

Technical Spotlight

Eden Rift: California History Meets Viticultural Perspective

Stacy Briscoe

CALIFORNIA HISTORY CROSSED WITH viticultural perspective—that is how **Eden Rift Vineyards'** proprietor **Christian Pillsbury** describes his piece of wine country located in the Cienega Valley AVA of San Benito County, just east of Monterey, California.

Prior to purchasing the property in 2016, Pillsbury, a San Francisco native, worked in the corporate wine world, most recently for the preservation system **Coravin**, heading the company's Asian market. When he decided to leave his position to put his own mark on the grapegrowing and winemaking sector of the industry, as a lover of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Pillsbury immediately began his search in Napa and Sonoma counties. In fact, Pillsbury said he was very close to closing a deal in Napa when a friend of his took him down south to an AVA so secluded, Pillsbury had never even heard of it.

"When I came here, I'd been a specialist in American wine for 20 years, but I'd never heard of this property," Pillsbury said. "When I rolled through the gates, my jaw dropped—how could I not know about this place?"

The 120 acres of contiguous estate vineyards date back to 1849, the heart of the Gold Rush era, before San Benito County existed, before California was even a state, making it one of the oldest continually producing estate vineyards in California. Rarer still, vineyards were planted to Pinot Noir as far back as 1860, during a time when rustic field blends of Zinfandel, Carignan and Petite Sirah were the norm.

Pillsbury calls his estate's story a "weird layering of histories." The property has been through seven separate owners and five different brands. "But the land itself never changes," Pillsbury said.



Key Points:

EDEN RIFT

- More than 100 acres of contiguous estate vineyards date back to 1849
- New proprietorship brings back Pinot-focused plantings
- Data gathered by Davis Systems weather station help reduce water use by 80 percent
- Old Vine Zinfandel finds a home within the Pinot program

Stacy Briscoe is the assistant editor of *Wine Business Monthly*. She has been writing about wine professionally since 2015, freelancing for multiple publications including *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Edible Communities* and *Napa Sonoma Magazine*, among others. She also maintains her own website, *BriscoeBites.com*, dedicated to wine reviews and tasting notes. Outside of wine writing, she also contributes as a freelance editor for the independent publisher She Writes Press. Stacy has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English-language literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz.



Talking Terroir

Located in the foothills of the Gavilan Mountain Range, Eden Rift is situated on top of the San Andreas Fault. Here, elevation ranges from 1,200 feet at the estate's lowest point, up to 1,600 feet at its highest. The soils are a combination of decomposed granite, limestone and dolomite.

Pillsbury said many mistake the estate's location for a warm-weather region. But, despite mid-day summer temperatures that can get quite high, the overall climate stays quite cool. The position of the Gavilan Range in reference to the Monterey Bay creates a literal rift (part of the reasoning behind the name "Eden Rift"), pulling in a heady fog during the night hours that sinks deep into the vineyard and lingers until mid-morning. In the early

evening, that rift pulls in a cooling breeze, ripe with maritime aromas—perfect growing conditions for delicate Pinot Noir grapes and for producing the Old World-style Chardonnay that inspires Pillsbury.

Another interesting, if not unique, feature of Eden Rift's topography is the numerous terraced vineyards: 2.5 acres of terraced Chardonnay (76 and Wente Clone), 8.5 acres of Pinot Noir (Calera clone) and 3.3 acres of Pinot Gris (clone 9)—what Pillsbury suspects is one of the only terraced Pinot Gris vineyards in California.

The terracing, much like the rest of the vineyard and winery, was an inherited feature of the estate. But what Pillsbury and his small team have added during his short time as proprietor is specificity in vineyard planting.



JIMMY HAYES

Eden Rift estate

The Restoration Project

Pillsbury calls his winery venture “the spirit of restoration,” with an eye toward pursuing the best quality grapes from the property. “The first thing we did here was dig 30 open pits just to try to understand what the subsoils were and what we’d be working with,” Pillsbury said. “It’s paid off because it’s informed all of our decisions about what our plans are going to be.”

The estate has always been primarily focused on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, save for a brief time in the 1990s when a previous owner’s fascination with Italian varieties created a Tuscan-inspired interrupt. When Pillsbury moved in, there were still scattered, confused plantings of Sangiovese, Merlot and Zinfandel.

Cory Waller, who was hired as head winemaker by the owner immediately preceding Pillsbury, said that a prior restoration project had already begun to bring back the heart of the land—Pinot Noir—but that project was “piece-meal” in execution. “Christian went at it full-force,” Waller said. “Since he came in, we’ve grafted 42 acres, planted 27 acres.”

“We’re really rediscovering the history of this place through action,” Pillsbury said. He noted that he doesn’t have the advantage of regional grapegrowing or winemaking notes throughout the years, as he would if he had purchased property in Napa or Sonoma. Instead, he, Waller and their vineyard manager, **Sandy Matthews**, are constantly testing various lots in blocks and working as hard as they can to assemble that breadth of knowledge as quickly as possible.

Though the previous owner had begun bringing the site back to a Pinot-focus, that focus was specific to Dijon clones: 828, 115 and 667. But Pillsbury asked himself, “How do we reach further back into history besides Dijon clones?”

“We have 120 acres of contiguous estate vineyards with different elevations, exposures and soil types. We had a variety of voices we wanted to illustrate,” Pillsbury said. “So we decided to use California heritage clones as that voice—the voice that we want to use to tell the story of the vineyards.” Today, the estate is 65 percent Pinot Noir across eight different clones, including Dijon 777, 115, 667 and 828; Swan; Pommard; Calera; and a recent addition of Mt. Eden—all of which are planted with site specificity.

“Clones are a shortcut to differentiation. They allow us to do a lot of comparison between one site and the next and how each expresses itself. The clones help us find the path toward the wines we want to make,” Pillsbury said.

One of the best examples of Pillsbury’s use of the land—both visually in the vineyard and aromatically in the glass and on the palate—is the terraced Calera clone Pinot Noir. Originally planted to Zinfandel, the block was grafted to Calera in 2016. “They’re thick-skinned and not super-vigorous, which makes them more ideal for terraces,” winemaker Waller said.

Those terraced grapes produce a wine that’s more masculine in style, providing a counterpoint to the more delicate Dijon clones. The Calera acts as an excellent blending component for the Estate Pinot Noir but is also a very structural—and still aromatically beautiful—expression as a single vineyard in the winery’s Terraced Pinot Noir.

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Functionally Organic Farming

According to Waller, the estate has seen a 95 percent take rate success with the vines they've grafted and planted from 2016 through today. One of the tools used that has played a role in that success is the weather station provided by **Davis Systems** and managed by **Farm Data Systems**.

Pillsbury said his site required a radio mesh set-up as the area is not covered by cell signal and "wired install was impractical." The system allows Pillsbury and his team to gather critical environmental data, such as temperature, wind speed and direction, solar radiation and even irrigation condition by block (rainfall, leaf wetness, soil moisture and temperature).



MIKE KOHNE

Eden Rift - Calcerous Subsoil - Mine on Ridgeline

Eden Rift estate vineyards are predominantly water-fed through irrigation. But Pillsbury said that he's been able to cut down the water consumption by 80 percent by implementing more mindful, and data collection-centered, farming methods. "We can cross-reference that to what we're actually exhibiting in phenological development and decide where we actually need to apply water and when," Pillsbury said.

Pillsbury and Waller call their vineyards "functionally organic," meaning that they farm with organic methods such as planting organic cover crops, spreading organic composts and not using glyphosate as an herbicide. But the two have no interest in pursuing an official certification. "I don't buy into the programs because there's a lot of stuff they miss," Pillsbury said. "And it's sustainability as well," he added. "Sustainability encompasses so much more—it's a better litmus test of stewardship to the land."

In keeping with that stewardship, Eden Rift's vineyards are all farmed by hand. Pillsbury said he's experimented with machine harvesting some of the fruit they sell, but "the jury's still out," as a lot of the harvest came back with too much MOG. "We're always looking to enhance in terms of efficiency, but not at the risk of vine health or wine quality," he said.

The Winery

Eden Rift, in its current form, is only on its third vintage. The winery produces just 6,000 cases annually under its own label. With a 55,000-case capacity, the space is also utilized as a custom crush facility for local wineries.

There was a lot of infrastructure already in place when Pillsbury took over, including the 25,000-square-foot barrel shed and the 12,000-square-foot winery. The winery houses nine 5-ton and four 2-ton open-top stainless fermentation tanks supplied by **Quality Stainless** and **Paso Robles Tanks**, respectively. There are also 24 closed-top fermenters, ranging from 1,600 to 13,000 gallons in capacity, supplied by **Santa Rosa Stainless**.

Waller said he prefers the use of open tops almost exclusively as he feels that he has more control over the fermentation. The closed-top fermenters are used solely for custom crush during harvest, as well as blending and bottling some of Eden Rift's larger lots. The 550-gallon **Portotank** and 500-gallon variable capacity tanks are used for the smaller lots.

All tanks include glycol jackets sourced from **Refrigeration Technology**, but Waller said he rarely uses them. "We don't cold soak. We cold soak by virtue of night picking," he said, explaining that grapes come in at 45° F to 50° F.

"Because we do all native ferments, we monitor pretty closely," Waller said. "If I start to smell any off-odors, we'll use our portable glycol heater to bring the temperature up to push the growth phase. I use the cooling system if the ferment gets too hot or ahead of the curve."



JIMMY HAYES

Eden Rift's 12,000-square-foot winery



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CALIFORNIA HISTORY; INTERNATIONAL MARKETPLACE

Six-thousand cases may seem like a small case production, but Pillsbury is able to spread the Eden Rift story far and wide. About 50 percent of its sales are made direct-to-consumer, with a number of the wines only available at the tasting room or through the wine club. One hour away from Monterey, Carmel and Silicon Valley, Eden Rift has become a day-tripper's location for those just a tad too far from the "traditional" wine country of the North Bay.

"It's a privilege, as a winery, to be able to build a business like that," Pillsbury said. But he also noted that, in addition to selling his wines in a number of U.S. states, he has established a very strong international market as well. Eden Rift wines are currently available in the U.K., Japan, China, Hong Kong and Denmark, and Pillsbury said the list continues to grow. "I believe in building our business that way instead of going to a giant U.S. retailer and saying, 'Please, please, please buy this many containers,'" he said. "We want to be able to diversify and build a sophisticated client base without worrying about raising any prices."

The trick, Pillsbury said, is conducting all this business in person. Though he admits that because he was based overseas for 10 years prior to his Eden Rift proprietorship, and does have a few contacts, he also recognizes that business relationships are not something he can "luck into."

"You can't do international from a desk. You have to get yourself on the plane. You have to make yourself relevant to the wine conversation in whatever market you're in," Pillsbury said.

The Winemaking

PINOT GRIS

Eden Rift was originally planted to 10 acres of terraced Pinot Gris, but Pillsbury cut it back to 3, keeping "only the highest quality block." It's a low-yielding block, producing just under 2 tons of grapes last harvest. "It's kind of nutty, business-wise," said Pillsbury of his decision to keep any of the Pinot Gris at all. "But not everything needs to be directly profitable. This is more about our philosophy of exploring the site—that's how it folds into the rest of the program."

Though he admits the Pinot Gris isn't economically sensible, Pillsbury believes that the grape has gotten a "short hand" in the wine industry. It is, as Pillsbury noted, a Grande Cru grape (if you take the Alsatian model), and he and Waller enjoy the addition of Pinot Gris into the portfolio as something different to their Chardonnay.

The Pinot Gris grapes are hand-picked at night, pressed whole cluster to tank to settle overnight. The wine ferments in combination stainless steel and neutral French oak (about 60 and 40 percent, respectively). The wine does not see any malolactic fermentation (MLF). Instead, to add a bit of body to balance the grape's innate racy acidity, Waller prefers bâtonnage every two weeks, which can be anywhere from one to four times during the fermentation process, depending on the wine. "Considering Pinot Gris doesn't spend much time aging (about three months in barrel), we have to be a little more cognizant of stirring directly after primary," he said.

The Pinot Gris is fined with bentonite, cold-stabilized and sterile-filtered before bottling. Waller uses **Supradisc II** from **Pall** for "polishing" all his white wines and **Millipore** cartridges at the bottling line for wines that don't go through MLF, like the Pinot Gris. Bottling takes place in-house with a **GAI** 16-head bottling line.



STACY BRISCOE

Pinot Gris on the terraces

The terraced Pinot Gris is something special, indeed. Though the juice sees no skin contact during the winemaking process, the final product presents an almost rose-gold hue in the glass. “That’s the innate color of the wine,” noted Pillsbury. On the palate it has just a touch of phenolic grip—just enough backbone and structural lift to enhance the light-bodied white wine.

“We really wanted to see, if we take it as seriously as it can be taken, what would we get? I love this wine,” Pillsbury said.

CHARDONNAY

Pillsbury and Waller both describe their Chardonnays as more reductive in style. The grapes are picked “a bit later,” with the last vintage harvested between mid-September to mid-October. It’s a broad range of picking dates at Eden Rift due to the sheer amount of diversity in elevation, aspect and soils the estate’s topography provides.

Like the Pinot Gris, Chardonnay grapes are pressed whole cluster in the winery’s **Diemme** AR-80 press directly to tank to settle. The exception to this rule are the grapes coming from a portion of the estate’s O-block, which goes directly to barrel.

“There is a quarter of the block that is interplanted and unilateral. I found in previous years this wine to be incredibly too lean and, to boot, more sluggish to finish MLF,” Waller explained. “I think pressing directly into barrel really helps the mid-palate, and I’ve also started using yeast hulls to supplement some of the solids for the main portion of this block.”

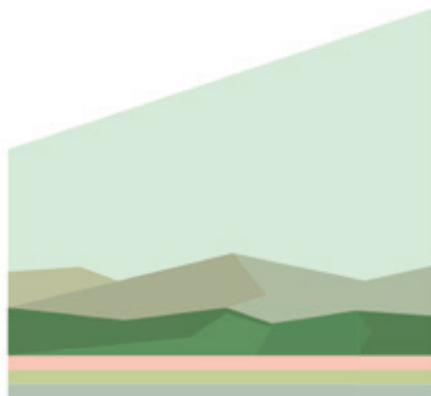
All wines at Eden Rift go through native yeast fermentation, with the Chardonnay and red wines going through native MLF as well. The Chardonnay ferments and ages in French oak (about 17 to 20 percent new) for anywhere

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Christian L. Pillsbury
Proprietor



Cory Waller
Winemaker



Sandy Matthews
Vineyard Manager

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YEAR BONDED	1989
DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER SALES	50%
APPELLATION	Cienega Valley AVA,
VINEYARD ACREAGE	Pinot Noir - 88 acres; ½ Dijon, ½ heritage; Calera, Mt. Eden, Swan; 117 total variety blocks Chardonnay – 20 acres; Old Wente, New Wente, 76, and 4; 0.66 acres Old Vine Zinfandel planted in 1906; 3 acres terraced Pinot Gris; 1 acre Grenache
SOIL TYPE	Calcareous limestone and decomposed granite
CLIMATE	Temperate with coastal influence
WINERY CASE PRODUCTION	6,000
AVERAGE BOTTLE PRICE	\$38
TONS USED VS. TONS SOLD	50/50



BUILDING THE WINERY

YEAR BUILT	2000
ARCHITECT	Christina Perez
ENGINEER/ MECHANICAL ENGINEER	Structural Engineers Inc., www.structuralengineersinc.com
LIGHTING	Retrofitted to LED by Lights, Lux and Lumens, 3lusa.com
WASTEWATER	San Benito Engineering
RECEIVING HOPPER	Scharfenberger VS 3,6 by Euro-Machines, euromachinesusa.com
CRUSHER/DESTEMMER	Delta E4 by Bucher Vaslin North America, www.bvnorthamerica.com
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2-ton open tops	Paso Robles Tank, www.pasoroblestank.com
Closed top from 1,600 gal – 13,000 gal	Santa Rosa Stainless Steel, www.srss.com
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PUMPOVER DEVICES	Toad and Lotus
PRESSES	Diemme Enologia AR-80, www.diemme-enologia.com
BARRELS	Predominantly Tonnellerie François Frères, www.francoisfreres.com
YEAST/NUTRIENTS/ENZYMES OR OTHER ADDITIONS?	Native yeast, Ferm O and Yeast Hulls for nutrients. Scott Laboratories, www.scottlab.com
CELLAR HUMIDITY CONTROL	Refrigeration Technologies, www.refrigtech.com
ANALYTICAL EQUIPMENT	Anton Paar DMA 35 density meter, www.anton-paar.com Admeo Y350 Semi-automatic analyzer, www.admeo.us Denver Instrument 250 ph meter, www.denverinstrument.com Accumet AB150, www.fishersci.com
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CORKS	Portocork America, www.portocork.com
CAPSULES	Ramondin, www.ramondin.com
LABEL DESIGN	Mash, www.mashdesign.com
LABEL PRINTING	Tapp Label, www.tapplabel.com

between nine and 12 months, receiving regular bâtonnage—a regimen that has changed with each vintage as Waller continues to learn how his grapes react.

“We were initially stirring Chardonnay every two weeks, but due to sluggish MLF, I was at an impasse between over-stirring and trying to help encourage MLF activity. I’ve backed off to monthly so that we can prolong stirring and help move MLF along,” Waller said.

Currently, wines are predominantly aged in **François Frères** cooperage, but Waller is constantly trialing other coopers—as well as amphora.

“I think earth-based fermenters are happy mediums between stain-less and neutral oak,” Waller said of his amphora, calling pure stain-less “too high-toned” and “lackluster.” “We’re looking for a medium that can add or enhance texture, flavor or general complexity...we’re always willing to play around with alternative fermentation and aging vessels,” he said.

Although Waller liked what the amphora did for his Chardonnay and he’s currently trialing Pinot Noir in the vessel, he and Pillsbury have yet to find a place for the style within their small-lot program.

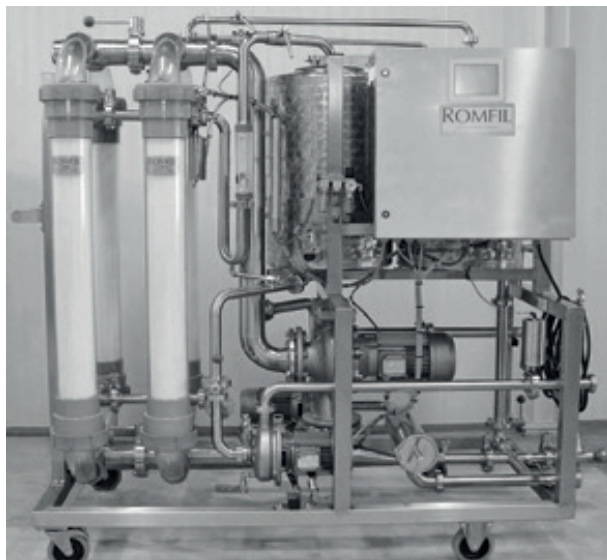
PINOT NOIR

In general, Waller describes his winemaking practices as hands-off and minimal intervention. “What I’ve noticed about these vineyards, growing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, on the winemaking side, I’ve had to do very little,” he said, adding that it’s given him freedom in the winery.



MIKE KOHNE

Night harvest at Eden Rift



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That freedom, specific to Pinot Noir, means “playing around” with whole cluster percentages and extended maceration in pursuit of the perfect blending tools to make age-worthy Pinot Noirs. “As the vineyard quality gets better, we get more color, more phenolics, and Cory’s been able to adapt to that,” said Pillsbury of his winemaker’s ability to evolve with the growth of their historic, but still-maturing, vineyard.

Harvest for Eden Rift Pinot Noir lasts from early September through mid-October, with the grapes that are kept whole-cluster picked about two weeks after those that will get destemmed in the winery’s **Bucher-Vaslin Delta E4** destemmer. “We like a bit of the ripeness in the whole cluster,” Waller said. “Underripe, and it will be too peppery, green, bitter.”

Waller uses about 20 to 30 percent whole cluster in his Pinot Noirs, a bit more in the Terraced Pinot Noir, consisting of Calera clone exclusively. The 2017 vintage of the Terraced Pinot Noir contained approximately 65 percent whole cluster inclusion. “With the grape’s skin-to-juice ratio, it can handle a bit more whole cluster. I’m not afraid of going for it with the Calera clone,” Waller said.

All lots are kept separate through every stage of the winemaking process. The lots for the Estate Pinot Noir program will age in barrel for nine to 12 months; the single-vineyard programs will see anywhere from 12 to 16 months in barrel. New French oak usage ranges between 20 to 30 percent.

In general, Waller prefers not to move his wines until he has to, with Pinot Noir leaving barrel just a month before bottling. “I prefer a reductive style of winemaking,” Waller said. “The only time I’ll move a wine out of barrel other than for bottling is if there’s an issue that needs to be addressed.”

All red wines are bottled without any filtration.

OLD VINE ZINFANDEL

Though the more recent plantings of Zinfandel have since been grafted over to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Pillsbury chose to leave in the $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre vineyard whose claim to fame is being the oldest continually producing block on the property. The Zinfandel vines here date as far back as 1906.

In the beginning, Pillsbury and Waller discussed what part Zinfandel could play in a Pinot Noir-focused program. “Zinfandel was never a part of the plan; but if this is a stewardship project, then the idea of altering a vineyard that old is completely off the table,” Pillsbury said.

He noted, too, that Zinfandel’s reputation is as a “hot weather grape,” simply because much of California’s Zinfandel comes from Lodi. But Pillsbury, Waller and Matthews don’t consider that assumption to be true. “Zinfandel has a wonderful capacity for elegance and bright acidity,” Pillsbury said, adding that his “cold weather Zinfandel” was his fastest selling wine last year.

The Zinfandel produced at Eden Rift is by no means a modern interpretation of the variety. In fact, everything from the way the vines are farmed to the way the wine is made harkens back to history. Matthews, who previously worked at **Tally Vineyards** in San Luis Obispo (SLO), said he had had experience farming old vines from a neighboring vineyard whose Zinfandel was first planted in 1880. Here, he learned about *en gobelet* vine training—a method widely used in the 19th century.

When Matthews began his role as vineyard manager of Eden Rift in 2017, the old Zinfandel grapes were left as bush vines, with many clusters sitting on the ground. The uneven light penetration meant that clusters ripened unevenly, making the block nearly impossible to maintain and Waller’s job in the winery quite difficult. In fact, Pillsbury invested in the winery’s new **Scharfenberger VS 3.6** sorting machine from **Euromachines** just for this block.

With the *en gobelet* vine training, once vines have lignified, Matthews gathers the canes into a basket, or globe, then shapes and ties them with twine at the top and bottom. “It’s basically like giving a man-bun to Side-show-Bob,” Waller joked.

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Old Vine Zinfandel

EDEN RIFT

What this does, Matthews explained, is relieve the clusters of excessive sun exposure while simultaneously ensuring even exposure between all clusters. “The way the clusters hang, with the wind we get, they almost rotate throughout the year. So, generally, it’s all ripening at the same time,” Matthews said. And, according to Waller, the amount of sorting he has to do has dramatically decreased since employing this vine training method.

Like a few of Eden Rift’s other original blocks, the Old Vine Zinfandel vines are own-rooted and unaffected by phylloxera. Thus, Matthews can use the traditional French method of vine propagation, plunging cordons directly into the soil to re-establish the clonal stock when a vine becomes dormant.

To keep history alive for years to come, Pillsbury and Matthews have started on a new Old Vine Zinfandel project, propagating canes from the original vines into a new 1-acre vineyard just adjacent to the other. “Twenty to 30 years from now, when that vineyard is exhausted, we’ll have a new one ready to go,” Pillsbury said. “It’s a commitment to the whole stewardship idea. In 30 years, it’ll be too late to plant an old vineyard.”

The Old Vine Zinfandel block is, as of right now, the only one that is dry-farmed at Eden Rift. Harvest for these grapes takes place relatively early, around the middle of October. “The Brix aren’t that elevated, and it’s not a color champion. It doesn’t have massive alcohol or extraction—that would be at odds with our vision,” Pillsbury said.

Primary fermentation takes place in open-top stainless steel tanks, receiving twice daily pump-overs. The wine is then pressed and ages in barrel for 12 to 16 months. And the result is, in fact, a lighter, more delicate expression of the variety, exuding a high-toned fruit profile outlined by just a touch of texture on the tongue. [WBM](#)

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