Random Ramblings of a Weary Winemaker

Collected Blogs of SonomaBouliste (aka Peter Wellington)

From Wine.Woot.Com

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Editor's Notes

These blogs are from SonomaBouliste, which is the screen name of Peter Wellington, owner/winemaker of Wellington Vineyards. The blogs are a series of entries for Wine.Woot showing us what happens behind the scenes at a winery.

The format for each entry is the same. The blog entry is first, followed by a discussion section. The discussion will often introduce new topics beyond those that were part of the blog entry. The discussion is in a Question (Q) and Answer (A) format, with the question coming from the Wine.Woot community and the answer from SonomaBouliste.

Since these entries are copied directly, there is no effort made to correct grammar, spelling, etc.

Where there are some comments in the discussion that seemed of particular interest, they are shown. Two commentators are specially noted.

SB – SonomaBouliste

RPM – Rob Perelli-Minnetti. Rob grew up in CA wine industry and has significant knowledge of wine and its history. He is a frequent contributor to the Wine.Woot discussion forums.

Initial Blog

Approximately twice a month, winemaker Peter Wellington (Wine.Woot username SonomaBouliste) of Wellington Vineyards *will share his musings on the vinting life in this space. Below is the first installment of his Wine.Woot diary.*

Here we go! From humble winemaker to award winning blogger….well….blogger anyway. What I hope to provide in this space over the course of time, with your interaction, is a peek into the life and times of a vineyard, winery, and a winemaker. No frills, no public relations BS, in my own somewhat irreverent way, I want to share my thoughts and emotions as I go through the annual cycle of my life in wine.

A word of warning: I may get a little technical at times. Winemaking does involve technical details as well as artistic creativity: it is complicated, and I won't hide this. Don't worry if you don't understand everything: it doesn't matter if you do. You don't need to know the intricate details in order to enjoy wine, and that's what wine is all about – enjoyment of life. On the other hand, ask questions if you really want to know about something. I also would like you to suggest topics that you're interested in learning more about – I can go on and on about most wine related topics, but I don't want to waste your and my time on the less interesting stuff. I'm looking forward to this experience because I cannot think of a better audience than the folks I've met at wine.woot.

That Was The Week That Was ("TW3", if you remember mid 60's TV) Sat. Sept. 8, 2007

Every year when we start crush there are usually a couple of pieces of equipment that need some work after sitting idle for ten months. So far, 2007 has been a Murphy's Law type of year. Our only prolonged heat spell of the year hit the last ten days of August and the first five days of September. This hastened harvest by a few days, giving us only the Labor Day weekend between bottling and the start of crush. Tuesday was devoted to shipping recently bottled wine to the warehouse, putting away bottling supplies, and getting crush equipment out of mothballs. The grape scale wasn't accurate and we found a small tear in the press membrane. Both repaired in time for the first grapes Wednesday, but then the grape sorting conveyor was working off and on and the must chiller was on the fritz. Then the bearings on the water pump that supplies both winery and vineyard starting whining something fierce; and I had to make a parts run to hook up my new (slightly used) commercial water heater. Meanwhile, grapes were coming in as fast as we could handle them, in near 100° weather. At 6 PM Weds. I was on the phone with my wife

when I noticed a cracked pipe on the tractor dripping hydraulic fluid; she said at least I was laughing when I told her – I said "What the #*%@ else can I do". I felt like my world had spun out of control. Oh yeah, and I damn near chopped the tip of my finger off with a barrel. It took a couple of days to stop bleeding; when my 16 year old asked why I didn't get stitches, I told her I didn't have time. Thursday was better; a lot cooler and I'd fixed what I could fix myself and gotten technicians for the rest; I feel like I've spent more time with grease on my hands than grapes so far this crush.

Wednesday's sugar level was the highest we've ever had for Chardonnay, 27.2°B (brix, or % sugar), but the fruit wasn't overripe, just dehydrated. We "rehydrated" it before putting the juice to barrel for fermentation (there isn't a very big demand for sweet, 16% alcohol Chardonnay). Thursday was more Chardonnay, and Friday and today were Sauvignon Blanc (the correct pronunciation of which is most definitely not "soveeño blah" (as the guy on the BevMo/Robert Mondavi radio ads used to say in a lame attempt to sound sophisticated). We'll finish Chardonnay by Tuesday. Next week will also bring Malbec, maybe our first Cab and Syrah, probably Marsanne, and possibly the first Zin. I'll be putting in quite a few miles this week walking vineyards – sampling, tasting, observing (deciding when to pick can be very subjective). Thankfully, the weather forecast keeps improving. Three days ago they said it'd cool for one day and then be in the 90's again, but we've had a couple of very cool, overcast mornings (a high of 74° yesterday) and the current forecast calls for mid 80's for the next week – absolutely perfect!

A Return to Sanity Thurs. Sept. 13, 2007

Unseasonably cool weather since last Friday has slowed harvest to almost a complete halt. We've got less than 20% of the grapes in. I was telling my wife the other day that if this were late September I'd be worried about getting everything ripe, but that it's a godsend right now. We brought in Malbec Monday, finished Chardonnay Tuesday, and did about half our Marsanne yesterday, but no more grapes for the rest of the week. Yesterday it was foggy until 3 PM and only reached 64º, so practically no ripening, but the other days have all been clear by late morning with 74-80º highs. This is perfect (although unusual in early-mid Sept.) for the final stage of ripening. I'm reminded of 2001, a classic vintage. We've got Cabernet sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, and some Zinfandel all at 22 to 23.5º B – very close to optimal sugar. The prolonged "hang time" these grapes are getting right now will intensify flavor and soften tannins without losing too much acid or causing sugar levels to get too high. I was already very optimistic about quality this year because of the small berries, loose clusters and perfect summer weather; now I'm thinking it has the potential to be an absolutely phenomenal

vintage.

Another benefit of this cool spell is the opportunity it's granted us to clean up and organize better and rest a bit, since we were catapulted into crush not quite fully prepared last week. My finger seems to healing nicely, too. We'll also have most of our white wines dry and topped up by the time we get real busy with reds – it's always nice to limit the circus to only three rings.

Enough Already, Let's Get The Show On The Road! Mon. Sept.17, 2007

The weather continues to be even cooler than predicted. I've got a full crew, but not enough work. Everything is clean and shiny and organized and we're running out of work. The first barrels of Chardonnay are dry, so we're topping them up. We've still only got one red fermentation going (Malbec), and that'll be ready for pressing Wednesday. I went to Dry Creek to check the Handal-Denier vineyard (Cabernet Sauvignon) this morning; flavors are beautiful, skins maturing nicely, pH rising (3.60), but seeds are still a bit green and sugars only 22°B. I'm excited at the prospect of fully ripe grapes at less than 14% alcohol, but maybe 12.5% alcohol is too low for a California Cab these days. (Sugar to alcohol conversion for reds usually runs .56 to .58, so 22° gives 12.3 – 12.5 % alcohol.) Weather forecast for this week says today will be the "hottest" day, and it's 81° right now (2PM). I heard the largest organic vineyard management company in Sonoma laid off a significant portion of their 80 man crew today – no work. We'll start again Wednesday (after six full days of no grapes), probably with the Karren Vineyard (Sonoma Mountain) Cabernet Sauvignon. Then it'll be some Estate Merlot Thursday. The Handal-Denier Cab and the Baron Vineyard Cab Franc might be ready by Saturday. I'll go check the Hilltop Ranch Zinfandel tomorrow. I also need to look at Estate Syrah, EnglandCrest Syrah and Shumahi Zinfandel. All are very close to ready.

A Leisurely Crush Sat. Sept. 22, 2007

Slight changes, as always: we picked 7 tons of Merlot on Wednesday, the Karren Cab on Thursday, and the Handal-Denier Cab Friday. The current plan for next week is more Merlot on Monday, Estate Roussanne, Marsanne and Baron Cab Franc on Tuesday. I'll be checking vineyards, ours and others, Monday and Tuesday to see what's next and when. Estate Syrah, EnglandCrest Syrah, Hilltop Ranch Zin, Shumahi Ranch Zin, FR Maestas Cab and J&J Petite Verdot are all very close to ready. It's supposed to be barely into the 80's for most of next week – great for quality, but an almost nerve-wracking slow pace. We got our first measurable rain (0.1") today, and I had two calls from growers in minor

panic: "Should we pick?" (No), "Will we get rot?" (Maybe, but I'd rather deal with a little rot than with unripe grapes), "Should I get out my spray rig and blow dry the grapes?" (If it makes you feel better).

Making harvesting decisions this year has led me think a lot about the factors involved. We've already brought in two red grape vineyards at lower sugar levels than we ever have before, but in my opinion the grapes were fully ripe. So many factors influence when to pick: sugar, pH, acid, seed maturity, grape skin maturity, stem maturity, tannin impressions, and most importantly, in my book, flavor. Ideally, all of these factors are pretty well in synch, but in the real world of winemaking they often are not, so you have to weigh them all in order to make the best decision. I know too many winemakers who get on dogmatic kicks involving one indicator or other – " I always pick my Zinfandel at χ brix", or "There are still some green seeds". I can't see how it serves you to have soft, rich tannins if your wine smells and tastes like raisins steeped in vodka. I pick mainly for flavor; if the grapes have rougher tannins, I extract more gently, consider pressing earlier, and keep the press wine separate. I'm actually quite excited over the potential this year for ripe, rich wines with "moderate" alcohol levels. (Where and when, except California in the 2000's, would winemakers call 13.5 to 14% alcohol in wine "moderate"?).

I was supposed to be teaching cap management techniques to a new (this year) seasonal employee tonight, but he didn't show up. Cap management is the most rewarding part of winemaking for me; there's an almost Zen-like feel to the interaction with the fermenting grapes. We use three methods: pumpover, punchdown, and pneumotage (using compressed air to force fermenting juice up through the cap). Choice of technique is based on type/characteristics of grape, type of tank, stage of fermentation and the amount/type of extraction desired. For each technique, frequency, length of time and vigor are also variable, of course. Tonight would have been an ideal time to go over all three with Crisantos, because we only have three fermentations going, and it was punchdown for the Karren Cab, pumpover for the Merlot, and pneumotage for the Handal-Denier Cab.

Discussion

SB: A reply to javadrinker:

Fortunately it wasn't one of the two fingers I do type with, or it would have cut my wpm in half.

Q: One question that's somewhat 'neutral' concerns the transition from fermentation to aging/clarifying. Oxygen is a vital component to the fermentation process. Once fermentation ceases, there's an abundance of dissolved CO2 in the wine that, in home

winemaking, needs to be removed. I was sold a 'whip degasser' that goes on the end of my cordless drill to beat the devil out of the wine. This seems to be a very important part of the process since (as I've been told) the dissolved CO2 can potentially sequester off aromas and flavors and impact the final product.

Is this a concern for a commercial winery and, if so, how does a commercial winery deal with the dissolved CO2 issue?

A: It gets lost during racking, etc. and is never a concern, unless you want to keep some in the wine to help maintain freshness and a slight petillance, as some producers of Gewurztraminer and Riesling do.

Q: How do you rehydrate? Just add water? Like making mashed potatoes?

A: Yes Somehow, "rehydrate" sounds more dignified than "adding water". I like to think of it terms of replacing water lost to evaporation rather than adding water. When in this situation I always have growers irrigate before harvest if possible; I'd rather have the water in the grapes - they press better.

Q: Has anyone (SB included) read "A Very Good Year" by Mike Weiss? It's sort of along the same idea as what we've got here, but instead it's an authored book by a guy who spent a wine-year with Ferrari-Carano documenting the end-to-end process of the creation of a vintage of their Fume Blanc.

A: I read it in installments in the SF Chronicle, where it appeared originally. It's a good read, but contains many inaccuracies - he either took a huge amount of "artistic liberty" and/or sorely needed proofing by someone in the know about wines and vines.

Q: I'm curious now where the artistic liberty came in -- growing practices, labor management, post-harvest production?

A: Almost everything involving grapegrowing and winemaking contained gross innaccuracies. It actually made me wonder whether he was getting people mixed up as well. It seemed like he had a year's worth of notes and then picked here and there to put things together. Still a good read, but doesn't make much sense regarding grapegrowing and winemaking.

Q: Hey Peter, after browsing your website, I have a quick question. Many vinters talk about 100+ year old vines, but how many of

those vines are actually that old? I was doing some quick math, and with a 1% per year vine loss (not uncommon here in the finger lakes, probably too high of an estimate for beautiful cali) that would leave only 36% of the original vines after 100 years.
And on a related question, what are the assets of having older vines - better quality yield, better flavor, etc. ?

A: There is serious attrition. More than half the vines are still kicking, but some of them are in real bad shape. Complex question regarding old vine benefits. Simple answer: vines often are too vigorous to produce the highest quality fruit, but old vines rarely are. Old vines isn't a gaurantee of quality, however.

Q: It must get pretty expensive to have a vineyard land with half the vines missing.

A: Replanting costs significantly more per acre than the original cost of the land. Over the last 21 years we've replanted 12 of 20 acres of the old vineyard and 1 1/2 acres of old orchard.

Q: SB,

This is for you from today's WSJ.....

The Straight Dope: Liquor Is Cleared for French Game

• DER SPIEGEL -- OCT. 4

The World Anti-Doping Agency has taken the rare step of allowing a commonly abused drug back into a sport, reports German newsweekly Der Spiegel on its English-language Web site. The sport is the barely strenuous one of pétanque, a French form of lawn bowling that involves throwing metal balls at a smaller wooden ball. The drug is alcohol.

The federation that oversees pétanque saw no reason why its top competitors shouldn't enjoy a drink while they play, just as casual players do in countless French villages. "Let's be sensible," the federation's president told a French newspaper. "You can drive a car after drinking two glasses of wine, but you can't play" pétanque? The antidoping agency agreed, and in 2008 alcohol will be dropped from its list of illegal substances for competitions. Pétanque players will be able to enjoy a glass of pastis, the liquor traditionally associated with the game but still are banned from taking growth hormones, beta-blockers, cocaine and other substances.

A: Thanks for the great news. Our local tournaments always include a long, leisurely lunch accompanied by adult beverages. I did sneak away and play on a Sunday a couple of weeks ago. My partners and I successfully defended our title in the annual club championship. Befitting Sonoma, my partners were the assistant winemaker at the biggest winery in Sonoma Valley (Ravenswood) and the great granddaughter of winery founder Samuele Sebastiani.

2007 Harvest, Take 2

Looks Like Crush, Feels Like Crush, Smells Like Crush: Saturday, Sept. 29, 2007

Vines losing basal leaves, hot, very dry air that chaps the face, and the wonderful smells of fermenting grapes leave no doubt that crush is in full swing. Seems like the weather forecasts have been even more inaccurate than usual. We got into the high 80's / low 90's a couple of days this week, and it was enough to push quite a few vineyards to full maturity, and almost everything else is very close now. We brought in almost as many tons this week as in the preceding three weeks added together. We finished Marsanne and Merlot, started Roussanne, Syrah and Zin, and got the biggest crop we've ever had of Cab Franc. We usually use the Cab Franc in our reserve Bordeaux style blend, with what little is left over going into our Sonoma County Cabernet or our Merlot. This year there's so much, and it looks so good that there's the possibility of bottling some separately. We'll have to see how it turns out, of course. Speaking of things looking good, I'm still very excited about quality this vintage. Fruit and wine so far has great aroma and flavor, tannins are soft yet full, and alcohol levels are lower than typical. Our merlot all came in at 23.2-24.2°B, the lowest in the last decade, if not ever, yet the fruit is rich and ripe with no greenness at all. Aromas are all cherry, berry, violets and spice.

I didn't set out with the intention of making lower alcohol wines this year, but I'm thrilled at the opportunity to do so. I believe in letting each vineyard and vintage express itself; otherwise wine would be boring. I try to make the best wine each year, with a consistency of style, but I don't try to make the exact same wine each year. Who wants wines that all taste the same anyway? (Yes, I know some people do, but there are oceans of wine out there to keep them happy.)

My number one winemaking rule is that there are no rules. If I don't at least experiment with a few new things each year my wines won't improve. It's a bit like cooking, where the more times you make a certain dish the better you get; you try small changes and fine tune things. We only get to make each dish once a year, and the raw ingredients are highly variable year to year, so the fine-tuning continues forever.

Last night we poured at the Sonoma Vintage Festival, a tradition that dates back to the 1850's. The best part for me is the opportunity to compare notes with my contemporaries. I had long chats with Joel Peterson (founder/winemaker of Ravenswood), Jeff Gaffner (Saxon Brown), and Steve MacRostie (MacRostie) and all are thrilled at the quality of grapes this year, especially concerning full ripeness at lower sugar levels than

usual. Of course there were some other (generally less experienced) winemakers waiting for more sugar ("We're only at 25") or for fully brown seeds. It's always affirming when winemakers I respect have similar views to mine. Tonight is the Sonoma County Harvest Fair awards night. In spite of my opinions of wine competitions and wine reviewers, we do enter some competitions and do send samples to the main wine reviewers; after all, gold medals and good scores do help sell the wine. The only out-of-area competition we enter is the Orange County Fair. It is non-profit, funding scholarships and wine education. It also is the only wine competition to use only formally trained judges (mostly winemakers). I find it more rewarding when I get a top award from a jury of my own peers.

When the Whip Comes Down, When the S#@& Hits the Fan: Sunday, October 6, 2007

Prior to this week the slow pace of the crush has spoiled all the members of the crew. My new full time cellar guy, Enrique, who started in July, just hadn't taken it seriously when told to organize all the different barrels so that he'd be ahead of the game when things got busy. This week we brought in as much fruit as last week, but also had a larger number of fermentations to manage, lots of pressing and barrel work. By Tuesday we were way behind, with no workload let-up in sight. Wednesday I fired one of the seasonal guys because he was slow, didn't listen to instructions, and was bad for morale because of his lack of focus or work ethic. Thursday, our vineyard foreman started working in the winery. José been with us 20 years, is sharp as a tack (although illiterate), and commands the respect of the other guys. There's very little of our own fruit left to harvest, and not much other vineyard work, so he's available just when really needed. By Thursday night we were caught up in spite of all the additional work. I felt good about everyone for the first time this crush, and let them know it. Friday we crushed 18 tons, approximately one eighth of our projected total. Friday night we had every tank in the winery full. Enrique said, "too many grapes". I told him that if we didn't fill everything at the same time at least once it meant "too many tanks".

This brings to mind some thoughts about the advantages and disadvantages of small wineries. The greatest disadvantage is lower efficiency, particularly with labor. The biggest advantages are flexibility and attention to detail. At big wineries they fill all their fermentation tanks many times each crush, and fairly often are unable to harvest all their grapes at the optimal time. One of our growers also sold to a large winery last year, and they didn't bring in his grapes until three weeks after they were ripe because there was no tank space. Large winery crushers and presses are sized to operate 12-24 hours a day to keep up with demand, and are typically capable of processing a max of 3-4 percent of a

vintage's production per day. As a contrast, we have crushed close to 20 % of an entire year's harvest in one day, and could do even more. We have fermentation space for over 60% of all our red grapes at one time, so we don't have serious logistical issues compromising our ability to harvest each vineyard block at the optimal time. Most small wineries have the advantage of this kind of flexibility and control.

We did well at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair, which has resulted in a flush of wholesale orders and increased tasting room business. It's a great stress reliever to have a jump in sales, and this is the time of year when I need positive news the most. Otherwise it's 6 AM breakfast and 9-10 PM dinner with lunch on the run or no lunch at all. I drink less wine this time of year (almost none!) because I'm too tired at night and need to hit the ground running early in the morning. During the peak of crush there is nothing else. When we first met, my wife asked why I had 15 pairs of jeans, 50 t-shirts and 50 pairs of socks. I told her it was to get through crush. Each year around the end of October I would make my local Laundromat smell like a vinegar factory for a couple of hours.

Discussion

Q: You touched briefly on the fermentation process. How much of the character of a wine (or winery) comes from the strain of yeast used? With beers, the type of yeast can have a profound effect on the final product (AOFBE).

A: I couldn't quantify the effect, but yeast does make a difference. When I was first taking viticulture and enology classes - planning career change, almost thirty years ago, I wrote a paper on yeast strain effects. I interviewed several prominent winemakers, and the prevailing opinion then was that the different fermentation dynamics of different strains (growth curve, maximum rate, temperature) were probably more important than any specific flavor contributions. There are many more strains commercially available now, whose influence on wine character is highly touted by the yeast producers. We do use about a dozen different strains, but I don't think the differences are as great as claimed by the yeast companies. Fermentation dynamics are still a major consideration in strain choice, but the subtle differences in structure and flavor imparted by different yeast strains constitute another tool we use in fine tuning wine style.

Edit: The grapes determine what the wine will be at least as much as the malt and hops determine beer style. If you used some black patent malt and lots of Fuggles hops, a bottom fermenter wouldn't turn your beer into a Pilsener, right?

SB: Rain, Rain, Go Away.
We've got four wines to go, and three of the vineyards aren't fully ripe. What to do? The Roussanne out at Saralee's Vineyard in the Russian River is close to physiologically mature, but could use more sugar and a bit more flavor. It also is extremely susceptible to bunch rot. The Noir de Noirs is very close and probably won't get much riper, so we'll probably bring that in soon as well. Given the forecast for the next 10 days, bringing it in soon is probably the best call. I'm willing to gamble a bit more with the Mohrhardt Ridge Cab. It's a little further (farther?) away from ideal ripeness and less susceptible to rot.

Q: Since you bring it up, I'm curious about the Noir de Noirs. I just got a bottle, but I don't know anything about the variety. Is it a good variety to drink young, or is it better to tuck back in a corner somewhere for a few years first?

A: My preference is young with strong, spicy food that would overpower any other wine. It will age for at least ten years, no problem.

Q: Thanks for the info. My wife and I have visited your winery a couple times from Chicago and our favorite is the Noir de Noirs!! Do you have to handle the red juice grapes differently?

A: Yes, we have to wear clothes that don't show the stains 

SB: Link to PD article about rain & harvest:
http://www1.pressdemocrat.com/article/20071018/NEWS/710180340/1033/NEWS01

Link to crush report from Napa:
http://www.sthelenastar.com/articles/2007/10/18/features/food_and_wine/doc4716b5a6da12b619176652.txt

Q: So, this article talks a lot about the gamble of leaving fruit on. Is a few days or so going to make that much of a difference? What's the benefit/risk?

A: Potential benefit: better fruit / wine. Risk: rot= poorer fruit / wine. Earlier in the season the decision was easier; we knew we would get more good ripening weather and the risk of some rot was worth it to get optimally ripe grapes. Now, with cooler weather, more rain, and vine leaves yellowing, significant additional ripening becomes more iffy and the decisions become tougher.

Q: I'm trying to remember if you plant grass between your rows, or till the ground, if you covered this before, I can't seem to find it. I've heard that some types of ground cover actually changes the acidity (or some other component) of the grapes.

A: We have permanent cover crop in all our irrigated blocks, a mix of legumes and native grasses. We disk the old, dry farmed blocks in order to retain soil moisture during the 5 to 7 month annual drought. I'm unfamiliar with any direct effect on grape composition.

Q: On the last woot offering you had, is there anything I should be drinking right now or should I let them age a little, and if you suggest age, when do you think I should start drinking?

A: Legally I can't suggest that you start drinking before age 21, although I had no problem with my 13 & 16 year old girls drinking wine in Paris restaurants this summer  But seriously, that is a very common question with no definitive answer. It depends on both personal taste and context. As to the prior, I've had professional sommeliers tell me they loved huge, tannic young Cabs that I thought needed years to develop. One person's "aged to perfection" is another's "way over the hill". Older wines are somewhat of an acquired taste, and most wines these days are made to be enjoyable upon release. As far as context: big boldly flavored young wines go better with intensly flavored cuisine while older, more delicate wines go better with more subtle, nuanced dishes.
After having qualified my answer with the above commentary, I will say that the Mohrhardt Ridge is probably the most age-worthy of the three Cabs. I like the wines from this vineyard at 8-12 years from the vintage date. All of these wines have 2+ years of bottle age and will not change too rapidly at this stage of their lives. My style is balanced wines that are drinkable young but can be aged, so there is no one ideal, or wrong, time to drink them. (Well actually there is an ideal time: dinner time.) Ultimately, it's your personal taste.

Q: More on aging. Being still relatively new to wine, I have very little experience with aged wines and I certainly don't have any personal experience on pre-Parkerized wine.

I've seen you & others comment on the fact that wines (at least in the USA) are being produced more as 'drink now' wines whereas old world wines might be purchased and stored for a future

generation.

A) What steps do modern winemakers take to MAKE a wine drink-nowable, B) to what extent does that somewhat require reducing the aging potential of the wine, and C) how is the overall quality of the final product affected by pushing up the drinking window?

A: C- You always ask the tough questions. The "drink now" trend is certainly worldwide, and is reflective of the reality that most wine is consumed within 48 hours of purchase. Most consumers and most restaurants don't have the financial or logistical ability to cellar large (or any) amounts of wine for extended aging. We live in an age of instant gratification.

A) Riper grapes = softer tannins, lower acid levels and more alcohol "sweetness". Oak also adds a sweet impression and fullness. This international style that emphasizes fruit and plush, viscous texture results in wines that are more attractive in their youth.
B) Yes, this can diminish the "ageability" of a wine. The point that I think a lot of people miss, including wine writers, is that most wines don't NEED to be ageworthy. I have had some marvelous older wines, and a lot of dull, uninteresting older wines as well. I have an acquired appreciation of older wines. Even so, most of the wine I drink has been in bottle three years or less. Yes, it's fun to open an older bottle occaisionally, but not regularly. A modern rich, extracted California Cab or Bordeaux might be expected to age well for only 8-10 years as opposed to 15 years or more for wines produced 20 years ago, but will probably be more enjoyable at any time during that span than the wine of 20 years ago.
C) Overall quality is so subjective! Which has greater overall quality, Pepsi or unsweetened espresso? I don't believe that hard tannic wines that demand aging are of inherently higher quality. If one extrapolates the idea that the numerical ratings bestowed by Parker et al infer "quality", then the "best" coffee would be brewed with a pound of beans per pot, the "best" milk would be heavy cream, and the "best" chili would use more orange habaneros than tomatoes. Unfortunately, many American wine drinkers are relative neophytes who didn't grow up in a culture where wine was part of everyday dining. As a group, we want to be told what to like; hence the popularity of numerical ratings. Even so, consumer tastes dictate winemaking style to a good extent. Consumer tastes have had a real effect on winemaking style, therefore, in the court of public opinion, today's wines are of higher quality.

Q: What exactly is done to lower the tannin levels, so that the wine is drink now. Why is it that wines produced 20 years ago were more likely to be storable so much longer?

You also say this is deffinately becoming a global trend. Is this true about other trends I'm finding. Such as drink now wines with strong flavors, high alcohol, and sharp tannins, that may smooth out for a year or 2 but won't last for the children.

A: The biggest differences are in tannin quality rather than quantity. Tannins interact and polymerize within the grapes as well as during the fermentation and aging process. Most winemakers now pay attention to grape tannin quality when considering timing of harvest. Oxidative winemaking, including the micro-oxidation practiced by more and more big wineries, further softens tannins. Good winemakers are also careful about tannin quantity, taking care not to overextract and using press wine judiciously. The drink now trend involves riper grapes. Riper grapes may give less unique character, but give higher alcohol, lower acid and softer tannins, all of which promote richer, softer, "sweeter", more mouth-filling wines. In my opinion, when taken to the extreme, these wines are very showy but not very pleasant to drink, particularly with food.

Q: From my limited perspective, its seems to me that more and more people these days seem to be disparaging the "new world fruit bomb" style of wine making, including a lot of wine makers, but I am beginning to wonder if this isn't just the latest "politically correct" position to adopt. Do you see any sort of trend against the "drink now," immediate gratification, style of wine making developing?

A: I don't think anybody is opposed to wines that are ready to drink now. What I do see backlash against, especially from restaurateurs, is out of balance wines with high alcohol, too much oak, and not enough acid. These wines often get high scores and win competitions, but usually clash with food, or at best, don't enhance the dining experience.

Q: More along these lines, why can't a winemaker hold onto a wine longer before releasing it??? You can release a drink now wine, when it's older can't you? I have no problem admitting that I have a tendancy to buy when when I intend to drink it, but I'm rather tired of having the wine offered so young. It almost neccesitates having to buy a year or more ahead of time, which I don't like to do(can't do). Why can't wineries simply add another year of bottle time before release? Or is this indicative of the industries "sell now"

trend?

By the way(BTW) Peter, I'm not saying this about you in particular, but you're the wine maker in my circle of knowledge, so I ask you to step outside yourself for a moment and give me you're feelings, impressions, sensations if you will.

A: I'd rather sell the wine sooner. We've got almost all our 2007 wines in barrel already, plus 2006 Cabs and Zin and Merlot. We have almost two years worth of bottled inventory; we're selling 2006 whites, but most of our current reds are 2003 or 2004 vintage, and we still have some 2002 & 2001 wine in inventory. More of our money is tied up in inventory than in buildings, equipment and land! At current interest rates we can't afford to hang onto wine indefinitely. Most restaurants, and many individuals, can't afford to tie up large amounts of money to age wine either. This is perhaps the biggest driving force behind the drink now style.

Q: Seems to me to be a question of the economics of the wine industry.
With that said, some of the larger wineries, that have a strong cash flow, could consider delayed release, at an increased price to cover the costs and likely a higher margin.

A: I haven't been there in 15 years or so, but Heitz Cellars used to ration out their famous Martha's Vineyard Cabernet something along the lines of 60% the first year, then 10% a year for four more years (increasing the price each year) so you could buy a wine up to 8 years old directly from the winery.

Q: Hopefully the Chinese mainland is ill suited for viniculture. I fear for the day when Peter has to compete with the $2.99 Chateau Tsing-Gao Yangtze Valley Cabernet (delicately aged in lead barrels).

A: They've already got a "Napa Valley" in China. Trademark lawyers draw your weapons!

Over The Hump

Sixteen, er Eighteen, Tons and What Do You Get? Weds. Oct 10, 2007

After our huge day Friday we decided, more or less on the spur of the moment, to do it again Monday (only an even more difficult day). We did a little bit of pressing on Saturday, and then a huge amount (14 tons of red grapes' worth) on Monday. We only had one four ton block of Zinfandel scheduled for crushing (could have been picked Thursday, Friday or Saturday, but the vineyard manager wasn't available). When the vineyard owner came to get our pickup truck at 7 A.M. Monday, he asked if there was any possibility that his other remaining block was ready. I told him I didn't think so, but that I'd rush over and check before the crew finished picking. It was 24.2ºB going on 27*, still a tiny bit tart, seeds still green, but had ripe flavor (nice raspberry, strawberry, guava fruit – no greenness). There was some rot in this last block and it was going to go to Hell in a hand basket with Tuesday's rain, so we decided the best thing was to pick (as it was, we ended up culling 400 lbs. out of 3.3 tons). About 9 AM I got a call from a Cabernet grower with whom I had left phone messages on Saturday and Sunday regarding a Tuesday pick. We ended up bringing that in Monday as well, and the anticipated 8 tons of Cab became 9.5 tons, for a day's total of 18. Four of us ended up working 14 hours; the other two had family commitments that kept their days to 11 & 12 hours. Once again, all the tanks were full. A little more pressing and crushing Tuesday, pressing today and tomorrow will give us space for close to half our remaining fruit (and almost all of what is ripe and ready).

Today was slower for me – a chance to catch up on mail & bills and write this. The shock of the day was paying over $1000 apiece for barrels for the first time (euros selling for $1.44).

* Zinfandel will often have a number of shriveled berries on a cluster before the rest of the berries are ripe. These will contribute their concentrated sugar to the must (crushed grapes) over a period of days, and can take the overall sugar level from 24 or 25ºB to over 30º in some cases. This is why you see a lot of Zinfandels with high alcohol levels, and some with both high alcohol and residual sugar. I think a rich Zin can handle more alcohol than a more tannic wine like Cabernet, but only to a point, and I also want my wines to go dry. To this end, we cold soak Zin for two or three days to get a better idea of the true sugar level, then bleed off juice for our rosé and replace it with water.

Caught Red Handed Sun., Oct. 14, 2007

With lots of punchdowns, pumpovers and pressing my hands regularly come in contact with young red wine, staining them purple/red/black. I've even had people ask me if I'm an automobile mechanic. The best comment, however, came from a (grapegrower) friend's son when he was about 14 years old. Emile asked what happened to my hands, and I told him it was from red wine. He pondered this for a moment and responded, "Man, you gotta stop drinking so much".

What else would farmers talk about if we couldn't talk about the weather? An inch of rain Wednesday, another inch Friday, and a forecast of more rain and cool weather for the coming week has forced our hand a little bit. We (and several other wineries) are bringing in Roussanne from Saralee's Vineyard tomorrow. It's very susceptible to bunch rot and the risk at this point of letting it hang far outweighs any potential benefit. BTW – Saralee Kunde is one of the most wonderful growers with whom to do business. She's got 16 wine grape varieties and sells to dozens of wineries, but everybody gets personal attention as if they were the only client. It's true, nobody doesn't like Saralee! We'll do white port tomorrow as well, and probably pick for our Noir de Noirs on Tuesday (weather permitting). All that'll be left after that is the Mohrhardt Ridge Cabernet sauvignon, which could really benefit from another week plus of sun, even if temperatures stay low. Cabernet in general, and this vineyard in particular, is not highly susceptible to bunch rot, mainly because of very loose clusters. We're extremely lucky that we had an early bloom and therefore an early start to harvest. Since the end of the first week of September fall weather patterns have been a month ahead of normal – October-like in September and November-like in October. If we had been on an average schedule instead of early this year it would have been a disaster. I feel fortunate to have almost everything in the barn, and am very happy with quality so far. I think it's going to be an "UnParker" year; many folks in the Napa Valley who were hoping for überripeness aren't going to get it in 2007.

He's Drinking Cab, I'm Drinking Zin, and We're Lost in the Ozone Again Mon., Oct. 22, 2007

Lovely Winefarm came by a couple of weeks ago to pick up a load of pomace (pressed grapes) for her garden compost. WD came along for the ride, and, inquisitive as usual, asked about the buzzing stainless steel box hooked up to a water hose. The ozone generator has become a fairly common piece of winery equipment over the last ten plus years. It is used for sterilizing equipment, hoses, floors and drains, and even oak barrels. It has by and large replaced chlorine, which has some serious drawbacks, the biggest being the risk of cork taint type compounds. Certain molds can

produce 2,4,6 trichloroanisole (TCA) and related compounds when they grow in the presence of chlorine. (Chlorinated processing water and organochlorine insecticides have both been implicated in the formation of cork taint.) *Cellar taint* can occur when mold grows in drains with chlorine residue or on wood treated with preservatives such as the now banned Pentachlor. Several wineries have had to gut their aging facilities due to cellar taint. I find it more than ironic that James Laube of the Wine Spectator, claiming exceptional sensitivity to TCA, "outed" Beaulieu Vineyards' cellar taint problem a few years ago, when not long before that he was bestowing high ratings on a very prestigious winery's Cabs that had way more obvious taint problems. Must be the Emperor's New Clothes syndrome;-). Ozonated water leaves no residue, poses minimal health hazard, won't burn holes in your clothes, smells like the air during an electrical storm, and I know it works because it does burn a bit when it gets into an open cut.

Back to crush news: We had everything except the Mohrhardt Ridge Cabernet harvested by last Tuesday. The Cab survived two inches of rain the week of Oct. 8 in great shape, and I decided to let it hang through some cool, drizzly days last week because of the promise of dry, warm to hot weather this week. It was 80º yesterday and today, and could be warmer tomorrow and Wednesday. The Cab was "acceptably", but not optimally, ripe last week and I'm confident these few warm sunny days will soften the acid and tannins a bit more and intensify the cherry-blueberry flavors. I just this minute got a call from the grower, and harvest is confirmed for Thursday. Things have slowed down to the point where we can start checking on wines in barrel, testing for residual sugar and malic acid. If both primary and malolactic fermentation are complete we can add a bit of SO2, top barrels up completely, and seal them tightly, all of which protect against formation of VA (volatile acidity or vinegar). After pressing two tanks today we only have two open top tanks to punch down, and four closed top tanks waiting to be pressed. We'll press the last tank of Syrah tomorrow and the last tank of Zin on Wednesday. They'll both get refilled with Cabernet on Thursday, along with one of our other two large empty tanks.

Now is when the fatigue sets in. We don't have the adrenaline of full on crush anymore, and even though we aren't working nearly as many hours, it's more exhausting. Tomorrow I'll give another safety talk to address this and stress vigilance and attention to detail. Now is when we're at greatest peril of wine spills or injury because we're more inclined to operate on "autopilot".

Discussion

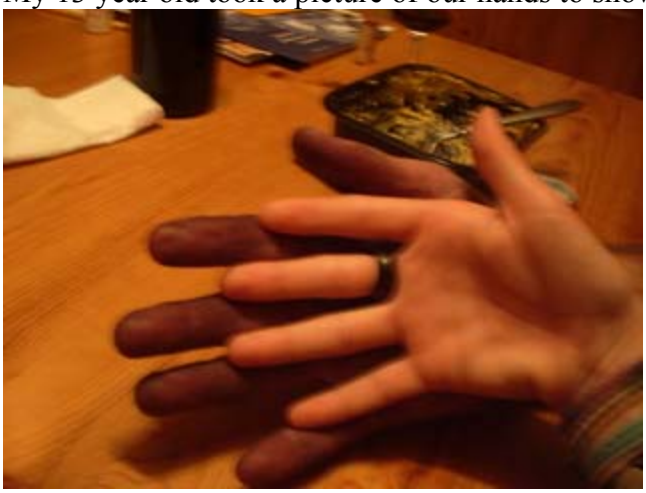
Q: Any repiratory complaints from workers around the ozone machine? My wife & I got a pair for our home years ago as 'air purifiers' and we both noticed a rapid onset of chest congestion and a few other symptoms that, after some googling, turned out be fairly common responses to the 'safe, heathy benefits' of home ozone generators (btw, they did make the place smell wonderful!).

The cost per barrel doesn't surprise me. This past week a friend was lamenting the rapidly increasing price of singlemalt scotch which led me to check the internation exchange rates (http://www.xe.com/). I was shocked to find that in the past 5 years, the dollar has lost +25% to the Euro and the GBP. In 2002, the Euro & Dollar were pretty much 1:1 and the Dollar:Pound was about 1.5:1. Now it takes $1.44 to buy a single Euro and $2.05 to buy a single pound.

Does Wellington export outside of the USA? If so, how has the changing global economy and weakening dollar affected international revenue?

A: Let's see, in order:
Avoiding excessive ozone use in a closed space is the one necessary precaution. Most of our use is outdoors. The Euro was worth $0.78 when first established (in the mid 90's ?); it's approaching double that value. We export less than one percent of our wine, an insignificant amount.

SB: My 13 year old took a picture of our hands to show the contrast.



Q: This is such fun to read for me. I realize that for the folks not in the industry this is fascinating, but for me I laugh at " a huge amount (14 tons of red grapes' worth) ". That is not even one trucks worth

at our facility. Granted we aren't some boutique winery, but one of the mass makers. We have had 1800 ton days in years past. Not this year.
Oh, what do I know about wine? Zilch, I don't drink. A co-worker did a blog in 05 documenting what we lovingly call "harvest hands", that god awful black that nothing, not citric acid, bleach or a coarse scrub brush with all of the above will remove.

A: I worked at wineries large and small before starting our own operation. One of the other production managers at the largest place I worked asked why I wanted to start a "toy" winery. When you love wine and winemaking and invest your life savings it's not a toy. This scale is way more labor intensive, but also puts me in intimate contact with the wines, which is its own reward. I was doing pumpovers Weds. AM when one of my seasonal employees asked if I wanted him to take over. I declined, explaining that I get a better feeling for the wines by my own physical involvement in their production. I know the wines better than if I were merely smelling and tasting them daily. Fourteen tons of pressing and eighteen tons of crush in one day is huge when your annual total is 150 tons plus 20 tons of custom crush. Imagine what ten percent of your winery's production in one day would seem like (impossible I imagine). My large winery experience has proven invaluable; crush there was constant, unrelenting crisis management. Getting a crusher motor rewound at 3 A.M. with hundreds of tons of grapes parked outside the winery overnight, trying to keep a wastewater overflow from reaching a nearby creek, ...it gives you some perspective.

Q: Hey, SB, what's in the Duke V? And (unfair question) if you were stranded on a desert island and a case of Wellington Vineyards wine washed up onshore, what wine would you want it to be?

A: The Duke is a blend of Zinfandel (that was too light for our Zin blend) and Merlot and Cabernet (that were too tannic for their respective blends). The "faults" of each component cancel each other, resulting in a reasonably rich and smooth blend.

If I were stranded on a desert island? What food would I have? If it were fish, I'd probably want the Sauvignon blanc. For sipping/comfort I'd have to go with the Port.

Harvest Is Over

I Buy the Beer Sat. Oct. 27, 2007

Every year we all weigh in on the first day of harvest and weigh out on the last day. He/she who loses the least amount of weight buys the beer and pizza (it means you weren't working as hard as everybody else). I typically lose ten pounds or more, but this year I was resigned to losing. I've got rotator cuff tears in both shoulders as well as a torn labrum in my right shoulder; I'm going under the knife in mid November to take care of both issues with the right shoulder. As a result of my incapacity, I didn't drive tractor and help dump buckets of grapes when we picked here and I did very few punchdowns. I actually gained two pounds, but at least my starting weight was the same as my finishing weight last year. Of course, with the boss losing, we went to a brewpub instead of ordering to go, and Lynda invited as many growers as she could (just to add to the humiliation, I suppose).

We finished Thursday with 16 tons of Cabernet Sauvignon from Mohrhardt Ridge Vineyard, our largest crop there since 1992's 18 tons. The vineyard is about five acres, so the crop was still just a bit over three tons per acre. The gamble of waiting another week to harvest paid off, as several sunny days in the 80's pushed the sugar content up to 23.8ºB, reduced acid levels a bit and developed more ripe flavors. Getting the last grapes into the winery is always a good feeling, but there are still pumpovers and pressing, lots of barrel work and labwork to be done before we can call it a wrap.

Where Are the Coyotes? Weds. Oct 31, 2007

It's Halloween and no howling coyotes. Usually my only company during nighttime pumpovers is the coyotes, but I haven't heard them at all this fall, even during full moons like late last week. When there's a full moon they usually sound like a bunch of teenagers having a beer bash. Our neighbors lost their dog to a mountain lion last month, and I wonder if the lion has eaten/scared away the local coyote troop.

With just three pumpovers twice a day, it's time to give equipment one last thorough cleaning and store it away for next year. We'll still be pressing, but we're done with the destemmer, the open top fermentors and related paraphernalia (punchdown devices, drain tube, fruit fly screens, and insulating blankets) and the picking bins and trailers. This will be the last week for two of the three seasonal helpers.

We brought all of this year's zinfandel (86 barrels) out today for sampling and topping. Five of seven lots are bone dry already and the other two are

very close, but none are close to completing ML. The alcohol levels range from 14.7 to 15.3%, which means we did a good job of estimation when we removed juice for Rosé and replaced it with water. I just looked back over my previous entries and realize the above needs a fair bit of explanation (topping, ML, Rosé): The wine is still fermenting when we press and put it to barrel, and if we filled the barrels completely it would foam all over, making a big mess and wasting wine. Therefore we leave the barrels a half-gallon or so less than full. The fermentation activity fills this space with CO2, protecting the wine short term, but we want to go back and top the barrels completely as soon as we can. This is a good opportunity to take samples for analysis and tasting. We check for residual sugar, absence of which indicates completion of primary yeast fermentation (dryness), malic acid, absence of which indicates completion of malo-lactic fermentation, and alcohol levels. More interestingly, this is our first opportunity to assess richness, balance and mouth-feel. During crush we get a good idea of aromas, color and tannin levels, but it is hard to gauge richness and concentration until the wines are dry and settled (cloudy, sweet, fizzy wines confuse the texture sensors).

The main reason I brought this up is that Lynda and I are thrilled with the Zins. The Estate old vine stood out as usual, but the really exciting part is the best Shumahi Ranch Zin in the last seven years and outstanding wines across the board from Meeks Hilltop Ranch. We thinned Shumahi to one cluster per shoot (removed approx. half the crop) except for a few rows we left for Rosé. We crushed the Rosé portion along with some Syrah and gave it 24 hours skin contact before pressing. The balance of the Rosé is made from juice bled from Zinfandel, Syrah and Grenache tanks that had excessive sugar levels. This juice is then replaced with water so that we don't alter the skin to juice ratio (don't dilute the color and flavors).

How To Make a Small Fortune Sat. Nov. 3, 2007

There's an oft repeated saying that you can make a small fortune in the wine business – you just have to start with a large fortune. In our case, timing was everything. Vineyard land prices 21 years ago were about 10% of what they are now, and it took my life savings, a fair chunk of my father's life savings and a timely inheritance from my mother's uncle to get us into it. We finished paying off the 20 year mortgage last year, but we do still have some bank debt. The other saying is that the only time you make a lot of money in this business is when you sell, and I realize how true that is in our case. We continue to build equity, but this is not a good cash flow industry. Of course it IS fun and challenging and allows a wonderful lifestyle in one of the more beautiful places on earth.

We sampled and topped Syrahs and Merlots on Thursday and Friday. I'm also very happy with both these varieties this year. In spite of lower

sugars than usual at harvest, the Merlots show no greenness or underripe flavors. The balance is wonderful already, and we'll be bottling Merlot with alcohol below 14% for the first time since the '02. Syrah has great depth and intensity this year, yet is remarkably smooth in its infancy.

My thirteen year old came and helped me with pumpovers today; I think she wanted to be "caught red handed" just like Dad. She thinks it's pretty cool here, and wants to learn tractor driving among other things. Who knows, maybe I'll have someone to take this over from me some day (in which case I'll never get rich :).

Discussion

Q How typical are work injuries for winemakers? Is it something you have to deal with every year?

A We are very safety conscious, but it is hard physical work around machinery. Back and arm injuries are fairly common with all the lifting, shoveling, pushing and pulling. Worker's Comp rates aren't nearly as high as for the construction industry, say, so I guess that's an indication of number/severity of claims.
My right shoulder is from a lifetime of wear and tear: every sport and outdoor activity imaginable, construction work, winery work. The left shoulder was a single episode: cutting a dead grapevine cordon with loppers in May. I couldn't get through the extremely hard wood with normal effort, so I took the "mind over matter" approach. The matter lost, both the vine and my body; as I cut through I felt a tear in my shoulder and one in my ribcage, which healed after a couple of weeks.

Q Perhaps you could start up the "sonoma grape diet / weight loss bootcamp" and get all the paris hilton types to do your harvest for free. Just claim that grape stains are an "age-defying skin treatment" and that vineyard dirt is a natural exfoliant.

A I used to get pissed off at the assistant winemaker at my first winery job when he wouldn't lift a finger in the cellar and would then head off to the gym for a workout. I kept offering him the great upper body exercise of helping us stack 100 lb. plus barrels.

SB We tasted barrel trials from the Handal-Denier Cab yesterday, and while I like the aroma/flavor profiles it seems somewhat lacking in concentration and intensity at this point. I could be wrong (and I hope I am), as in 1991, when the young wines were so well balanced that they seemed a bit weak.

Q Is there a difference between a meritiage and a field blend? How much trial and error is involved-it seems like it can be quite a

process, although an enjoyable one as you and your team sample  . Is there a way you can amp up the Handal-Denier cab concentration and intensity: through blending or some winemaking alchemey?

A Meritage is a copyrighted term for US produced blends of the traditional Bordeauk varieties: Cabernet sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Malbec, Carmenere and Gros Verdot for reds and Sauvignon blanc, Semillon and Muscadelle de Bordelais for whites. (I haven't checked accuracy of the above listed varieties; if anybody wants to research it, feel free to correct me.) A field blend is what it sounds like - a vineyard of mixed varieties. The blending is predetermined at planting/budding time, rather than at the wine stage. There are pros and cons, but in both the Rhone and Bordeaux most people nowadays are planting single variety blocks and blending later.

While there can be pleasure and excitement in arriving at a wonderful blend, it isn't exactly the life of Reilly. I'll discuss the process more thoroughly in an upcoming blog segment.

It's way too early to start fussing with the HD Cab. Blending a little bit of Merlot, Cab franc or Petit Verdot later on is always an option. As far as "alchemy" - adding tannins and ultrapurple grape concentrate - I believe that's best left to the mass producers and wannabees. It may make a more Parkeresque wine, but IMHO never a better wine.

Q Just interested about the topping off process. I understand why you don't top off the barrels (foaming & wasted wine) but when it's time to top them off do you have some excess Syrah & Merlot to put in the barrels to fill them or what is it you use?

A Winery rule: all containers are either completely full or empty and clean. Murphy's Law: You never have the precise amount of wine to fill x number of barrels exactly. Hence the half barrels, multiple beer kegs, 5 gallon and 3 gallon demijohns, even 1 gallon jugs. Because we make so many different wines we have to keep a large number of "breakdown" containers, and yes it's a pain in the kiester.

Q More about Meritage on Wikipedia.

Based on Wiki, you're in the correct, SB. Slight difference on one of the white varietals, but otherwise the same.

A Sauvignon vert = Muscadelle de Bordelais, most likely (no one has done the DNA studies). And how could I have ever forgotten the widely used, ever popular St. Macaire? What a dunce!

Q (re. Meritage) No, it's a trademarked term, more specifically a certification mark, like that of the "UL"'s stamp on electrical appliances. Copyrights are very, very different (and incredibly smurfing lame), and have all sorts of procedural advantages relative to Patents and TM that it shouldn't, given that Crappyright also has much harsher civil statutory AND criminal penalties for infringement.

A I should know better than to bandy about legal terms loosely with this crowd

Q A lot of blend wines list low single-digit percents of some wines. Understanding that the answer to this question will probably depend on the winery, how much of that is intentional winemaking practice to achieve a final product vs. realizing that there are barrels to be filled and the winemaker simply takes stock of what he's got lying around to fill the void?

A Yes, it does depend on the winery, but I imagine most high end producers do as we do - try to make the best wine possible. At the lower end of their (our) product line it may be a matter of "leftovers" to some extent. For example, we have included 2 or 3 percent of something else in some reserve or single vineyard wines to improve them. Any "leftovers we have are potential components for our eight dollar a bottle table wine, "The Duke". Other wineries might lose bits in large blends, sell them on the bulk market, or use them for a second label.

Q SB, doesn't applying the title Meritage force the winemaker to call it his 'flagship' wine?

A I haven't joined the Meritage Association, so I'm not sure how they monitor/enforce the regs. I do know they want Meritage to be higher priced than any of the same label's Cabernets or Bordeaux varietal wines.

Randy Wino Mimes Fear a Long Warm Break*

* - *Anagram Contest: I'll give a Bandolier of Corks to whoever comes up with the best anagram for "random ramblings of a weary winemaker" a la* Fawlty Towers.

Life After Crush? - Thu. Nov. 8, 2007

Yes, there is life after crush. Today I'm getting a haircut for the first time since late August, when I got my typical, shorter than usual, pre-crush buzz. This weekend I'll spend 24 hrs.+ with my daughters and two other girls in the Girl Scout Amazing Race. It's a very intense three-day contest of mental and physical challenges all over the greater Bay Area. Last year included orienteering, fire building in the rain, scavenger hunts, blind tasting of jelly beans (including Bertie Botts flavors – ughh) and a grape pick/grape stomp (guess which team won?). Now I can catch up on neglected paperwork and start planning next year's bottlings. Some supplies have a very long lead time and need to be ordered months ahead.

I've got shoulder surgery scheduled for next Wednesday; this is the only time of year I can afford to do without my right arm for an extended period of time. I'm hoping recovery and rehab won't last long enough to interfere with late winter / early spring tractor work.

Smells Like Victory In the Morning - Sat. Nov. 17, 2007

So, WineDavid springs a wootoff on me, kinda last minute, scheduled for the day after my surgery. Fortunately, the surgery was shorter, easier and less painful than anticipated. I won't need to have my shoulder immobilized for 6-8 weeks as feared, and can begin PT right after Thanksgiving. I've still got 45 of the prescribed 50 pain pills left, and fierce bidding has begun among coworkers (note to DEA: JK!). Also the wootoff didn't happen until yesterday. I can't believe how much wine sold in a little over an hour. Hopefully, this puts WD in good graces with the Woot powers that be, and me in good graces with WD; think lab capybara. :)

After winning the whole thing last year, our Girl Scouts finished third (out of 37 teams) this year, less than a minute behind the winners after almost 72 hours (a lot of shoulda, woulda, couldas in the car on the way home). I'm a verrry proud Papa, of course.

A lot of people seem to think my job must be wonderful because I "get to sit around and taste wine all the time". Even in light of all the other challenges of the job, mental and physical, wine tasting is hard work that

requires a lot of concentration. When your success depends on your ability to judge small differences and predict how those will affect the wine at a future date it's not quite so romantic anymore. Assistant winemaker Lynda and I (and often Toby, our tasting room manager) taste formally anywhere from one to four times a week from November through August. We taste in the morning when the senses are more acute, and it's not too much fun critically tasting young red wines that aren't ready to drink yet. (I always have my dentist appointments late in the day, when all the day's stimuli have dulled my senses; there's much less discomfort than in the early morning.) We don't taste for more than about an hour, or four to ten wines/treatments (otherwise I lose concentration or get a headache from too much concentration). We taste all the trials or experiments we did during crush: different yeasts and barrels, different fermentation techniques, etc. We also do a lot of blending trials: different varieties, with and without press wines, etc. It is imperative that we be our own biggest critics, picking each wine apart, looking for flaws or shortcomings. I've made a point to tell tasting room staff listening to us while we're tasting not to get the wrong idea about the wines; we can sound quite critical even when we love a wine.

A lot of wooters have asked about the blending process, so I thought I'd go through the details using our most complicated (and ultimately most rewarding) blend for an example. We have made a Bordeaux style blend called Victory since 1991, but not every year. I think we now have the tools to make it almost every year. The 2006 vintage is the first time we have had five different varieties available for this blend (**C**abernet **S**auvignon, **C**abernet **F**ranc, **Me**rlot, **Ma**lbec and **P**etit **V**erdot). On May 24th, after assessing the 3 batches of Me, 7 CS, 2 PV, the Ma and CF, I suggested a starting point of 60% Handal-Denier Cab, with 10% each of the other 4 varieties. We liked it, but all felt that it was a bit too lean and hard. We decided to try less PV and more of the varieties that add mid-palate richness: Me, CF and Ma. The next day we tried three blends with 55% CS and 5% PV, each with an additional 10% of Me, Ma or PV. The 20% CF was a favorite, with great richness and mid-palate fruit, but a bit too much gritty tannin. The next week we kept the Me, Ma and PV at 10, 10 & 5% and varied the CS and CF, with inconclusive results. The following week we tried substituting different amounts of Mohrhardt Ridge CS for Handal-Denier CS, with positive results. Then I had the thought that a little more PV could do positive things. As we got down to smaller differences and honed in on a final blend, it got harder and harder to reach consensus; all the wines were good and the small differences became more a matter of individual taste. In our final tasting before the '07 crush I preferred 40% HDCS, 10%MRCS, 22.5%CF, 10%Ma, 10%Me, 7.5%PV. Lynda preferred 45,15,15,10,10,5. Toby preferred 40,10,25,10,10,5. We let it rest, unblended, and just tried these same three blends last Friday. Amazingly enough, we each picked the same favorite

we had picked back in July. My first was Lynda and Toby's second. Based on discussions of what we all liked and "disliked" in each blend, we took my fave and swapped 5% HDCS for CF. When we tasted this new blend against the others we were unanimous, decisive and excited in our preference for it. Small changes may take place between now and bottling in April of 2008, but it looks like the 2006 Victory will be 55% CS, 17.5% CF, 10% Me, 10% Ma and 7.5% PV. These tastings involve a lot of discussion, and blends are changed / tweaked more on subjective criteria than any mathematical formula. Putting together the Victory is more work, but more fun than any of our other tastings; when we tasted this last blend we were all totally jazzed.

Q Speaking of cabernet franc, any chance you'll be releasing that as a single varietal? I *love* cab franc by itself. I feel it to be a much maligned grape, but nonetheless quite tasty.

A I think I mentioned that possibility in a previous Random Rambling. We have a lot of Cab Franc this year (2007) and the young wine is promising. I first got into Cab Franc when I worked at Carmenet (now Moon Mountain Estate) in the early 80's. The Cab Franc we grew there was awesome.

Q We had a 2000 Cab Franc from a local Long Island winery last night. And it truly reminded me of a decent Pinot Noir. Never gotten this from from CF before (but I also don't have a huge amount of experience with them).
The color was brick red and really had a leathery earthiness dominating (most of the fruitiness was gone). Still had some of the vanilla I get from some CF's - but the body,flavor and aroma were PN (to me).
Is this common as it ages, or did I (more likely) have a bottle that was past it's prime?

A Long Island Cab Franc and Merlot have gotten some good press in recent years, but I haven't tasted anything that was similar to California or Bordeaux in a good year. It's an extremely difficult growing environment in terms of temperature and rain during the growing season. Likely this wine was on the thin and light side to begin with and age hasn't helped it.
Vanilla aromas are typical of oak rather than any particular grape, and are often quite prominent in young wines these days. Cab Franc has intriguing aromas - often some licorice and violet-like notes not found in its daughter, Cabernet sauvignon. The tannins in Cab Franc can be gritty and out of balance, particularly if the grapes aren't fully ripe. It tends to ripen later than Cab Sauvignon,

which may be one of the main reasons it was replaced, in large part, by Cab Sauvignon in Bordeaux during the 1700's.

Q Do you (and winemakers in general) have a problem with cold season? Do you just stop tasting for a bit, or rely on other people to be your nose?

A My policy is to avoid getting colds. When I do get the rare cold/congestion tasting gets put off until a later date.

SB There were so many worthy entries that I had planned to put my top three up for a vote, but then DMCer got me with "Wynona". It's not only a workable statement (although not a complete sentence) but funny, and topical. Congrats, DMCer, you'll probably be receiving a blockhouse of crucibles some time during the next few months. In other words, don't hold your breath.

Thanks to everyone for playing.
Wynona: A famed, grim [minor] lawbreaker.

Q But her name is W**i**nona (Ryder); the country music singer is W**ynn**ona (Judd). When you said that "spelling counts", I didn't realize it counted against us!

A Oops, my bad (and I liked that one so much). So, here are the finalists. I couldn't even narrow it down to three. Also, Honorable mention to Joel Sisk for his imagination and sheer volume. I will consider who votes as well as how many, so don't bother stuffing the ballot box with votes from alternate identities 

1) My mini-eared woman brakes for a regal wine
2) Fairy gremlin worker, sew Mom a bandana
3) A lame-brained monkey warns of grim war (Is this a headline from 2003?)
4) Swankier, merry, mean amoral bag of wind
5) Wynona, a famed, grim (minor) lawbreaker

Loweel got the most votes, and will receive a brougham of croziers sometime next year (expect tediously long production and delivery times). Speaking of tediously long waits, I gave my next blog installment to WineDavid two weeks ago, but it hasn't been posted yet. I guess he's been too busy packing boxes to deal with anything else.

Q Gonna open the Merlot with some friends who enjoy Merlot this weekend. They want a wine and cheese night and I just want to drink wine so who am I to say no? What kind of cheese would you

recommend?

Also, what kind of decanting time, if any, would you recommend?

A I find that an assortment of three or four cheeses is both educational and enjoyable. I like to include one soft, creamy cheese (Delices de Bourgogne is a personal favorite) and one dry aged cheese (Parmesan or Vella's dry jack). After that, there are so many choices - Port Salut, aged Gouda, sharp Cheddar. I find everyone has different favorites.
I generally don't decant young wines; I like to see how they change with time after opening. This wine is fairly "open" aromatically, so if you do decant, I would recommend doing so no more than a few minutes before serving it. Note: this wine does have a lot of sediment already, likely lodged against the cork due to storage cork-down. If you shake it to "wash" the gunk off the bottom of the cork and then stand it upright for a day or two it won't be so messy when you open it.

Episode 6: The Phantom Menace

Ain't No Cure For the Wintertime Blues - Tues. Nov. 27, 2007

Well, there's no more of the excitement of crush, the vines have lost their leaves after the first hard freeze of the season, and I feel like staying in bed when it's cold outside. We're still "tidying up" in the vineyard and winery some, but our attention has returned to the 2006 wines which haven't been sampled, tested, tasted or racked since before harvest. I wrote about the Victory blending trials last week. We start from the top and work our way down, so next in line is the single vineyard Cabernets, then the Merlot and the Sonoma County Cab. With the Mohrhardt Ridge Vineyard Cab we preferred it with all the press wine included and still found it just a little tart and thin. We then tried this (blind, of course) versus a sample with a bit of Merlot and one with a bit of Cab Franc. A vineyard designated wine must come at least 95% from the named vineyard; we are usually at 100% but do blend occasionally if it significantly improves the wine without destroying its uniqueness. The Mohrhardt Ridge Cabernet has been bottled unblended in 15 of the previous 17 vintages, but in this case we all had a strong preference for the blend with Cab Franc. The Cab Franc added richness and a slightly chewy texture, intensified the fruit and lengthened the persistence of the finish. With the Handal-Denier Cab we also used all the press wine, with the Karren Vineyard Cab we used none of the press wine; both will be 100% single vineyard. With press wine there is often (but not always) a trade-off of more richness and fruit versus more harshness and astringency. With the Merlot we preferred it without the press wine, and decided to look at possible blends with Cab Franc and Petit Verdot. Inclusion of either would mean giving up the Estate designation, which requires 100% estate grapes. After three days of tastings we settled on approx. 5% PV and 2.5% CF. This leaves the Sonoma County Cab, which will be a complicated project, with several different batches of Cabernet sauvignon, the press Merlot and the remaining PV and CF to consider. Anything that doesn't fit (doesn't improve the wine) will likely end up in our generic table wine "The Duke".

The real bummer this week is the impending layoff of the new (as of July) cellar man. As feared, he never really got up to speed. I'm not sure exactly why, but he was a slow learner and continued to make the same mistakes over and over again.

Contest # 2: You Name the Topic - Mon. Dec 3, 2007

Contest # 1 (see "Randy Wino Mimes…") will close Dec. 10th, but we've already got our first winner in contest #2, before it was even officially

announced: mlust3905 sent in this week's suggestion for a blog topic. Regarding contest #1, there are some great entries and I've already got one of my daughters working on a design for the Bandolier of Corks. Send more suggestions, please.

Here's mlust's post: "Is it possible to give some insight into the economics of winmaking (sic). How is wine generally priced? Is pricing based upon perceived quality? How does the public/winery benefit from the woot model? (Elimination of distributor and retailer) How is product that is exceptional or disappointing handled? I realize there may be some overlap in the questions as posed, but your insight would be very interesting."

Wine pricing has to take several things into consideration: cost of production, marketing budget, the competition, and perceived value being four major inputs. Starting with cost of production: the price of any wine with a retail price under $15-20 is heavily influenced by costs; below that range you get into the realm of low cost grapes, barrel alternatives and cheaper packaging. Above that range pricing is related less to production costs and becomes much more subjective. The price and the value of any luxury item are determined in large part by the perception of quality. Unfortunately (IMO), the inverse is often true: for many people perception of quality is affected by price. I believe this latter phenomenon has had a negative effect on some people's perception of our wines. While we get some people telling us what incredible value our wines give ("This is better than any $50 Napa Cab I've had"), others dismiss them as "cheaper". Some small producers have an incredible amount of chutzpah (I'm not naming names). I've tasted $50 wines that I wouldn't pay $10 for, much less $20.

My approach to pricing has evolved somewhat over the years. Obviously we need to be profitable to stay in business, but I have always believed in giving people their money's worth. We spend very little on promotion and marketing, and depend heavily on customer loyalty and word of mouth. Because we sell almost half our wine retail (tasting room, wine club, internet), where the gross margin is much, much higher, we have been able to keep our prices lower than if we were selling only wholesale. We couldn't stay in business selling only wholesale without significant price increases. In setting individual wine's prices my main considerations are my assessment of quality and supply and demand. I'm willing to sell some wines at or below cost and make up for it with higher prices on our best wines. To wit: the costs for "Victory" are only marginally higher than the costs for "The Duke"; we sell one for $40 and the other for $8. This in large part also answers the question of how I handle exceptional or disappointing product.

The question about how “the public/winery benefits from the woot model” is harder to answer. Certainly the public (consumer) benefits by the availability of good to great, hard to find wines at substantial discount. Wineries benefit in different ways, including increased brand exposure, selling relatively large amounts of wine (for small producers), and moving excess inventory. (BTW: “excess inventory” should not be equated with inferior product. I won’t get into the whys here.) Some may be surprised that selling through woot does not result in great margins for the wineries. Between the discounts, woot’s cut and winery subsidized shipping, winery returns are similar to returns from sales to distributors. That WineDavid drives a hard bargain. Sometimes I think I’m accommodating him in order to get max playing minutes for my daughter when basketball season rolls around and he becomes CoachDavid.

Discussion

Q There could be lots of reasons. the few that immediately jump to mind are: (a) "gluts" of superior wine during great vintages; (b) people reducing spending in recessions; (c) the excess is an artificial legacy of the stupid asinine protectionist shipping restrictions, as all those who want to buy can't buy without finding a local distributor or traveling to one.

A Whoa! Almost enough here for another column. BTW: I'm looking for suggestions; it's a good thing WD delayed putting this on the site, because my next one would have been due yesterday, and I don't have enough material yet. (Hint, hint.)

Press wine and free run constitute all the wine; stems, pressed skins, seeds and lees (precipitated yeast, grape solids, "dirt", etc.) are all discarded/recycled.
First press is a term used almost exclusively in Champagne/sparkling wine production. The freshly picked grapes are pressed for white wines. Rather than "first press", "second press", etc., we increase the pressure sequentially and separate the juice by taste when we think we are starting to extract more harsh and bitter compounds. We then "fine" this "hard press" portion with a protein which reacts with the phenolic compounds responsible for the harshness and precipitates on the tank bottom. We then blend the fined juice with the "light press" prior to fermentation. We use egg white or gelatin based proteins; other proteins used include isinglass (from fish), casein (milk protein), and PVPP (a synthetic, nylon-like protein). None of these remain in the wine, but there is some pressure to require wine ingredient labelling that would include everything used in production whether it remains in the wine or not.

Finally, on to red wines, which is what my column/blog entry is about. Reds are fermented with the skins in order to extract color and flavor, so the separation of press wine occurs after fermentation. After we drain a fermentor we shovel the skins into the press and, similar to white grape pressing, start at low pressure (3 PSI) and increase pressure sequentially to a final 30 PSI. The first few cycles yield a fairly high volume of what is essentially free run wine - wine that remained with the skins after tank draining. This goes into the same tank we drained to initially. The process for "making a press cut" is the same as for whites, except we don't do any fining at this stage. We age the press wine in separate barrels and make fining and blending decisions later.
Added note: we separate red press wine only with the Bordeaux varieties; every time I have kept Zinfandel or Syrah press wine separate I've ended up adding all of it back, unfined, wishing I had more. As mentioned in the blog, press wine typically has more body and flavor as well as more harsh tannins. Not mentioned is that fining is not so selective as to remove only unwanted compounds; fining also strips body and flavor. We fine red press wine infrequently, and then only after small scale trials. There's significant danger of over fining, which will strip a wine and actually can make it taste harsher. The typical range for press wine % is 10-15.
Your rundown of labelling regs is pretty accurate. I might add that the 75% varietal requirement must be from the appellation in question, e.g. a wine that is 70% Napa Cab S., 10% Mendocino Cab S. and 20% Napa Merlot cannot be labelled Napa Cab S.

Q I have a couple questions about the wine you call "The Duke"... first, will this one be offered on wine.woot sometime? I love trying these 'leftover' styles of wines. Second... I've heard of (and had) a blend of wines that some wineries call "Cold Duck" - sometimes it's bubbly, sometimes it's not, but it sounds similar to your "Duke". It's the leftover wines that weren't blended into others but weren't strong enough to stand on their own, and the bottles are always inexpensive. Is that essentially what your "Duke" is? Are you familiar with the "Cold Duck" term?

A It's highly unlikely the Duke will make it to Woot - it just doesn't pencil out, given overhead/shipping costs. The only "cold duck" I've seen is sparkling, the name has a German origin; RPM gave a great explanation of that a few weeks ago (I can't remember which week). While we don"t just throw all our "leftovers" together de facto, that's essentially what the Duke is blended from: wines that didn't fit into other blends or weren't strong enough to stand alone.

Q I'm actually interested in hg's question as well. My automatic assumption is that there's no point in selling an $8 bottle if it couldn't be profitable in and of itself. What would be the point in holding out for people to climb your pricepoints (like auto manufactures do, hoping consumers climb up from hatchbacks to flagships)? It would probably be easier not to bother sourcing the grapes in the first place, unless you believed that you couldn't get the Victory grapes w/o purchasing the slightly lower quality ones for the rest of your line.

That said, you've been pretty open about not knowing what wines you're going to put out from year to year and how many vintages don't produce the specific labels you've given them in previous vintages (if that makes sense).

FInal question: Do you still wake up early in the off season?

A I don't plan to or want to make the Duke. Grape quality is difficult to assess and to control - weather is such a huge factor. I believe all of our vineyards have great quality potential; otherwise I wouldn't buy the grapes. Actually, wine from two of our vineyards has gone into both Victory and Duke (in different years). The point in selling an $8 bottle is that 's a far better alternative than selling in bulk for a much lower return or not selling it at all.
Edit: Or lowering the quality of our other wines.

Short answer: no.

Q That's fascinating. I've assumed that higher price = higher cost = (lower yielding vines + higher land costs); that they were all proportional. Does your example hold true for many wineries in CA? Does the cost actually fall somewhere in the middle of the $8 and $40 wines, with averaging-out leading to overall profitability?

A Vine yield and land costs don't automatically correspond with grape and wine quality. (Hey, I just got a great idea for an upcoming topic: The Myth of Low Yields.) As mentioned in the blog, production costs and bottle prices have a low coefficient of correlation at the higher price levels. Some people even make "cheap" wine and price it at very high levels; wine quality is very subjective and you can fool some of the people some of time. With rare exception, costs have very little to do with the price of very expensive wines.
Obviously, overall profitability is crucial to any business' long term viability. I don't think there are too many businesses where margins/profits are uniform for all goods or services.

Q So I have a question about "The Duke" Well I suppose it extends into your own business practices as well. I know you source from other vineyards, and I seem to remember that you had exclusive first rights to some of them. Or was it completely exclusive? Say you think the quality was bad one year, do you still have to go and pick them and pay for them, or are you able to pay as you go? Is this why you have an excess that you feel obligated to make wine out of. If I'm hearing you right, your saying there are extra grapes at the end of the day, and if you threw them out, you lose more money then if you ferment it and sell it below production costs. Is that right? It's because you have already paid for the grapes and you are trying to minimize your losses?

A We use all of the grapes from our own vineyards and most vineyards we purchase from. I work closely with these growers to do all we can to produce high quality grapes. Short of egregious mismanagement, the dominant factor in reduced quality is weather; this is a risk I share with the growers. In most cases I commit to taking the entire production from a vineyard, so our production amount does vary from year to year. There aren't any "leftover" grapes from our growers. (I do get lots of calls from other growers in high yield years that typically start with "I filled my contract with X Winery for 80 tons and have some left over; I'll make you a great deal...). I've seen growers get stiffed at the last minute by wineries large and small, but I stand by my commitments, even if I have more grapes than I want or I don't think the quality is what I expected. If a grower screws me, intentionally or not, I'm highly unlikely to do business with him/her in the future. Grapes are by far the most expensive component of wines (at least in our neck of the woods): we would never consider "throwing away extra grapes". Yields are unpredictable; when you get "excess" of great grapes it's generally a good thing.

Q From a technical standpoint, how do you know that none of the proteins remain? Is there a test that you use? This is all pretty fascinating.

A Red wines have an excess of highly reactive tannins that bind strongly with proteins and precipitate. White wines, without excess tannin, can have residual protein from the grapes and yeast. Many wineries use a clay called bentonite to remove excess protein from whites. This is called heat stabilization; it prevents white wines from forming a protein haze (turning cloudy) if they're subjected to high temperatures. In my book heat damage to flavor is much worse than cloudiness and I'd rather know if my wine was treated

improperly. My policy - don't do anything to a wine unless it improves quality, so no cold stabilization or fining or filtering solely for cosmetic reasons.
Okay, I got way off topic. I don't know if there is a sensitive enough test to ensure that absolutely no protein remains; maybe a better term would be no detectable or no measurable protein remains (of the very small amount added initially). So are wines thus treated technically vegan? Maybe not. I don't know of any routine testing any wineries do for traces of protein; wineries will put wines in incubators to test for heat stability - just a visual check to see if the wine turns cloudy at all.

Q From your description of the process I would say that most of the production cost of the Duke should be allocated to the quality wines - even though those leftover wines didn't get selected for the final blend, that can only be determined after the final blend is selected. You have to go through all the steps of producing the wine before you know which lots will be used in the quality wines and which will be leftover. Up to that point all of the costs should be allocated to the quality wines. That's part of what makes quality wines expensive - only a fraction of the wine produced will end up in the final product but you won't know which fraction until after the costs are incurred. Assuming the resulting quality wine is priced to absorb all those costs, the cost basis of the leftovers used in the Duke is essentially zero. Like SB said, the goal is for there to be no Duke, but the reality is that there are too many uncontrollable variables in wine production for that to happen.

A Well put, but there are accounting and tax implications as well 

Q We've had a few vegan wine discussions on the board. I know some wineries are doing what they can to remove the use of meat proteins from the wine making process. Have you considered this at all? (Personally not important to me if it adversely affects flavor)

A We do very little fining of red wines, so almost all of them are vegan. I guess if you used PVPP (a synthetic protein) you'd be okay with the vegan community but then you might run afoul of the organic community. I don't know of any vegetable derived proteinaceous fining agents, but I suppose it's possible (do we then have a soy warning label?)

Q Just had my first of your wines, the 2003 CS... fantastic! Is it meant to have a slightly chocolatey aftertaste to it? It's wonderful 

A Thank you very much. I wouldn't say the wine is "meant" to have any specific flavors. We really don't try to manipulate flavors. I'd rather let the grapes express themselves, then protect the flavor and make sure the wine has good balance and "drinkability" (oh no, is that a word?).

Q about a month ago, "rpm" mentioned when he was a child, he remembers sitting around with grandfather (or was it father) and uncles listening to their tastings of pre and post root cloned wines. Now that would have been and interesting subject to listen too.. any way when you talk about old vines, maybe you (rpm also) could expand into whether you feel the the clones have changed the original flavors..or do clones (roots) change flavor at all, (I know they are necessary to combat Grape phylloxera and different types are switched/chosen for the way they work with different soil types/water conditions and I haven't seen any studies as to their effect on the taste, if any)

A Wrong episode! This is The Phantom Menace, not Attack of the Clones.

It sounds like maybe there's some confusion between clones and rootstock. All grapevines of a given variety such as Pinot (you'll see why I chose this as an example) are grown from cuttings taken from vines of that variety. Every vine in the world of that variety can be traced back to one "mother vine" that grew from a seedling. Before phylloxera was spread to Europe and California in the 1800's vines were planted simply by taking a piece of grape wood and sticking it in the ground. Nowadays most vines are grafted onto phylloxera tolerant rootstock (native American grapes). The genetic properties of any plant are the same whether they're grown on their own roots or grafted. Any impacts on flavor are due to differences in rootstock vigor, and vine vigor does play a large role in wine quality (more on that in an upcoming column about old vines). So, yes, type of rootstock can have a profound influence on taste, albeit indirectly.
Clones are copies. When we talk about different grape clones, we're talking about selections of propagation wood from vines that have developed small differences through somatic (non-reproductive) mutation. Typically what happens is mutation in a single cell at the growing point of one branch. When a cutting from that branch is used for propagation the entire vine carries that mutation. The differences that grapegrowers notice and select are usually visible differences in the fruit such as cluster and berry size or shape, and intensity of color. Pinot provides the most vivid

example: in addition to many widely varied clones of Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris (aka Pinot Grigio) and Pinot Blanc are clones of Pinot (Noir). These "varieties" are actually the same exact variety as Pinot Noir. At some point a grower found one branch on one vine in his Pinot Noir vineyard with pigmentless fruit (Pinot Blanc) and took cuttings from that branch for new vines. Every Pinot Blanc vine in the world has been cloned from that one branch. Same with Pinot Gris, same with clone 667, etc. The provenance of many "clones" is unknown, and to be technically correct from a botanical standpoint many of the named "clones" would be more properly called "selections". In other words, there is no evidence that they are distinct clones.

Q As I was watching emails roll in for 'another' site with updates about a community wine project, I noticed a lot of things getting added at various times in the fermentation (nutrients (Cerevit, DAP, Superfood, etc.), water, tartaric acid, SO2, Vinozym/FCE...).

I'd be interested to know more about how winemakers manipulate a fermentation using additives, what they do and why they use them (i.e. what happens if they were to just let nature take its course)?

A Nutrients are all compounds naturally present in grapes, but that are sometimes deficient. Some winemakers don't use them at all, some dose everything (that's kind of like taking tons of vitamins even if you eat a healthy, balanced diet), and some (like ourselves) use them selectively, depending on "risk factors". The reason for using nutrients is to reduce the incidence of stinky fermentations, and sluggish or stuck fermentations. Risk factors include excessive drought stress, high sugar, low nitrogen, late harvest. Certain varieties (e.g. Chardonnay) are notorious for poor nutrient status and fermentatation problems. Others (Zin, Pinot) usually ferment rapidly without problems. Individual vineyards tend to ferment similarly year to year. If a vineyard or variety ferments rapidly without problems we don't want to add nutrients which might accelerate the fermentation.
Water is necessary if the grapes are so high in sugar that the fermentation will not go to dryness (if desired), or will result in a higher alcohol level than desired. We had 5 tons of Chardonnay come in at 26.7 brix this year; if we hadn't added water we probably would have ended up with a wine around 15.5% alcohol and 1.5% residual sugar(RS) - not the style we're aiming for.
Tartaric acid is the main acid in grapes. If there isn't enough the wine will taste flat and soapy and be more susceptible to spoilage; if there's too much the wine will be too tart.

SO2 is routinely added before fermentation to supress growth of unwanted microbes (wild yeasts and bacteria). These organisms can produce off aromas, but, more critically, they compete with wine yeast (native or inoculated) for nutrients. I rarely used SO2 at crush (only for "unsound" grapes) prior to 1992, when I had a Cabernet fermentation stop at 1% RS due to bacteria and had an extremely difficult time restarting it. Now I always add a bit of SO2 at crush.
Another additive we use is oxygen. It helps build healthy yeast that are more alcohol tolerant. It also can interact with tannins and affect body and structure.
Macerating enzymes and added tannins seem to me to be more into the "manipulation" category. Yeasts do have similar enzymes, but the ones used in commercial winemaking products are isolated from other fungi (yeast are fungi), such as Aspergillus.
Commercial tannin products are derived from grapes, chestnut or oak. I'm not sure why these additives seem any less natural to me than tartaric acid or yeast extract. Maybe it's just because they weren't used when I started in the industry. Maybe it's also that they can change the structure of a wine, although other factors such as yeast strain, cap management, fermentation temperature, oxygen can all affect structure also. When you get right down to it maybe winemaking is all manipulation - crushing, pressing, controlling temperature.....
Without getting into philosophical issues too much, our techniques vary from SO2 at crush then nothing else, no yeast, no acid, no nutrients (Estate Zin) to inoculation with a pure yeast strain, nutrients, tartaric acid, enzymes and oxygen (via air) (Syrah). I've done trials with tannins and never liked the results; possibly they're of more utility with grapes from hot growing areas.

I suppose if we let nature take its course completely we'd have wine for a few days and then we'd have vinegar 

Q Isn't this how we got to region-specific varietals in the first place? Some regions not only grew certain grapes better, but also had different / better conditions for all of the rest of the factors involved in getting those grapes into wine. Add in a bit of skill and craftsmanship and different regions became known for different wines. Over the centuries (and probably the most in the past century) we have learned the *why's* behind so much of this process and figured out how to get the same results (or superior) results in a wider array of conditions. You can add SO2 or nutrients or enzymes to get similar results to some region in France that used to have naturally high amounts of these things.

It's also why we have to protect regional names, now -- it wasn't hard to know that Feta cheese came from Feta, Greece 100 years ago; but today we can make it anywhere because we know the factors that used to make it unique; they're no longer exclusive to the region that first discovered them.

I guess where I am going with this is that much of this still sounds like traditional wine making, but you're recreating situations that are not natural in your environment. You can take it too far, I am sure; or use techniques that rely on even more artificial methods to get results, but what you described sounds like educated craftsmanship. Stradivarius was a skilled craftsman, too, but I have read that much of his lasting success is due to weather conditions in his area that created ideal wood for his instruments -- is a violin less good when its maker knows how to get the wood to grow in the best way before it is shaped into a violin?

A Love it! Great post. Thanks, Peter

Q Is this a new trend that comes from the budding practices in the industry?? In particular I'm thinking about the fact that wine makers are now picking their grapes when they feel the they are "ripest" rather then at a certain brix level. Since they are allowing for higher sugar levels in the grapes, which in turn is increasing the alochol possibility, is oxygen being added so that the sugars can be digested more fully? I know that if there is too much sugar then the yeast will die out before fully converting to alcohol when the yeast reaches it's alcohol limit. Making it more tollerant to alcohol allows it to become more alcoholic right? I guess I'm curious if this is something that also is a cause for the recent spikes in alcohol levels in wine that traditionally would not have been reached.

A Stuck fermentations are always a worry at harvest time. Picking at higher sugar levels, and therefore producing wines with more alcohol, increases the risk. Delaying harvest also can result in depleted nutrient status in the grapes, further increasing the risk. Higher alcohol levels are due to stylistic decisions.

Last 2007 Installment

And She'll Have Fun, Fun, Fun 'Til Her Daddy Takes the Ripple Away - Sat. Dec. 8, 2007

Sweet fortified wines like Night Train, Ripple and Thunderbird were the backbone of the California wine industry from repeal up into the 1960's. Whether all grape like Port or Muscatel, or flavored like Ripple, these wines were the beverage of choice for budget minded alcoholics, aka winos. The sugar helped it go down easily and provided some energy, and wine was the cheapest high because of the tax structure. The tax on fortified wine was, and still is, higher than the tax on "table wine", which is defined as 14% alcohol or below. The federal government still considers all wines above 14% as "dessert wines", not distinguishing between a typical Zin or Syrah and a Port. During the reign of George I, his administration raised the tax on wine 529%. They also levied a one-time floor tax on all wine in any licensee's inventory. Because the tax was to be calculated as of Dec. 31st most restaurants and wine shops cut way back on holiday ordering that year in order to deplete their stocks and reduce their tax liabilities. We ended up with depressed sales and extra taxes – Merry Xmas! That administration also introduced a bill including a special occupational tax (SOT) on winemakers. The SOT was originally set at $5000 a year, a mere pittance for wine factories, but quite painful for small businesses like ours. In the final version passed by Congress it was reduced to $1000 a year and was recently eliminated altogether. Every dollar of tax paid at the producer level raises the price of the product two dollars or more at the retail level and three dollars or more at restaurants because everyone wants to maintain their margins. "No new taxes" my @;;!

Start Me Up - Tues. Dec.11, 2007

I just got our monthly energy summary from the power company and we only had a net usage of $86 of electricity in November, leaving us with a balance of almost $1200 to the good. The anniversary of our solar electric generation system and annual electricity usage reconciliation is March 30th, and it looks likely that we'll still have a surplus at that point, and therefore an annual electric bill of $0. The system was designed to generate 95% of our usage in the prior year, but since we did not have a time-of-usage meter they could only guess at peak/off peak usage. Also, we now have a "net" meter so we don't know if we used less electricity this year because of the mild summer or if the system is more efficient than anticipated. I have a feeling the company that designed and installed the system will be able to tell us which is the case, as they have remote monitoring equipment. I've got a board meeting at the Sonoma Ecology

Center tonight. Maybe I'll offer them free charging for their Toyota Rav 4EV (they talked Toyota into a donation when all the other ones were recalled/decommissioned).

Auld Lang Vine - Thurs. Dec. 20, 2007

Thanks to nematic for the suggestion that I address the facts and myths of old vines. I remember when I was growing up I once asked my (physician) father, "Why do old people get thin? Do their digestive systems not work as well?" His response was, "Maybe it's not so much that old people get thin as that thin people get old." This has to be true to some extent with vineyards and quality as well – good vineyards don't get ripped out as readily. There are logical reasons why old vines often make for better wine, but age alone is no guarantee, nor is it impossible to make great wine from very young vines. The factors that do influence quality have more to do with vigor, stress and fruit exposure (all interrelated). Grapevines are extremely vigorous plants, and if given fertile soil and sufficient water they grow excessively and don't produce high quality wines. There's an old European saying that "vines need to suffer". What this really means is that they produce better wines in poor soils; when they actually suffer they don't produce good wines. Old vines tend to be less vigorous. This means their fruit has better light exposure (important for flavor, color and tannin development), they have lower yields and they stop growing earlier in the season (putting their energy into ripening the fruit). Location is still the number one factor in quality potential; even old vines don't make great wine in poor locations.

I will be on vacation until mid January. Keep the comments, questions and suggestions coming, I'll respond when I get back.

Happy New Year to all!
Peter

Discussion

Q I'll assume that is referring to George HW Bush. What year was this?

A 1991, if memory serves (which seems to be more of a problem as the years go by).

Q you mean old vines like these, peter?

Looks like someone has some pruning to do after their vacation (unless, of course, these have already been pruned, in which case I am showing my wines 101 knowledge)

A Gee, I wonder where you got that pic of an 84 year old Carignan vine. You can see that each arm has two canes at the end. In early March we'll remove the distal (outer or uppermost) cane completely and prune the basal cane to two buds (about 1-2 inches). This should give us two canes this year - the same amount of fruit and same amount of growth.

Q Why remove the distal and prune the basal as opposed to the opposite?

A If we kept the distal spur the arm would get 1-3" longer each year. A 50 year old vine would be over ten feet tall. We do choose higher buds for position while we're training young vines. Once the vine is the desired height and the arms developed for proper spacing of the fruit we want to keep the vine the same size and shape as much as possible.

Q So does that mean that we're going to see a decrease in the cost of Peterwein for 2008?

A We're just paying the bank instead of the power company, but in theory we'll have the system completely paid off in less than seven years and then the electricity will be free.

To Heaven and Back

Oh Lord, Stuck in Shanghai Again - Sat. Jan. 19, 2008

Skip ahead to "Go Back Jack…" if you're here to read about my work. These first two sections are all about my recent trip to Bali. My 86 year old father had enough miles on his credit card for a couple of tickets to anywhere and wanted to go to his favorite place one more time. His last visit was about 15 years ago, mine was as a teen 40 years ago when we were living in Malaysia on one of my father's sabbaticals. A lot has changed in that time, but Bali is still one of Earth's special places and the people have maintained their spirituality and grace. Getting there is another story. It was 32 hours from takeoff in San Francisco to landing in Denpasar, with two layovers of several hours each. One cool thing about the flight was getting a bird's eye view of our vineyard and winery as the plane went north on the polar route.

The Shanghai airport was immense, all chrome and tile and glass, but almost deserted. While we waited for wheel chair assistance at the end of the jetway, the United flight crew was waiting for their escort. After about ten minutes one of them suggested walking down the hallway towards the airport center, but was quickly rebuffed with a warning that they could end up in jail. I ended up going through Quarantine twice, Immigration, Customs and airport security three times each. Each time a stern faced official pored over the documents to make sure every i was dotted and every t crossed. My dad and I sat on hard chairs (with armrests that made it impossible to lie down) for half the night in the cavernous, unheated (high 50's maybe) main building. Two thirds of the check-in counters were unassigned, airport personnel outnumbered travelers and seemingly no one spoke English. Only because of a tip from some fellow Americans did I manage to prevent loss of our luggage, which had been clearly marked to be checked through all the way to Bali. I guess it really isn't the airport employees' fault that they can't read the Roman alphabet.

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? - Thurs. Jan. 24, 2008

After Shanghai the Singapore airport was almost too good to be true. It is the top rated airport in the world. The terminal is a huge first class shopping mall, with a large, friendly, knowledgeable, multilingual staff and there are large banks of free high-speed internet stations everywhere. Best of all, after our ordeal in Shanghai, the well padded chairs and chaise lounges are extremely comfortable. You can even rent small bedrooms or take a shower for a small fee. I decided to buy some Indonesian Rupiahs for airport fees, tips, etc. while still in Singapore, and ordered $100 worth at the foreign exchange booth. When I discovered that would get me 930,000 Rupiahs I got to thinking that I'd never been a millionaire, much

less carried a million in my wallet, so I bought $120's worth. There are way too many great stories to be able to tell them all here, from tiny women in flip-flops carrying 110 lb. sacks of cement balanced on their heads and families of four on a motorbike to verdant scenery and temples everywhere you look. In spite of the arduous travel involved I look forward to going back, would consider retiring there, and would recommend it highly to anyone looking for a very affordable, unique cultural experience in a tropical paradise. The Balinese are among the most friendly, artistic, stress free, spiritual people on the planet. The feeling is pervasive and infectious and one can't help but let go of stress and worry after just a few days. I believe that just two weeks there has altered my perspective on life.

Go Back Jack and Do It Again - Sat. Jan. 26, 2008

After our first two full time cellar workers were with us more than 4 years each we now have our third new guy in just over six months. The first one just didn't cut it and the second one got picked up on a probation violation on his way home after just his third day of work. It seems his probation conditions didn't include taking a long trip to Mexico. Such a pity, too, he had great experience, glowing recommendations, was a quick learner and hard worker. Everybody liked him a lot. My wife said she couldn't believe I didn't do a background check.

It's time to get back to business after a month plus of very little vineyard or winery activity. José started pruning on the 14th, but rain has put things on hold the last few days. No worries, we've got until late March to finish. Our first bottling since August is in four weeks, so we're making sure all the wines are bottle ready. Supplies have all been ordered – capsules in November (minimum 10 week lead time), glass in December, corks and labels last week. We'll be bottling 2007 Rosé and Sauvignon blanc and 2006 Estate Zinfandel and Merlot. Most of our '07s have completed ml, so the new guy, Sam, will get lots of practice racking, and we'll all be busy with our first formal tastings of all the different cuvées, including barrel trials and cap management comparisons.

A Double Shot of Wine Judge Love - Mon. Jan. 28, 2008

You've probably read some of my rants about wine ratings and wine competitions, but the fact remains that positive reviews and awards can boost sales. We do submit wines to several major reviewers, and we do enter some of the California competitions. We just got great news from the SF Chronicle Wine Competition (billed as the largest wine competition of American wines in the world). We got two double gold (unanimous) medals – for our 2003 Sonoma County Cabernet (a wine. woot launch wine) and our 2005 Zinfandel "Meeks Hilltop Ranch". Just over 2% of the

4000+ entries made double gold. At least two dozen wineries that have been featured on wine. woot entered the judging and many of them got great results, including double golds for Mumm, Calistoga Cellars, Stuart, Hahn and Ty Caton. Complete results, if you care, can be found at winejudging.com.

Coming soon to this blog: my opinions about the connections and the myths about yields and quality. Please continue to suggest topics or ask questions about any aspect of grapegrowing or winemaking.

Discussion

Q Does bottling at different times of the year impact the wine at all? even if its aged the same, does the climate play a role or is it so isolated/weather-free that it doesn't make a difference.

A Bottling time is determined by how long we want to age each wine in barrels. I'm not much of a believer in the biodynamic theories about performing certain winery operations during certain phases of the moon or whether the barometer is up or down.

Q What do you or other winemakers do when they end up with a barrel/tank of just bad wine? Stuck fermentation, contamination, what have you. Can you just dump it down the drain? do you or anyone you know do anything fun or crazy with it (thinking along the lines of the old beer dunk tank that sam adams does)?

A "Bad" wine, no matter the cause, hurts the pocketbook one way or another. Some just go ahead and bottle it under their regular label, which has to hurt sales and reputation at least a little. More often it gets blended with something else, bottled under a second (cheaper) label, or sold in bulk. If it is completely unusable it can be distilled or, with government permission, dumped.

Q Could you elaborate a bit on both "final" solutions?

A Distilling material (DM in the industry) gets a very low price. It doesn't even pay the cost of shipping when small amounts are involved. When I worked at a very large winery all the tank rinsings, etc. were saved in a large tank and shipped out for distillation. I think this practice only made sense because it saved the winery considerable money on wastewater processing. The biggest wineries have their own stills; they not only salvage alcohol, they also cut down on wastewater treatment costs. The alcohol thus obtained is used to make "cheap" brandy or for fortifying desert wines such as Port and Sherry. In France and

other countries where wineries "pay tax" by giving alcohol to the government it is common practice to distill all winemaking byproducts: lees (the dregs that contain grape solids and yeast), pomace (the grape skins after pressing), rinsings, any spoiled wine, etc.

Because the government's main interest in the wine industry is tax revenue, they like to keep track of the wine. They don't like it when wine (potential revenue) disappears. Therefore we must account for and report weights and volumes from the time we receive grapes until the tax is paid. Written permission is required to "destroy" wine.

Q Did you enter the Handal-Denier in the contest? I really enjoyed that wine and thought it was the best of that woot offering. To date, it's been my favorite woot wine.

A We did not enter the Handal-Denier Cabernet. It is almost completely sold out. We make so many different wines that we can't afford to enter every wine or every competition. Typical entry fees are $50-$85 per wine plus six bottles plus pour / give away wine at tastings.

Q So this leads to something I have wondered on many occasion. Of a typical batch (is there such a thing?) how many / what percentage of the final bottled product do you "use" in ways other than selling it. Boy that was very clumsily worded -- how about: How much wine to do you open, but not sell, for things like tastings, competitions, promotions, drink it yourself, etc.? Given your comments on taxes, above, I suspect you must keep track of this usage, too -- do you actually have to "charge" yourself for use of this inventory?

A Before we got into the business a wise (winemaker) friend told me to remove 5% of the wine off the top from any sales or financial calculations, so as not to agonize over making donations, giving samples to marketers, competitions, journalists, etc. We typically allow 2% for trade (wholesale distributor and broker) samples. We give somewhere around 1% of our total production to charity events. This is probably way above the industry average, but even then we have to be incredibly selective. Wineries are constantly bombarded by donation requests. Most of our donations go either to local charities or causes about which we have strong feelings. Promotions, competitions and tastings probably add up to 0.5% or so of our total production.
There really is not a typical batch. For small lot wines that we sell

predominantly from the tasting room such as Port or Noir de Noirs we may pour 5% of the total bottles. For larger production (for us) wines that are largely sold wholesale such as Chardonnay or Cabernet we'll end up pouring less than 1% in the tasting room. Overall, I would estimate we sell 95%, so my friend's 5% off the top rule turned out to be quite accurate.

We generally pay the excise taxes on large batches at a time, so all the case by case or bottle by bottle sales and removals are done from a "tax-paid" area of the winery (as opposed to the bonded area where we keep all bulk wine and any bottled wine that has not had the tax paid yet.

Q I would imagine the bookkeeping aspect of owning a winery is a larger headache than any of us suspect. Do you keep your own books or do you hire someone to do it? What kind of penalties would a winery receive if the books were wrong and the taxes were paid incorrectly/not at all on a portion. I think my pipe dream of winning a large sum of money and buying my own vineyard just went poof. I'll fall back on my previous wish of winning a large sum of money and buying a 9 hole golf course to run.

A Like any other taxes, there are penalties and interest for late filing or underpayment. Bookkeeping, reports and tax payments are a mixed bag for us. I do general bookkeeping, we have a compliance company that does a lot of the state by state licensing, reporting and tax filing, I do the California and federal returns and payments. Oh, and yes it is my least favorite part of running a winery.

Q Where is the romance in the business? This sounds like even more work - paper - the icky sort of work. Soy bean farmers have it made. They harvest the stuff and a week later it's on the way to China. But wine is work from bloom to mouth.

A had no idea how much paperwork was going to be involved when we got started. From the state division of water rights to the assessors office, ABC, ATT, B of E, IRS, emergency services, health department, weights & measures, Dept. of Food & Agriculture, OSHA, EDD, trade associations, insurance companies, etc, etc. - everybody has licensing and reporting requirements (and collects money).

I'm sure the soy bean farmers have it a little easier than we do, but nothing is simple in this bureaucratic age. Any soy bean farmers out there who can tell us about the BS (bureaucratic stuff) that is put on them?

Resp I work in natural resources (so I am the bureaucratic bs) and my dad's a farmer. Depending on your state you may have restrictions on irrigation and fertilizer application. In some parts of Nebraska you have to certified to apply Nitrogen and you have to monitor your irrigation VERY closely. In other parts of the state, you're pretty well free to irrigate at will. In my resource district we're going to start requiring flow meters on all new high output wells (50+ gpm). You also have to be nitrogen certified and in areas of high nitrates there is a form you have to fill out that requires your well to be tested for nitrates and also your soil, but soil is only for corn. The farmers grumble about it, but it's about 50 bucks in test fees. If they had to deal with what you deal with they'd never complain. I'm not sure what taxes there are on the actual product, but my dad has never complained about taxes on his crop. He farms in Iowa and has never used irrigation, so for him it was literally plant, grow, pick, sell. Though once every four years he has to take nitrogen certification classes. Basically, whatever headaches he has are offset by the perks he gets. Currently all his land is in CRP because it's Loess soil and therefore easily erodible, so he gets paid to not farm. He also gets favorable interest rates on loans and can buy a deer tag for $1 for every person that lives in his house over the age of 16. It costs my dad about 5 bucks to get his deer licenses.

Q What percent of your time would you guesstimate goes to paperwork?

A I know exactly how much time: 2 much!

BTW - My BS is in Cons. of Natural Resources from UC Berkeley (with emphasis in Soil Sci. & Plant Nutrition). If I had followed the common career path we might be colleagues now. As you probably know, UC was one of the original land grant colleges.

Q I stumbled across a 1999 Wellington Syrah at a local store tonight -- highly unusual. I asked the wine dude if he had any more Wellington stuff, but he said no and that the syrah was a leftover from last year when Wellington still had distro in Michigan. Just wondering if I should go clean them out.  I think they were selling it for around $25.

A Original retail was $18.00 I haven't tasted the 1999 Syrah in two years or more, so I can't say how it's aging. I wouldn't buy more than one without trying it first. Distribution is harder and harder to obtain these days. The trend the last two decades has been to more and more wine brands and fewer distributors in most states.

Fortunately, in the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision on Michigan and NY laws, more and more states are opening up to direct shipping. We are licensed to ship to Michigan. The downsides are shipping costs and time. The upside is that you can get any and all of our wines, not just the ones we sell to distributors.

Q I also came across a bottle of your syrah, (the only one the store had), but it was a 1998. Of course I bought it for $15.99. Any suggestions?

A 1) Cut tin capsule
2) insert cork removal device, rotate clockwise, apply lever, pull
3) pour into wine glass
4) enjoy!

Peter

Q Is it wrong for me to ask when and where the 2005 Zin (Meeks Hilltop Ranch) will be available?

A It would most definitely not be wrong to ask. The primary source is our tasting room and web site. Our Calif. distributor has some; not sure whwer he's placed it yet. None has gone to out of state distributors so far.

Does (Crop) Size Really Matter?

Less is More, Isn't It? - Fri. Feb. 8, 2008

There is a widely held belief that wine quality is inversely proportional to yields. I would like to look into when and where these ideas came about and if /when they are valid. Yields in Europe are typically expressed in hectoliters per hectare, an amount of *wine* per area measure rather than grape yield, and this is an important distinction. The first appellation laws and yield restrictions in France were designed as market control measures to protect both price and image of a region's wines. They date to a time when wineries generally sold wine in bulk and rarely bottled at the winery. Bottled wines were marketed with regional names (e.g. Burgundy), sometimes adding a village name (e.g. Pommard), and occasionally a vineyard name (e.g. Les Épenots), but very rarely the producer's name. Grower/wineries wanted to protect the value of their product both by limiting production and maintaining quality. Allowing each grower to sell only a certain amount of wine helped protect against both overproduction and various types of fraud. Note that nothing in these laws limit the crop your vines produce, only how much wine you can sell with a given appellation. A few years ago one of the regular writers for *The Wine Spectator* devoted his entire column to the news that the commune of Puligny-Montrachet, home to some of the greatest Chardonnay vineyards in the world, had voted not to allow increased "yields" for the *previous* vintage. He went on and on about their integrity and about how they were maintaining high quality because higher yields lower the wine quality. He seemed to completely miss the point that the grape yield had been huge and they were only deciding how much wine would be allowed to be sold as Puligny-Montrachet (the rest would have to be sold as "Bourgogne").

We also need to look at the definition of grape and wine quality and how that has changed. Historically, ripeness and alcohol level were the most obvious quality factors. In regions such as Burgundy and Bordeaux under ripe grapes were the norm. Therefore the riper (or "less under ripe") the grapes, the better the wine. In this situation smaller crops would almost always result in "better" wine. With better viticulture and, dare I say it, global climate change, ripeness is much less of an issue than it used to be. Even the French are learning there can be too much of a good thing. With better winemaking technology and knowledge the definition of wine quality has also changed somewhat, at least to the extent that low alcohol levels and spoilage issues are nowhere near as prevalent as just a few decades ago.

I think everyone involved in winegrowing would agree that over cropping lowers wine quality. Only a minority (myself included) would contend

that “under cropping” also lowers quality. I believe that vines produce the best fruit and best wine when they are balanced and the fruit ripens gradually but completely. So how do we define “ripens completely”? That means different things to different people. As an example, some winemakers actually want 16%+ alcohol, so one of their criteria might be minimum 28º brix (28% sugar w/v).

How do we define crop size and yield? The most common metric used in the U.S. is tons per acre (TPA). We all use that kind of number when we talk about our wines, especially when we have low yields. Few catchphrases or buzzwords are as commonly used in wine promotion as “low yields”. I plead guilty. However, there is no way we can put a number on the ideal crop size. What if a grower had rows 12 feet apart (the most common row width from postwar up into the 80’s) and planted a new row in between each row, reducing his row width to 6 feet? If his yield went from 3½ tons per acre to 7 tons per acre would the quality be diminished? I know a grower who did this in the 80’s, and the answer is no. Another way of measuring yield might be lbs. per vine; I have a friend who contends that each vine should have a maximum of 6-8 pounds (PPV) of fruit. If your vines are 6 feet apart in the row and you plant vines in between so that the vines are 3 feet apart, but still have 6-8 PPV would the quality be diminished? Yes, if that original 6-8 PPV was the right amount. I like to think in terms of lbs. of fruit per foot of trellis wire. This takes out the variables of spacing. Of course, all the numbers are meaningless if the vines are not healthy and balanced and the fruit evenly distributed and evenly exposed to light.

So, if we can measure yield in a way that best correlates to vine balance and grape quality (lbs./ft.), can we come up with a number for the crop that will ripen completely for any particular winemaker’s ideals? Again, no. We’ve got more variables to deal with, specifically site and year. Given the same spacing, etc., 3 TPA could be too much for one vineyard one year and 8 TPA ideal for another vineyard. I’m not trying to say yield doesn’t affect quality, just that numbers don’t tell you much at all. For me, crop levels for both our vineyard and those we buy from are determined rather subjectively. Fruit thinning decisions (we thin more than half of both our blocks and growers’ vineyards) are made using past experience, flowering dates and intuition.

Our 84 to 116 year old vines produce 1 TPA or less, and I use that statistic regularly and shamelessly. There are many missing vines and many very weak, small (slowly dying) vines in those old blocks. In my opinion, the best fruit comes from the vines that are still healthy and reasonably vigorous, and those vines typically crop at the equivalent of three TPA. If we had an old vineyard full of completely healthy vines I believe we could make even better wines at 3TPA than we do currently at 1TPA or less.

No Occupation For Old Men - Fri. Feb. 22, 2008

We bottle five or six times a year, spread between February and August. After nearly six months since the last bottling it was back to my least favorite part of the business this week. Bottling is very stressful; it is when the greatest amount of bad things can happen in the shortest time frame. It also involves long days of preparation. I don't want wines to be in tank any longer than necessary, *especially* whites and rosé, so the racking and filtration schedule is calculated backwards from the bottling date. A few days before the bottling our mobile bottling company called to move the start of bottling from 8 AM Thurs. to 11 AM Weds. because they were concerned we might not be able to finish everything in eight hours. This put a little more pressure on me by taking away the cushion I had left in case of difficult filtration, and Murphy was right. We hadn't racked our rosé since it had gone into barrels and a small tank at the end of fermentation, and it was pretty cloudy, making for very problematic filtration. I started filtering at 7AM Tuesday, and around ten I was carrying a six ft. stepladder when I tripped over a wine hose. I spun to avoid falling on the ladder and landed on my hip and back and hit my head on a door. If I had been a few inches closer to the door I probably would have knocked myself out. I had to work 12 hours more after the fall, and I'm still quite sore (my hip and I must have twisted my knee going down). It gets me to wondering how much longer I can, or want to, do this. The bottling went off all right, but it was fortunate the bottler allowed extra time – we had a problem with crooked necks on one of the two types of glass we used. This forced the bottling line to run at two-thirds normal speed, adding a couple of hours to the job. The "quality control" person from the glass supplier came out, measured bottles, and told us they were all "in spec". This supplier already had two strikes against them, so we won't be using their glass again. As the guy who owns the bottling truck said, "If these are in spec, their specs suck!"

Discussion

Q If you get a chance, could you please elaborate on this point you made, "Therefore the riper (or "less under ripe") the grapes, the better the wine. In this situation smaller crops would almost always result in "better" wine." Why do small crops produce grapes of the correct ripeness? Does it have to do with harvesting time or something else I am unaware of?

A Fewer grapes per vine = more sugar per grape.
I wouldn't call this a calamitous bottling. Everything (the wine) turned out alright. Most bottlings are tough; that's why it's my least favorite part of the process. Thanks, all my aches are gone. There aren't very many glass suppliers. This move will mean we're using

two instead of three, but they all have their pros and cons. Quality is paramount, but price, service and other factors weigh in the decision to use any vendors.

Q They must have been using government specs!

A My two favorite phrases from my nail pounding days are, "Good enough for government work" and "Can't see it from my house!

Q i would appreciate if you would elaborate on the following passage in your post: "I like to think in terms of lbs. of fruit per foot of trellis wire. This takes out the variables of spacing." i don't know how trellis wire is laid out in a vineyard and/or possible configurations of the same & therefore don't understand the meaningfulness of this metric. i also can't tell whether this metric is intended to provide insight on yield v. quality or simply to inform you of the actual yield in a more meaningful way.

A Virtually all post WW2 vineyards are trained on wires that run down the row. Width of row and spacing between rows can vary. If you have twice as many rows you have twice the length of fruiting wire (there are also foliage wires). If you decrease the in row spacing you have more vines, but the same length of fruiting wire. The two main relevant factors affecting ripening and quality are proper balance of leaves to fruit and spacing/exposure of fruit. Greater length of fruitng wire per acre can allow a larger crop while maintaining balance and spacing. I think the lbs. per foot is a much more useful metric. TPA or lbs. per vine don't mean much if you don't know the vineyard spacing.

Q And smaller grapes make more flavorful and concentrated wines, right? For example Petite Sirah. I also seem to recall many white whine grapes are very small. Why is this not true in other countries? Is it because they still use the old methods or is it due to the local environment? In Italy I always see grapes grown overhead rather than sideways. I mean the vines run up the sides of the rows but then are trained over the middle of the rows and the grape clusters hang down over your head.

A Glad you brought up the point about smaller grapes. Since flavor and color is concentrated in the skins smaller grapes (all other things equal) can produce more intense wine due to the higher surface to volume ratio. This reminds me that I forgot to say why too small a crop can (IMHO) give lower quality. First, if a vine has too small a crop for the amount of foliage, it tends to compensate by making bigger berries. Also the crop can ripen too fast,

resulting in harsher tannins and less flavor development.
Most post WW2 vineyards in Western Europe and the United States are on trellisses to facilitate tractors. There are some exceptions, of course, based primarily on tradition.
Taking a hard fall is always scary. It takes a few seconds to figure out if you're seriously hurt.

Q got it. it seems that they key distinction that is now clear to me is the difference between spacing between rows (or inter-row spacing) v. in row spacing of vines (or intra-row spacing). for example, all else being equal (and perhaps using an extreme example to illustrate the point):

1. doubling the number of rows of vines (which would require doubling the amount of fruiting wire) could yield twice as much fruit w/out sacrifice balance & (intra-row) spacing s.t. pounds of fruit per foot of fruiting wire would be unchanged

v.

2. doubling the number of vines w/in existing rows (which would require no change in the amount of fruiting wire) could yield twice as much fruit but sacrificing balance & (intra-row) spacing s.t. pounds of fruit per foot of fruiting wire would be doubled

in this example, then, #1 would yield better fruit. in other words, the configuration w/ lower pounds of fruit per foot of fruiting wire would yield better fruit, yes? just want to make sure i understand this since, as you pointed out, yield seems to be one of the most oft (mis)used terms in marketing wine today.

A That's exactly the point I was trying to make. I just didn't bother to summarize it, as you have done so well.

Q And smaller grapes make more flavorful and concentrated wines, right? For example Petite Sirah. I also seem to recall many white whine grapes are very small.

A Most wine grapes are quite small when compared to table grapes. Zinfandel, Syrah and Durif (aka Petite Sirah) are among the larger berried wine grapes and Cabernet sauvignon one of the smallest.

Q Do you replace vines as they die? Or an entire chunk of the vineyard? Since "old vine" is a selling point, how "pure" do you have to be in the percents in the bottle?

A We do some vine replacement in two of the old blocks. In general that is not economically efficient. We have replanted 11 1/2 acres out of the 20 acres of old vineyard that were on the property when we obtained it 22 years ago. There is no legal definition of old vines. I've seen the term used on wine from a 30 year old vineyard (of course the winery said it was 60 years old). In theory you could have a block of three year old vines and a block of five year old vines and call the five year block "old vines".

(Later addition) Lest I paint the wine industry as a bunch of snake oil peddlers, almost all California wines with an "old vine" designation come from vineyards at least 70 years old. There were very few vineyards planted between the mid 30's and mid 60's, and most of the vineyards planted in the 60's and 70's have been replanted.

Q I hope this isn't an ignorant question, but how do you control the number of grapes per vine? Do you just walk the vineyard during the season and just discard random grapes?

A Not an ignorant question at all, in fact it's an excellent question. I wouldn't call the process random, but we do quite a bit of thinning. Depending on the skill of the people doing the thinning it can be done by judgement or by "rules". As examples, I'll explain how we thin our young vine Zinfandel and how one of our grower's vineyard is thinned. Jose Mendoza has worked for/with me for 20 years and has a keen understanding of vine balance and what my goals are. He thins our Zin to an average of about 1.25 clusters per shoot. Most shoots end up with one cluster, but some shoots are more vigorous, some shoots are spaced farther apart and some clusters are smaller, so "extra" clusters may be needed to obtain the same amount of crop and good vine balance. The other vineyard is managed by a company with a large work crew, and it is impossible to give them complicated instructions, so they have a rule: one cluster per shoot. This particular vineyard has closer shoot spacing and larger clusters, so we go back and do selective thinning to fine tune things after the big crew has done most of the work. This most often consists of removing "wings" from large clusters rather than removing entire clusters. We selectively remove wings in our own vineyard as well.
The timing of thinning is important also. If you thin too early, the vines tend to compensate by making bigger berries (not what we want at all). If you thin too late, ripening is infatuated because too much of the vines' energy is put into ripening the "extra" grapes.

Q Separate but related line of questioning. one of the claims that many winemakers make in conjunction w/ the lower yields = higher quality wine claim is that vines that have to "work harder" to extract nutrients from their environment (poorer soil, less water, etc.) make more concentrated wine and that higher concentration in turn is associated w/ higher quality wine. is this true for all / certain / no varietals? if it's true (whether for all or certain varietals), all else being equal, does that imply that configuration #1 of my example (doubling the number of rows of vines) would yield more concentrated fruit v. the status quo given that twice as many vines would be growing on the same soil surface area? just curious.

A This is a great line of thinking, and is a subject debated amongst winegrowers. Grapevines are very vigorous plants, and do produce higher quality wine when this vigor can be controlled. The easiest way to control vigor is to plant on soils with limited reserves of nitrogen and water. The theory of limiting vigor by competition between closely spaced vines has its proponents, but the California experience, so far, is that this effect can be obtained only on poor soils, where it is needed least. A more effective tool in controlling vigor is choice of rootstock. Rootstock vigor varies widely, and choice of the proper rootstock combination with variety, soil, climate and vine spacing is critical to planting a high quality vineyard.

Q in other words, this is still as much art as science, yes?

A There is trial and error involved as well. Every time a vineyard is replanted you get an opportunity to fine tune things.

Q I was thinking of Petite Sirah vs Syrah, petite meaning small so Petite Syrah is a smaller version of syrah (or so they thought back then). Bit I see now. Cab has even smaller fruit. So when you talk about yield and and crop size and TPA, doesn't your whole "formula"- if you will, change? Because a ton of 2 different size grapes will produce different intensity wines. Like you said, smaller grapes concentrate more flavor in the skin so all other things being equal (other than the type of grape) ie: ripeness, sugar level, etc then 1 ton of Zin isn't really the same as 1 ton of Cab. Of course I'm comparing apples and oranges. Basically you expect to have different TPAs from different varieties and you pick them and work with them accordingly.

A You answered your own question: you are comparing apples and oranges. Smaller berried Cabernet, other factors equal, will produce darker, more concentrated wine than larger berried

Cabernet. Proper TPA is more dependent on individual site than any other factor, including variety. However, your theory does make some sense. At the high end of the yield range Cabernet quality seems to suffer less than Zinfandel quality.
The "Petite Sirah" thing would make sense if it weren't a misnomer. There is a distinction in France between Petite Syrah and Gros Syrah, but most of what is called Petite Sirah in California is actually Durif, a cross of "true" Syrah and Peloursin. I will copy an article I wrote about Syrah back in the mid 90's into a seperate post.

Q And this was another thing I was thinking about earlier as well. I saw a tv show about wine and they showed the Domecq vineyard where they grow the Palomino for Sherry. It literally looked like the surface of the moon. Dry and gray. The "soil" is so poor that they have to run a tractor between the rows and create cross rows of dirt every few feet so that the water doesn't run off. Then they showed a cross section of the roots down to 6 feet! The roots go down that far to find water. The end result is because the vines have to work so hard to nourish themselves and produce fruit, they produce very little but its very concentrated and intense. And- they make great sherry because of this.
Now try to do this in the Napa valley. It just wouldn't work the same. But I guess thats the terroir for that grape and only certain places in the world have it.
So I have the same question, do you specifically want that to happen for certain varietials vs others?

A We do try to limit / control vigor by other means. Choice of site is the biggest factor in quality (location, location, location). The best tool for controlling vigor, as mentioned in another post, above, is rootstock. By using water dependent rootstocks we can apply as much stress as we want with irrigation timing and amount. Those Palomino vineyards in Jerez have to be on very vigorous roots or they would die fairly quickly. To my mind, stress is probably more important with reds, but it is important for quality with all varieties.

Q Petite Sirah **IS** Durif, according to Carole Meredith. That's not to say that some plants, mostly old vines, might be misidentified as PS when they might be S, Peloursin, or Carignan, but PS is Durif. Syrah and Shiraz are "Gros Syrah"; PS is almost gone from France (and I'd *LOVE* to try a PS from France, especially a 2003 -- the "kangaroo vintage", as GV puts it, would have been great for the grape).

A There is "Petite Syrah" in France that is Syrah, not Durif.
Here's my old article about Syrah:

If Syrah's So Great, Why Hasn't There Been More in California Before Now?
Peter Wellington, Wellington Vineyards

I was asked this question while extolling the virtues of Syrah at a winemaker dinner recently Some of the reasons came to mind immediately, but as I thought about it later I came up with a more thorough rationale. There are several explanations for the tiny amount of Syrah planted in California prior to the current boom (only 163 acres as recently as 19881). These are identification & nomenclature problems, viticultural drawbacks, and the international stature of Syrah at the time of the fine wine renaissance in California.
There is still a lot of confusion surrounding the term Petite Syrah (alt. Petite Sirah). This name (hereafter PS) is used in California for three or more different grape varieties2. To add to the confusion, the term PS is used in France for a group of cultivars of Syrah (differentiating them from Gros Syrah). The most common variety known as PS in California is Durif3, a cross of Syrah and Peloursin. Syrah and Durif vines are very similar in appearance, to the extent that it's extremely difficult to tell them apart, even growing side by side. The biggest differences are in cluster and berry shape and flavor, and these aspects are quite variable within each variety.
I suspect that a significant minority of California PS has been / is in fact Syrah. We have very old vines of both Durif and Syrah in our vineyard (it took me years to realize this and become halfway proficient at telling the difference). I have also identified Syrah, with a very high degree of certainty, in several old mixed vineyards in Sonoma Valley. As recently as 1965 Napa Valley had four times as much acreage of PS as Cabernet sauvignon . Since almost all of this acreage has been replanted, it is impossible to tell what the actual varieties were. Most of it was probably Durif, but some of it (we'll never know how much) no doubt was Syrah.
Many currently important grape varieties were not widely planted in California prior to 1965, including Cabernet sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot and Pinot noir . The main reasons for this were viticultural drawbacks, particularly the problem of low yields. While Syrah is less susceptible to bunch rot than Durif, the old California selection(s) produced a much smaller crop than Durif, particularly when head trained and spur pruned . This factor likely would have led to preferential selection of Durif over Syrah when selecting "PS" budwood for propagation.

The varietal wine boom began in California during the late 1960's. At that time, Napa and Sonoma wineries were interested in making wine from the world's most "noble" grape varieties. In the late 1960's and the 1970's the most highly esteemed wines were red Bordeaux, red and white Burgundy, and German Rieslings. Hence the varietal planting boom centered on Cabernet sauvignon, Pinot noir, Chardonnay and White Riesling. Wines from the Rhône Valley were not held in high esteem during this time. Prices were low, even for the top Northern Rhône appellations of Hermitage and Côte Rôtie, and vineyards were being abandoned. I won't delve into the reasons for the low stature suffered by the Rhône through much of the 20th century, other than to mention rustic winemaking. Likewise, I won't go deeply into the reasons for the resurgence in both quality and reputation during the last twenty years. Efforts of some importers (notably Kermit Lynch) and winewriters (notably Robert Parker) have certainly helped fuel interest in these wines in the United States. As Syrah's reputation has recovered, more California winemakers have taken interest in producing it. The high quality level of recent California Syrah from many growing regions has spurred great optimism in Syrah's future and widespread planting. While it remains to be seen whether production will surpass demand in the near future, I believe Syrah will become a major varietal wine in California.

1 California Grape Acreage, 1992. California Agricultural Statistics Service.
2 personal communication from Lucie Morton, grape ampelographer
3 Galet, Pierre 1985 Precis d'Ampelographie Practique 6th Ed., Charles Dehan, Montpelier
4 Winkler et al 1974 General Viticulture 2nd Ed. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles
5 Amerine, Berg et al 1980 Technology of Winemaking 4th Ed. AVI Publishing Westport, CT
6 personal observation

Q nice article. and informative to boot re the evolution of varietal preferences (and not just in California). would it be fair to say that, 15 or so years later, if a label stateside says "Petite Sirah" that the varietal in the bottle is in fact PS / Duriff / son of Syrah & Peloursin? or is there still a risk that it might be Syrah?

A Old vines can be misidentified or from mixed blocks. Lucie Morton told me that Stags' Leap (arguably the best PS over the years) had at least three different varieties they were calling PS that went into that wine. Any young PS vineyards planted from UC

Davis derived plant material are Durif. (Except for nursery mix-ups)

Q do you have sources for the French PS (still called PS) that's not Durif (I'm guessing that it's just a small clone of Syrah)? or on Where to find Durif in France? I want to emphasize that I believe you 100%; I'm just interested in learning more about it, and there's nothing about that in the Wine Bible or any of the many PS articles I've read.

A The Oxford Companion to Wine (edited by Jancis Robinson) is a good reference. "Petite Syrah" is the preferred selection of Syrah or Shiraz. I'm not aware of Durif in France. I think they might have given up on it because of disease (including rot) susceptibility. BTW - I haven't forgotten I owe you a Bandolier of Corks, but please don't hold your breath 'til you're blue in the face.

Q Carole Meredith of UC Davis in 2002 at the 4th PS SymPoSium: I'm not trying to argue, Peter -- I've just never heard of PS being substantially confused on the vine with S before.

A The key here is "everything that looked like Petite Sirah" Even an expert didn't hit 100%. I'm not saying Durif isn't Durif, just that growers and winemakers have called and continue to call other varieties PS. McDowell Valley Vineyards has an interesting story they tell. They were PS growers in Mendocino County who sold to several different wineries. All the winemakers preferred the grapes from one particular block. When they started their own winery and took a real close look at things, they discovered that block was actually Syrah. Another story - we used to buy Syrah from a vineyard in a cool, foggy part of the Sonoma Coast appellation. One year I happened to visit the vineyard in early September and noticed a couple of dozen vines whose grapes were turning red before the rest of the vineyard. When I looked at them closely I was pretty sure they were Durif. When I showed the grower, he said they always had a huge amount of bunch rot right in that spot. He marked the vines and budded them over to real Syrah. Budwood mixups do occur. I've seen Viognier in Syrah, Cab in SB, Chardonnay amongst Zinfandel. When it's PS and Syrah it's hard to tell. I didn't notice a few Syrah vines in our young block of Durif until last year, when the vines were seven years old.

SB It's nice to be able to quote sources or references, but it's truly serendipitous when an article like this one from today's SF Chronicle comes out the day after my blog. It's about chaptalization and the reduced need due to climate change and

improved vineyard technology. Perhaps some kind, younger than I, techie could find this and post a link: Is Europe too sweet on chaptalization? by Jim Clarke at sfgate.com http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/02/29/WI2EV50OU.DTL

Q How long does a vineyard typically last before being replanted? Do the vineyards wear out, or is it a matter of fashion? How many years before a new vineyard or vine is productive? When do you know that "X" vine is not very good?

A I addressed old vines in the "Last 2007 Installment" blog. For "industrial" or commodity level vineyards it's maybe 15-20 years. Between disease, physical damage and concurrent declining yields, desire to change varieties or growing methods, not too many of these vineyards last more than 20 years. A typical replant schedule for a top Bordeaux chateau might be 2.5% per year, in order to strike a balance between yield, vine age, and consistency of product. This equates to a 40 year average, but which vines are replaced is not per se determined by age. Vines can live at least a couple of hundred years, but, like people they become less vigorous with age, don't heal their wounds as well, and mortality increases. Our 115 year old blocks have very few fully healthy, "normal yield" vines. There are many missing vines, and most of the remaining vines range from somewhat compromised to almost dead. In its prime, 5 TPA was pretty normal (per the previous owner), but now any more than 1 TPA would be considered a bumper crop. If we were selling grapes from our ancient blocks we wouldn't cover our farming costs.

Q Interesting that there's a lot of focus on Global Warming but virtually nothing on Global Dimming.

Is there any discussion in the wine world about how these two factors may affect wine producing regions in the the near to distant future?

A There was a widely disseminated article last year (I don't remember the original source) about how many of the best winegrowing regions in California and Western Europe could be too hot for high quality wine production by the end of the century. Some one asked me if I was concerned. My response was that if that happens, growing wine grapes will be the least of our worries.

Q Peter, did this harvest produce a 'VICTORY' blend this year? or do you decide that later in the process? I know you did an 04. what other recent years?

A We have an '05 in bottle, and are working on a prospective '06 blend. We may be able to produce Victory more years than not now that we have excellent sources for Cab Franc (since '04) and Petite Verdot (since'05). It's way too early to even think about '07. Wines are finishing or recently finished with MLF and being racked for the first time.

Q Will crooked necks on bottles lead to more cork failures or does the crooked neck problem only translate to longer bottling times? I'm sure you would like to give that glass supplier a "crooked neck" after all of the frustration you had to endure.

A The inside of the neck is true, so no cork problems. The necks "lean" a little, which results in a very slight delay of the top of the bottle sealing against the filler spout. This results in occaisional "low fills" unless the bottling speed is slowed.

Q I went winery crawling thru central VA this past weekend, and came across one winery that described aging in a combination of French oak, American oak, and Neutral oak. I think this was for their CF/ PV blend wine. I know that French and American oak each impart different flavor characteristics. But what is Neutral oak? Where does it come from? What does it impart/not impart? Also, could you characterize what French vs. American oak does for wine?

A "Neutral oak" would simply be oak that has been used enough that it imparts no significant oak flavor. Most winemakers consider 4-5 year old oak to be neutral. There is significant range amongst both French and American oak barrels due to region of origin (Allier vs. Limosin or Minnesota vs. Ozarks), aging and coopering technique. At this point the distinction no longer is always obvious, but American oak often has more coconut and dill-like aromas, and tends to be a little more aggressive, both aromatically and structurally.

Q Neutral Oak is oak that has been used for a while to the point where it no longer imparts the vanilla/toasty/smoky/creamy flavors. I think that it still adds structure through the ellagatannins and allows the wine to slowly oxidize.

A Do you moonlight as a wine educator?

Q Does Spanish oak have much of a use outside of sherry (and of course scotch)?

A There is a Spanish cooperage industry, but I think they use a lot of imported oak, both from France and the US. I did have some experience with Spanish coopered French oak at a winery I worked at. They were good barrels. I've never heard of them for sale in California. There is significant usage of Hungarian and Russian oak both in Europe and the US. I saw some Chinese oak barrels at a trade show a while back; I have no idea of the aromas/flavors, but the appearance was shockingly crude

Q Do you get your PV from Clay Shannon's Vineyard in Lake County? KR's Esoterica PV came from there, and I was fortunate enough to be a Labrat for that one. Yum!

A We use 100% Sonoma County grapes, predominantly within 5 miles of the winery. We did buy a small amount of Napa Valley - Mt. Veeder fruit from 1989-1997 (from just over the county line - Mt. Veeder is the highest peak in the Mayacamas Range that separates Sonoma Valley from Napa Valley).
The Petite Verdot is from J & J Vineyard, on very gravelly soil about 5 miles south of the winery, near Casa Santinamaria and Vadasz Vineyards.

Q dogfishead made a wood-aged beer using Palo Santo (Holly Trees). Do you know about this wood at all? If so, how does it's profile compare to oak?

A The main advantage of oak is that its physical structure allows construction of a durable, leak proof container without use of pitch or any other type of sealant, and it is a common tree. The flavors are a byproduct of the bending process. Chestnut and other hardwoods can be used for barrels but are harder to work. Oak also just happens to contribute what most people perceive as positive aromas and flavors when properly coopered and used.

Q So, when I see a cluster of grapes, I could only imagine how unbelievably tasty they must be. This begs me to ask, do you ever grow grapes just to eat? I know that there are plenty of different types of grapes typically grown for just eating, but do you ever grow some of your wine grapes just for eating.

A We grow several varieties of table grapes (just a couple of vines each) for eating. A lot of wine grapes have tough skins and lots of

seeds. IMO the best winegrapes for eating are Syrah and Zinfandel, but they don't hold a candle to the best table grapes.
I put so many grapes into my mouth during harvest to help decide when to pick that I can't eat grapes for months afterwards.

Making Wine and Selling Wine

Ho Ho Ho Chi Zin, MLF is Gonna Win - Thu. Mar. 13, 2008

I wasted this ad-lib on Lynda the other day as she was removing chromatography paper from the developer jar – she's way too young to remember the Viet Nam War. Malo-lactic fermentation (MLF) is the conversion of malic acid (named after apples) to lactic acid (named after milk). This process lowers the acidity and raises the pH, making wine slightly less tart. MLF is carried out by lactic acid bacteria, usually Oenococcus oeni. Byproducts of MLF often include diacetyl, a major component of the aroma of butter, which typically is metabolized by yeast but can be left in the wine, intentionally or not, by using ML bacteria strains that produce lots of diacetyl and by racking the wine immediately upon completion of MLF.

MLF can be a real pain. We inoculate all our wines for MLF except Sauvignon Blanc, some Roussanne and the Rosé. Inoculation takes place after primary fermentation, and the bacteria usually grow and work very slowly in what is a very hostile environment for all life forms (low pH, high alcohol, no sugar, no oxygen, low temperatures). Sometimes MLF doesn't finish until well into spring. This is worrisome because we don't add SO2 or rack the wines or bring them to cellar temperature until MLF is complete because all of these activities will inhibit ML even more. Without SO2 the wines are more susceptible to spoilage, both microbial and non-microbial, so there is risk. It is possible to inoculate for MLF during primary (yeast) fermentation, when there are more nutrients available, but there is a very real risk of stuck fermentation due to competition with the yeast. I got stung badly once, and it was enough to get me to abandon early MLF inoculation. Aside from lowering acid levels, which may or may not be a good thing, MLF serves several functions. You can get buttery aromas if desired, and other secondary flavor and texture contributions, it makes your wine more resistant to growth of spoilage organisms by consuming nutrients, and you don't have to worry about MLF in bottle. MLF in bottle is never good; it results in cloudy, spritzy, often stinky (cheese/sauerkraut) wine.

Is There a Distributor in the House? - Tue. Mar. 25, 2008

Thanks to Bhodilee for the topic – he asked (somewhere in w00tland, but I can't find it) how one goes about finding a distributor. If anybody can answer that they could make a lot of money. Over the last two or three decades there has been consolidation amongst medium to large size distributors while there has been a huge concurrent increase in the number of wine brands sold in the United States, both foreign and domestic. During that time the United States has become the number one wine

consuming country in the world, and a greater variety of French, Italian and Spanish wines is being sold here than ever before. Wines from Australia, Chile and Argentina were virtually unknown in the U.S. 25 years ago, to say nothing of New Zealand, Portugal, Austria… Between actual "brick and mortar" wineries and alternating proprietor brands (like Ty Caton or Muscardini Cellars wines that we have made) there are now almost 2000 bonded wineries in California alone. Large wine companies have created multiple brands such as Gallo's Dancing Bull, Anapamu, MacMurray Ranch, Frei Bros., Turning Leaf, Barefoot, Red Bicyclette, Black Swan, Ecco Domani, etc. etc. in order to claim a larger portion of retail shelf space. All this brand inflation makes it very hard to get wines reviewed by Parker or the Spectator and even more difficult to find distribution

So far all I've done here is complain why it is increasingly difficult to find distributors. I've poured wine at various trade events, made cold calls, used recommendations and intros from various contacts, even hired a national marketing company for two years (at 10% commission on gross sales), all with fairly minimal results. Over the years Wellington wines have been distributed in 24 states. We currently have distribution in twelve states plus California, with highly varied results. Three of the states are hardly worth the effort of maintaining licenses and filing reports. Of the remainder, two states (Missouri and Ohio) are responsible for over 50% of our wholesale business. I am currently in various stages of discussion with distributors in three other states – it's kind of an ongoing process. The biggest markets (California, Florida, New York and Texas) are the toughest. We have yet to find the right company in FL, we lost our NY distributor post 9/11 and our TX distributor closed shop in the mid 90's. Our greatest success has been with small, relatively young companies that have sought us out rather than vice versa.

Thanks again to Bhodilee and keep the suggestions coming. I promise there won't be a long a gap before my next column. Things are getting busy, but there's a lot to write and talk about this time of year.
Discussion

Q Is there anything we, as consumers, can do to help procure a distributor for your wine, or any wine, in our state? If it meant I could pop down to the local wine store or mega grocery chain and get a bottle of Wellington or Caton or Madison I will be very happy to begin bombarding people with phone calls.

Or conceivably, what does one have to go through to become a distributor?

A We have had consumer fans of ours help in the past, both with and without our knowledge. One of our best distributors found out about us from a member of our wine club who was a friend of his and belonged to the same tasting group. What usually happens with the consumer/grower/supporter who has a good friend with a restaurant or wine shop doesn't result in success. A retailer or restaurateur may recommend one or more distributors with whom they like to work, but, typically, the distributor isn't looking for new brands. Distributors probably get so many calls from people wanting representation that they look upon them as most of us do upon telemarketers (one of whom elicited more rudeness and profanity from me just yesterday than I have used in several years). Not to say it's pointless, after all - nothing ventured, nothing gained.
As far as becoming a distributor, it's probably easier to become a licensed arms dealer in most states (and cheaper).

Q Why is Florida so tough? What about ABC Liquor; contact them. I know it may not be that easy but if you have a great product with a price point thats good; I dont know. Hell let me get a distributor license(son in law already has a federal arms dealer license)

A My Tasting room / office manager had a series of discussions with ABC that never bore fruit. I've had discussions with three different Florida distributors in the last two plus years with similar results. It takes the right company, the right chemistry and good timing to be successful. With the plethora of wine brands available, just making great wine and pricing it fairly aren't enough anymore.

Q Do you distribute to NC?

A We do distribute in North Carolina. Dionysus, based in Raleigh, was the one good distributor we got out of our national marketing company.

Q I was surprised to read that you have made wine for Caton and Muscardini. Do you do this for better utilization of your facilities, kindness of your heart, ...?

A Among others. It generates positive cash flow, which is a big issue in this biz. It utilizes excess capacity, and works out well as long as it doesn't stretch other resources too thin (esp. labor).

Q Can you tell us which wines you made for them?

A ‘03 Tytanium was fermented at Castle, aged, blended and bottled here. ‘04 Tytanium, Syrah, Petite Sirah, Merlot and Cabernet were all crush to bottle here. All Muscardini’s ‘05, ‘06, ‘07 crush to bottle here. Both are now elsewhere due to our lack of space and their growth.

Q We may get some scatterred communication from Peter today. He's probably been up half the night dealing with frost protection. I't is 30 degrees in Carneros and the windmills are whiring and sprinklers are spraying at full tilt. sub 32 degrees after bud break is not something to be taken lightly.

Peter, hope Glen Ellen is managing.

A A B A D night unfortunately. It'll be at least a couple of weeks before we know the full extent of the damage.

Q Is this the type of thing that makes for a bump in the road, or that impacts a whole vintage?

A The main result is some crop loss. There is one potential quality problem, particularly with frost much later in the season: uneven ripening. If you have secondary shoots that bloom significantly later than the main crop and leave the fruit on and harvest at the same time you will be mixing in some underripe grapes.

Q I just rechecked (wasn't 100% sure I had done so) and apparently you don't ship to NH. No distributor? Bureaucratic BS? Or is it just the wine club that's not available?

A We are in the process of obtaining our direct ship license in NH. We actually do have a distributor, who sells 2-300 cases a year to restaurants, state stores, and private stores.

A Paradigm Shift

$60! Per Board Foot Thurs. Apr. 3, 2008

Four or five years ago I proudly told people that all our wines were barrel aged, primarily in French oak, and that we didn't use shaved and retoasted barrels, sawdust, oak chips or stave inserts. Times have changed; an old friend who's in the "barrel alternative" business calls it a paradigm shift. We did our first barrel stave insert trials during the 2004 vintage, and have been expanding and fine tuning our use of these products a little bit each year. As with new barrels, it takes trial and error to find which producer, wood source and toasting regime works best with each wine. We have actually preferred the best inserts over several of the new French oak barrels we have been using.

When I came into the industry French oak barrels cost $200 to $240 apiece. I mentioned in a previous blog that I paid over $1000 for a single barrel for the first time ever this past fall (range - $800-$1020). Big jumps in wood prices in France combined with the US dollar's abysmal loss of value have driven this year's prices (at the *current* exchange rate) to $940-$1260. Inserts cost less than $100 per barrel. Economics has finally become a major factor in our barrel use decisions. We no longer can afford to exclusively use French oak barrels in our core line of wines that retail for $18. We will continue to use only the best barrels for our single vineyard Cabernets and Victory Reserve.

Interestingly, most of the cooperages have gotten into the barrel alternative business over the last few years. One factor, no doubt, is market opportunity, but another factor may be the profitable use of scrap from the barrel making process. I liken the latter to bagel shops making 9bialys, which I've long contended are filled with floor sweepings

Are Y'all Harvestin' or Jest Sittin' on Yer Duffs? - Wed. Apr. 9, 2008

I heard this many springs ago in a Napa Valley tasting room, uttered by a gentleman who had arrived in a big new Cadillac with license plates from a state where many of my favorite w00ters reside. (I wish I had written down all the wonderful things I've heard wine tourists say over the years.) Outside of crush, this is actually the busiest time of year for us. We had a two-day bottling last week and will bottle again next Thursday. Each bottling involves a week of prep work. We're also very busy with racking and blending. Lynda and I taste several times a week now: blending decisions, vineyard assessments, barrel trials (order deadlines loom). It's also very busy in the vineyard, with mowing, disking and frost protection. The driest March in memory led to slightly early budbreak, but the

weather has been cooler than typical for most of March and all of April so far. This means we are susceptible to frost damage but there isn't a lot of growth yet – the vines are just kind of sitting there. At this point I think we're not likely to have an early start to harvest. If I didn't have enough to keep me busy, there's always out of state distributor visits and other marketing activities.

We tasted 2007 Merlot barrel (and insert) trials this morning. I'm just as happy with the Merlot as I was during crush. It's rich, fully ripe, and actually under 14% alcohol (with zero water addition at crush). It doesn't need as much oak as it usually does, so we're taking out some of the higher impact barrels at the next racking. Our preferred inserts for this wine weren't what we preferred with the Cabernet in yesterday's tasting or in the Zin last week. As we integrate more inserts into our barrel program we'll target different types for different wines, using the same process we've used to select barrels. Our goal with oak is always to complement the wine, to add sweetness, body, structure or length only when we deem one of those properties to be deficient. I still abhor soulless, oak dominated wines, despite their popularity.

We've also tasted all of the Zinfandel (8) and Chardonnay (5) lots formally over the last few weeks, as well as the EnglandCrest Syrah (4 lots). I'm happy to report that my early enthusiasm for the quality of the 2007 crush was well founded. Nothing from 2007 has disappointed so far, and certain of the wines may be the best yet from their respective vineyards. I can hardly wait to taste the Cabernet Franc and Petite Verdot, but that won't happen for two weeks as we prepare and bottle our single vineyard 2006 Cabernets and Victory.

In The Black, Or Pink, Or Orange Or? - Sat. Apr. 12, 2008

We just received our year-end reconciliation from the power company, and after our first year of solar power we're about $550 "in the black". The system was designed to generate approximately 95% of the electricity we had used over a prior 12 month period, but since peak solar generation occurs mostly during time of peak usage, those kilowatts are worth more. Also, the summer of 2007 was quite mild, so we may have used significantly less energy for air conditioning. Keeping two large barrel cellars at around 60º F does use a lot of power. Unfortunately, our contract doesn't allow us to sell power back or carry over a credit to the next year.

Not My Cup Of Tea

I'm going to take advantage of slightly delayed posting of this blog to respond to a question by themostrighteous during the Peltier Station offering and elaborate further on the "paradigm shift". Please refer to the

discussion of my most recent blog for tmr's remarks. Oak barrels perform two main functions: contribution of oak flavor and gradual, limited oxygen uptake. Alternative oak strategies have their proponents and their detractors. "Tea bags" and micro-ox can mimic barrel aging to some extent, and these techniques are very effective for mass produced wines in terms of economics and practicality, but very few ultra-premium wineries use (or admit to using) them. In the 80's I worked at a large winery that used sawdust infused wine as a very small percentage of its cheapest blends. We used three letter codes for all wines in bulk, so the "high oak red" was the HOR (and she was nasty). The smaller the oak pieces/particles, the faster the flavor extraction, and, IMO, the greater the flavor difference vis a vis barrels. We use large staves inside barrels to mimic barrel extraction rates, have greater uniformity of toast level and minimal end grain exposure. In our barrel trial tastings it is often difficult to tell the difference between new French oak barrels and French oak barrel inserts. We are using these products (and will increase use) in Zinfandel, our Sonoma County Cabernet, Merlot and barrel fermented Chardonnay.

The primary pro and con arguments to oak dust, chip, bean, block, chain, or tank stave use revolve around quality versus control. A friend of mine is the production manager for a very large winery that makes a full range of wines. He's an ardent supporter of tank aging, oak adjunct and micro-ox (which they use on their low-end and mid-tier wines) because of the great ease of monitoring and controlling the aging process. His opinion is that all their wines would be better if aged this way, but the highly esteemed winemaker (also a friend) doesn't share that opinion, so their high-end single vineyard wines are all barrel aged.
Discussion

Q so barrel staves just mimic what would be done in a normal oak barrel?

A Mimic is a good choice of words. There is a school of thought that some oxygen passes through the wood and interacts with the wine and wood where they meet. By putting the staves inside a barrel we're getting renewed oak flavor and barrel maturation. Staves inside a tank will give you oak flavor/aroma, but not "aging".

Q Do you forsee wineries not using actual oak barrels anymore at some point in the future (at all)? If the other methods end up working the same or better then why even bother, since its much more expensive and harder to work with.

A IMO the other methods don't work the same or better in terms of wine quality. Putting staves inside barrels comes the closest to

replicating barrel aging in new oak, and it still involves barrels. I do foresee a continuing trend to alternatives, particularly in large wineries. Long term, who knows anything?

Q So did the electric company cut you a check for the $550 you were ahead, or what? I'm surprised they don't allow you to sell power back.

I was watching a weekly TV program that has about 4 or 5 stories a show (1/2 hour segments), and they were highlighting a winery that had put in solar power and were able to sell power back to the electric company.

A I believe the "no sell back" clause was part of the California subsidy program.

Q I feel this validates, however humbly, my pedestrian vision of a "great" wine...

A More controll is positive, but if the quality isn't equal then it's not a better outcome. I lean to the traditionalist point of view. That's why I used to proudly tell people we didn't use oak alternatives. We still take a pretty "natural" approach as far as not adding tannins or color, not fining or heat or cold stabilizing, etc. My limited experience with "tea bags" and tasting of wines made that way has definitely not made a convert of me. This is just one of many factors that differentiate artisan wines from industrial wines. Unfortunately, there are industrial wines masquerading as artisanal wines and there's no ready way for the consumer to know.

Q In commenting on tasting of the various lots of each variety, you noted the number of lots for each. Just to pick the zinfandel for example, there are 8 lots. How will each lot be used? Do you anticipate potentially 8 different zins or is it more likely to be used to find the right blend among them that meets the criteria for a specific label?

A There are four different vineyard blocks at Meeks Hilltop Ranch, with different soils, exposures, clones and training. Each is harvested, fermented and aged separately. From these we will blend the best posiible wine(in our opinions and style) and bottle it as a vineyard designate. We have won at least one Gold Medal (from the two to three competitions we've entered) for this wine each of its first three vintages. So far we haven't been able to make more than 200 cases each year, but 2007 should allow us increase the amount significantly.

There are three Estate lots. We blend our Estate Zin from these the way we do the Meeks.
Shumahi Ranch Zin has typically been blended with the "leftovers" from Meeks and our estate and some Durif (aka Petite Sirah) for our Sonoma Valley Zin, but this year we'll give some consideration to a Shumahi vineyard designate. 2007 is the best vintage of Shumahi since 2000.

Q When you say $550 in the black, is this after the full cost of the solar system, or an amoratized cost? I am curious at the pay-back rate of such a system, which is why I ask.

What are red wines like without the oak? I always assumed that oak was used in the beginning as it was what the local barrels were made of; since then it has become what we are used to. Your blog implies that it is more than this, and that oak is a key ingredient in making wine correctly. So I wonder, what is it like without the oak?

MaskedMarv, you are clearly a romantic for the ages. I have heard the restaurant industry is only for the passionate, and your views on wine production (screw top vs. cork, oak barrel vs. insert) show how much you can about the idea of wine as well as the product. I can't say I disagree, but there is a numbers side of me that says if the outcome is the same, does it really matter how it is made?

A That's net energy usage (in value, not kilowatt hours). We have an eight year loan with payments greater than our power bills were, but tax credits and accelerated depreciation more than balance that. Anticipated payback is less than six years. After that it's free juice.

Some red wines can be fairly complete without oak. I think Zin and Syrah fit that mold. IMO Cabernet really needs significant oak to make a complete, balanced wine. Without oak Cabernet can be like a donut - with a big hole in the middle. Your statement regarding "what we are used to" is very perceptive. Prior to the industrial age, barrels were used for everything from flour to nails to pickles to monkeys. One man could move 500 pounds or more fairly easily. Oak is common, strong and naturally watertight so it was the best material for barrels. Heating was necessary to bend the staves without cracking them. Fire also changes the flavors, and yes, the aromas and flavors imparted by a hand made barrel are what we have come to expect and like in a wine. Burgundy barrels have more bend to the staves than Bordeaux barrels, and

the corresponding higher toast levels have become part of the expected profile in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Regarding your response to MM, I for one don't think the outcome is the same in this case.

Q What is micro-ox? I am assuming these are not small, castrated bulls (at least I hope not).
What is the problem with end-grain exposure?

A Micro-oxidation is a process pioneered in one of the lesser known areas of the south of France. Without getting into all the chemistry, etc. it basically speeds up the aging process early in the wine's development. Controlled amounts of oxygen are dosed into a tank using a frit like an aquarium stone to produce small easily dissolved bubbles. BTW, oxen and steers ain"t the same thing; you're a city boy, no?

End grain exposure can leach more harsh, undesirable substances into the wine.

Q I'm guessing the difference you're noticing is the end grain flavours? You have much more control in this than you do with oak barrels. What are these flavours?

A I can't say what role end grain flavors play, or wood in the wine rather than wine in the wood, but the best barrels are still superior IMO (and that of many other winemakers).

Q What would be the best time of year to visit Sonoma for the following:

- Good weather
- SonomaBouliste in town as opposed to off galivanting
- SonomaBouliste not frenetically busy.

Kinda like the way McDonald's has the goal of controlling the process so the customer has a consistent experience at their stores anywhere in the world? Perhaps that doesn't make their food gourmet?

A Weather & SB in town: crush, a wonderful time of year, no galivanting allowed. Yes MacWine does exist, and is often the goal of the largest wineries.

Q It never occurred to me before. What happens to barrels after they die?

Are you reusing them with the staves? Is it a slow transition to stainless?

A $1000 barrels become $10 flower pots after five years or so unless you put "staves" inside them. No transition to aging in stainless is planned. We will continue to age all our reds and ferment and age most of our whites in 60 gallon oak barrels. We'll just buy fewer new barrels each year and refurbish more with stave replicates.

Q The credit you mentioned sounds pretty amazing. My friend installed a solar system at his business in Telluride but due to its position in the mountains there's little chance of them actually feeding the grid much. However, in a cash strapped power hungry state like cali, it's interesting to see them take this approach that would reward people for the installation and then 'spread the wealth' if there's excess juice from the business owners.

A The state of California has had severe budget woes for a number of years, with no solution in sight. I won't go into the reasons we're 49th in the US on per capita funding for primary education, etc., but the state doesn't subsidize energy production for profit at this point. (And subsidies for all solar, business and private, have been dropping each year.)

Q do all non-new aged oak barrels use staves? or they just use those barrels until it "dies" and loses quality?

A I'm not sure I understand the question completely. All wineries making ultra-premium wines buy new barrels. The percentage they replace each year depends on how much oak flavor they want in their wines. Typically they then sell the older barrels to other wineries, or if they're more than four years old to companies that cut them in half for sale to nurseries and hardware stores. If a winery is aging its Cabernet in more than 50% new oak(not uncommon for Napa Cabs), then it will sell 2 and 4 year old barrels (the wine is barrel aged for 1+1/2 to 2 years before bottling). We have usually replaced about 20% of our barrels each year; some wines get 40% new oak or more, some get no new oak. This year we will jump from about a quarter of those replacements being roxorz to 40% or more.

Q So let me get this straight--the staves get stuck inside older "spent" barrels that have lost their oakiness and so would otherwise be no good for aging? I guess I had assumed the staves would be placed in stainless steel tanks. If you are still using barrels (albeit spent

ones), then why do you need the micro-ox? *Can't you let the little critters go?* Or am I getting this wrong?

A Sorry for any confusion. At our winery we age all reds in 60 gallon barrels. Used barrels are good for aging, they just don't impart much oak flavor, so an alternative to replacing them is to refurbish them with "staves" placed inside the barrel. An alternative, more "industrial" approach is to eliminate barrels by aging wine in tanks with "staves" or oak chips, sawdust, etc. and micro-oxygenation. Some people do practice micro-ox in barrels, but it's fairly rare.

RPM I wonder how much new oak is really necessary, however. Some, for Cab especially, to be sure, but some historical perspective is useful.

As you will no doubt recall, back in the old days, wines were often stored in much larger casks than the current barrels. And, those casks were usually reused quite a while. Nor were all those casks oak. Remember that a number of very serious wineries aged a fair amount of red wine in redwook casks of up to ~1500 gallons (and more?)

I wonder how much of the emphasis on new oak even in Cabernet Sauvignon is a result of the market pressure to sell the wine younger and younger. 40 years and more, premium wines were not release until they were 4 or 5, and they'd spent up to 3 years in cask/barrell and 2-3 years in bottle. If those wines had been aged entirely in new oak barrels, they would have tasted like an oak plank, which they didn't. What I think is the case is that wines could take their oak on much more slowly in the old days, and I think that may have been one of the reasons those wines seemed to have oak flavor without being "oaky" in the modern sense where it hits you over the head.

And, let's go back to the period before Prohibition, when wine was aged as long as 7-10 years before it was released. Again, aging was slower for premium wines.

And, of course, many of the modern tricks with chips, etc., were well known to wine makers in the old days who had to artificially age wine (as it was put in some papers I have from a 1935 symposium my Dad attended) using a whole host of techniques that are probably disreputable for premium wine, but which can make perfectly decent sound commercial wine for daily drinking.

A There are a lot of good talking points here. IMO, oak use in the wine industry mirrors a general cultural attitude that if a bit of something is good then more is better. Wine does develop more slowly in larger tanks. The large redwood uprights that were common up until recent decades typically held 10's of thousands of gallons, and wines were aged 3,4 or 5 years to soften sufficiently prior to bottling. I would think that the prevalence of oak aging has more to do with tastes than a desire to sell wine younger. Joe Heitz always aged his Cabs in larger tanks for the first one to two years, then transferred them to 60 gallon oak for two years. I think that process helped his wines, while being extracted and powerful, to attain a lot of finesse. Both Burgundy and Bordeaux have a long tradition of aging wine in small barrels, and the tremendous proliferation of Cabernet and Chardonnay in California over the last four decades must have driven the use of oak in other wines as well. Cabernet and especially Chardonnay were not widely grown in California prior to the wine renaissance that began in the late 60's. IMO, except with some of the very best cool climate Chardonnay, these varieties need more oak than any others. Zinfandel doesn't really need oak, and I am saddened by the oak dominated, sweet, high alcohol Zinfandel trend of the last fifteen years. Winemakers saw Robert Parker give 95 pt + scores to oddities like the Turley Zins and decided that was a good way to make money, whether or not a good way to make wine. I'd better get off one of my favorite soapboxes now - I could go on and on. I will just note that I'm seeing growing disdain for "Parkerized" wines, especially in the restaurant community.

1935. At repeal (1934), most wineries did not have stocks of the aged wines that fit consumers' tastes. A lot of techniques to artificially give wines aged character were approved, even including adding vinegar.

Q I think California just followed the trend of all the other wine making countries out there. And how does a heavy oak flavor lend itself to a more marketable wine? Oak subsides in age.

A California was really the first major wine region outside of Burgundy and Bordeaux to use oak heavily. Italy, Spain, Australia, Languedoc, etc. have all followed suit essentially for the American market. Oak makes a wine sweeter, richer and more viscous - all positive taste attributes for the Pepsi generation.

Q So ... to put words in your mouth: the repeal of prohibition is partly to blame/credit with the use of techniques to "artificially age" wines (as none had been made for a few years), which became part

of what people expected to taste, which then became part of the marketed product to meet expectations?

A Not really. The artificial aging was used to make wines similar to those that people were used to tasting or expected to taste. It was put by the wayside after a fairly short time.

Q But the restaurants make so much money selling Opus One, Silver Oak, and Cake bread! My friend's restaurant has cases and cases of those and they make a ridiculous amount of money selling them.

A There will always be demand for the marquee brands, as a status symbol if nothing else (and I'm Not inferring that there is nothing else to them). Many fine independent restaurateurs are moving more toward wines that complement their dishes rather than overpower or clash. They're getting sophisticated enough to consider how wines fit with their style of cooking rather than just have brand names. The wines you reference are not made in an extreme, over-the-top style and do generally work better with food than the 15% alcohol, syrupy and oaky monsters that are far too common these days.

RPM Last first: most of those techniques used after repeal were not new (as you know), but were part of the professional winemaker's bag of tricks going back centuries.

And, repeal and the pent up demand for wine (you could sell almost anything at first at a premium, and then there was a huge glut of bad wine no one could sell and prices plummeted).

Two things drove the trend to selling wine young then: lack of stocks of aged wines in the US and the tax system that taxed the entire inventory of a winery every year, making it very expensive to age wine. There was a period (that otherwise could have been used to build up stocks if the only issue was a glut of wine) where it cost more to keep wines for an additional year or two than the difference in what the wines would fetch in the market. I remember my grandfather and great uncles talking about it - it may have been the late '30s or early '40s, but it was a very hard time to be trying to make good wine. I think it was also the reason Simi walled up so much of that '35 Cabernet Sauvignon, to hide it from the Revenuers!

I agree that the emphasis on Burgundian style with Chardonnay and to a lesser extent Pinot Noir has driven the use of small new oak barrels, as has the desire to be like Bordeaux in prestige

(notice I did not say to make Bordeaux like wines). In the old days (pre-1968 or so), BV aged the Reserve cab in new oak, used the 'once used' barrels for the Rutherford, while at Inglenook in the Daniels days (when the wines were BV's equal, if different) they were aged first in the old (meaning pre-Prohibition) huge oak casks, and only later in the smaller oak casks for a couple of years before bottling. We won't really know of course, and few people alive and active have the taste memory to really make the comparisons, but I don't think the best Cabernet Sauvignon made to day is any better than the best wines made at BV or at Inglenook in the 1940s (e.g., the '41s, '47s and '51s at BV and the '41s and '51s at Inglenook).

I confess to liking Chardonnay both with and without much oak - very different wines of course. While I love the big Chardonnays (and have since first tasting the Hanzell and Stony Hill in the early '60s), I also loved the austere clean style of the old Wente Chardonnays (starting with the '62) -- (NB- the current Wente Chardonnays are not made in the old way, but are quite good).

Zinfandel works with or without oak, though I think it ages better with some oak and lower alcohol.

The disdain for Parkerized wines cannot come soon enough for my taste (I suspect we may share the soapbox on Parker - I have thought he did not understand Cabernet Sauvignon or Burgundy since I first came across his work in the early 1980s.)

I do think there is considerable commercial pressure to sell wine younger and for people to drink wines younger. You have to make and sell wine every year. With capital requirements what they are, there is intense pressure to get vineyards into bearing usable fruit (people used to wait longer, as you no doubt know), and to sell wine as soon as possible in order to get a return on capital.

The consumer of course, would ideally only buy wines in very good years (but in larger quantity) for laying down, wine in merely good years for more or less current drinking, and avoid mediocre and poor years altogether. That was the way I was taught to buy wine, and pretty much what I was able to do through the '70s.

I always found the old California 'every year is a good year' propaganda risible (especially when I heard winemakers and vineyardists talking candidly among themselves), but the commercial guides to vintages always seem to say the next to be marketed vintages will be good to very good --- it's only after 7-10

years that the assessments become realistic. Remember the hype over the '74s? Hoo! Hah! And, my sense is that there really haven't been very many truly superb vintages in California for quite some time. Good ones, but not many great years.

SB Bordeaux, of course, seems to have several "vintages of the decade" and at least one "vintage of the century" every ten years.

Q Sir RPM, if I may ask the obvious question(s) - what do you consider the great years? The good years? And mediocre and poor years?

RPM You put me on the spot. I will think about it and put something up when I have some time, which is at a premium right now. It's easier to list good years in retrospect when you've seen the wines develop over time. Sometimes great vintages are immediately apparent -- '68 and '70 come to mind -- but sometimes expectations are not met -- '74 comes to mind -- and sometimes years end up better than originally thought -- '73 comes to mind. Sometimes disasters are immediately apparent - '72 and '77 - but even in disasterous years some people make good or even exceptional wine (go figure).

Off the top of my head, for age-worthy wines, I liked (for mostly Napa, some Sonoma, cab) '78, '85, '89 and '90. '99 may work out. I would have to think harder for newer years. Styles have changed a good deal, and I am very concerned about the ability of the newer styles to age 2-3 decades.

SB I, like my favorite importer Kermit Lynch, detest "vintage mentality". There is good historical precedent in Northern Europe, where terrible weather has made it nearly impossible to make good wine some years. That doesn't happen in California (knocking on wood re global climate change). We don't have years when it rains a lot during harvest. I do believe some years are much better than others in the number of very good and great wines, but it is much much harder to generalize about vintages here. A great year in the southern Stags Leap District is likely not as good in Calistoga and vice versa. I think some generalization about smaller areas such as mid Napa Valley, home to the classic Cabernets, is valid, but a great year there doesn't necessarily translate into a great year in Carneros or the Sonoma Coast or anywhere else. Years that are great for one variety in one area may be very inconsistent for other varieties elsewhere. Just one example: 1998 was a great Russian River Pinot Noir year, but way below average for most other wines and areas of Sonoma and Napa. In my personal experience with

many different varieties and vineyards each vintage has its standouts and its weak sisters. My definition of a good or great year is based more on how many wines are good or great. We have had dissappointing, below average years that have been championed by the meat puppets (press) like 1999, and vice versa. Having tried to qualify the limited validity of this concept, my personal list of the best vintages in Sonoma and Napa would include '68, '78, '85, '91, '94, and '01.

RPM You (and Kermit) are of course correct that the 'vintage mentality' is dangerous, because it leads one to ignore worthy wines in 'off' years and buy unworthy wines in 'good' years. And, of course, it's completely true that you have to be grape and district specific with vintages. I suppose when I think of vintage in California, out of habit, I should really be talking about the Rutherford Bench Cabernet.

The only exception I take to your list of vintages would be your omission of 1970. I'm curious about that. I don't think I tasted a failure in quality red wine from the vintage, at least when the wines were drunk more or less when they were supposed to be (meaning top cabs at 15+, other cabs at under 6 and 10+, zin under 6 and 10+, Charbono at 15+, Barbera at 15+). The state was absolutely awash with high quality fruit in 1970, even BV's humble 'Burgundy' was a memorable wine at 8! Even most of the Pinot Noirs were drinkable, and in those days that's saying something. There was a lot of really good zin that was lovely drinking in the late '80s, and the top cabs just seemed to go on forever. For my money, 1970 was the only year to approach 1941 -- which even Andre T thought was the greatest year of his career for Cabernet Sauvignon.

In 1987 or so, in DC, I opened the eyes of a law colleague who was a major collector of first growth Bordeaux (with a cellar holding wines back to the '28s) to California wine with a 1970 SEBASTIANI (!!!!!) Barbera. He'd never been impressed with a California wine before, though he had an excellent (Pauillac oriented) palate. The wine WAS pretty impressive, like a 20 year old Barbera d'Alba.

SB Regarding my omission of the '70 vintage - probably just lack of sufficient tasting opportunity on my part, but I would have to agree based on my limited experience. I do remember that Sebastiani Barbera, which was August S.'s pride and joy. Of course in those days the varietal requirement was 51%, allowing the winemaker a lot of blending leeway. I also remember BV "Burgundy", which

stylistically had nothing to do with Pinot Noir or Burgundy, as being incredible some years (even "off" years like '73), and an incredible bargain.

RPM 1973 was a 'sleeper' year. There was a lot of good wine that was overshadowed by the still available 1970s and the highly hyped 1974s. BV had a particularly good year in 1973 as well as in 1970. The 1973 BV Latour was one of the top 3 of the decade (in my view 1970, 1973 and 1979 (mediocre to poor for most wineries, but a great BV Latour))

PS, there were a lot of winemakers who were not thrilled when they changed the varietal percentage requirements form 51% to 75%. Others liked it. BV always made it a point to say the Latour was 100% Cabernet, but lots of good wines were blends, sometimes other Bordeaux grapes (but there wasn't much of that planted), sometimes Zin and Petite Sirah even in pretty good wines, and carignan in some of the cheapies. And I think Inglenook put little Charbono in the cab sometimes - I know the Charbono often had some zin and PS in it.

Q I can hardly wait until you release your Verdot and Franc. Two of my new found favorites!

A The odds of us ever bottling a varietal PV are very low. The nature of the PV grape doesn't lend itself to making balanced wine. I think it's an exciting blending component, but I have yet to try a varietal Petite Verdot that I would want to drink (I haven't tried my bottle of KR yet). Cab Franc's strength, IMO, also lies as a blender, but it can make a very nice varietal wine when conditions are right. 2007 will be our first possible varietal bottling of Cab Franc since 1991. That decision won't be made until this Summer at the earliest. I like to tell the story about one year when the Cab Franc was my least favorite of all our Bordeaux varieties yet I wished I had more because it so improved both the Cab Sauv. and the Merlot.

Q You said you were very excited about the possibility of the 07' harvest. Are you still excited and do you think it has the potential to be on this list? Which varietals do you think were strongest in 07 from your stock?

A Yes and yes. I think it's premature to even put '04 (which I love) on the list. For us, 2007 looks like a great year for all the Bordeaux varieties, especially Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petite Verdot. Our Zin's probably the best in quite a few years also. I

haven't tasted anyone else's '07s but everyone I've talked to is pleased with the vintage.

Q What, if anything, was good in 1981 (and would likely be good today)? Anywhere in the world

A Availability is obviously the biggest issue here. '81 was a good vintage in Bordeaux, obviosly overshadowed by the famous '82. '81 was a fairly hot year in California, so that would generally favor cooler areas like Stags Leap / Yountville (Clos du Val maybe?), Sonoma Valley, Russian River over Alexander Valley, Calistoga...

RPM Just thought I'd add an historical note: I was looking through some of my Dad's old wine magazines and on the inside cover of the December 1935 issue of *The Wine Review* I noticed an ad that listed among other winery supplies, the Original Kentucky Oak Chips of the "Kentucky Toasted Chip Co. "To assist the proper ageing and smoothing of wines."

Figured you'd get a kick out of that.

Q Wow, the most important aspect of the PV for me was that I'd never had a single varietal PV and didn't think I ever needed to again. I started blending it with 3 other open bottles by the end of the night and put it to some good use.

A We racked the Franc this past week, and after tasting my current guess is that we're not all that likely to bottle it separately. We have a fair bit of CF and PV this year - more than we'll ever use in a Victory, so we may have to come up with some kind of CF/PV/? blend Who knows what, but it'll be fun trying different possibilities.

The Times They are a Changin'

A Bad Night At Black Rock - Wed. Apr. 23, 2008

It's been so cold all month that the vines have hardly grown at all, but after three weeks we able to discern that the damage from frost at the end of March wasn't so bad. That all changed Sunday and Monday mornings. We had two extremely cold nights in a row, resulting in our worst frost damage since 1988, and by most accounts, the worst damage region wide since the early 70's. We lost more than a quarter of our potential crop, and published estimates are 10-20% losses for Sonoma, Mendocino and Lake Counties, somewhat less for Napa. Losses in Sonoma County alone are projected to be in excess of 50 million dollars worth of grapes.

The Tipping Point - Sat. Apr. 26, 2008

I believe Al Gore used the above term in reference to the situation where the environmental balance is compromised to the extent that it can't be corrected – when "chain reaction" climate change takes over. I bring this up because I think we're near or at the tipping point for a lot of resources that we've taken for granted in the past. Prices will skyrocket as demand exceeds production capacity. The price of wheat has tripled in less than six months; worldwide rice shortage looks inevitable, salmon season has been cancelled. Steel prices have risen 30-50% since January, on top of huge increases in recent years. Despite the powers that be exerting tremendous political and economic pressure, it probably won't be long before U.S. gas prices reach international levels (currently $8 a gallon and rising in most of Europe). The reasons are obvious yet complex and interwoven at the same time. For a real eye-opener check out the current National Geographic issue, which is entirely devoted to China.

Why, you may ask, am I bringing this up on a wine blog? I've been paying bills, and almost all of them have increased dramatically from only a year ago. Tin wine capsules have gone up 50% or more since last year due to a worldwide shortage of tin. Apparently demand, particularly from China, has surpassed mining capacity. Bulk tin has gone from $1600 a ton to $10,000 a ton in less than a year. Recently, scrap metal dealers have been calling, looking to buy "damaged" wine capsules. The price of steel grape stakes has more than doubled in five years, stainless steel tanks likewise. Everybody is adding "fuel surcharges"; trucking wine to the warehouse after bottling last week cost $590 plus a $173 fuel surcharge. Wine bottle prices have jumped – no, there isn't a shortage of sand yet, but it takes a lot of natural gas to melt the sand. The cost of shipping wine seems to go up almost every month as UPS and FedEx pass on their increased costs. I haven't asked WineDavid about it, but I imagine this is

eating into the take home for both w00t and the participating wineries. Can $5 shipping last much longer?

Some Like It Hot - Wed. Apr. 30, 2008

Thanks to Clayfu and ieabarry for the questions about high alcohol levels in California wines. The biggest reason, both direct and indirect, is wine critics' and consumers' tastes. I say direct and indirect, because alcohol levels can be adjusted independent of grape sugar levels. The traditional methods are decrease by amelioration (water addition) and increase by use of sugar (in Europe and much of the U.S.) or grape concentrate (in California, where sugar is not allowed). The modern, more technological methods include the cryogenic concentrators used by top Bordeaux chateaux and alcohol removal from wine by centrifuge or reverse osmosis and distillation. Clark Smith, owner of Vinovation, says that his company removes alcohol from hundreds of "high-end" wines every year. He touts the theory that every wine has one or more alcohol "sweet spots" – and you can optimize the taste of your wine by dialing in the right alcohol level. There are some very high end Napa Cabernets that use a "formula" of picking at outrageous sugar levels, bleeding off juice and replacing it with enough water to be able to ferment to dryness, and then removing alcohol.

Alcohol labeling is another issue. In the U.S. wines are categorized into two tax classes, 14% and below, and over 14%. When this system was set up, fortified wines (Port, Sherry, Muscatel, etc. – actually the lion's share of the California industry at the time) were the only wines over 14%. For table wines (14% or below), the label is required to be accurate within +/- 1.5% (to allow for blending and batch to batch variation). Almost all California table wines used to carry a label stating 12.5%, which covered everything from 11-14. European wines don't require alcohol labeling in their home countries, so a generic sticker (typically 12.5%) is added for export to the U.S. Above 14% the label must be accurate within +/- 1.0%. You can't always assume that the stated alcohol % is accurate. Someone in the w00t forum referred to a Bordeaux that was 12% alcohol – it could easily have been 13.5%, given standard import practice. Also, some U.S. wineries strive for full disclosure and accuracy while others label for perception / marketing (usually within the allowable legal limits). I had one wine recently (coincidentally a w00t offering) that just seemed higher in alcohol than the label stated. I was suspicious enough to save an ounce to test, and lo and behold, it tested at almost 1% higher than the label said.

Widespread appreciation of fine wine is a relatively new phenomenon in this country. We look for wines that are easy to like, and many of us look

to “experts” for guidance. I think only if you have been “into” wine for 25 years or more can you fully realize how much Robert Parker and others have dictated tastes. I don’t really want to renew the debate about that here, so I’ll spare you the crazy stories for now. At any rate, a large number of American wine drinkers currently prefer wines with lots of body and extract but low acid, soft tannins and sweetness or the impression thereof. As grapes ripen, sugar levels climb, acid levels drop, tannins “soften”, and flavors change. The general trend over the last fifteen years or so has been to delay harvest; “hangtime” has been one of the most popular wine buzzwords of the decade. Higher sugar levels result in more alcohol; they also result in more “stuck fermentations” with residual sugar (RS) left in the wine. Sadly, in recent years I have tasted a number of Gold Medal winning and 90+ point wines with 16% alcohol and 1% or more RS. Traditionally this type of wine was considered flawed. Robert Parker has actually used the term “port-like” as a positive descriptor for non-dessert wines.

Alcohol affects the aroma and flavor of wine in several ways. Because it is volatile it acts as a carrier for other compounds, intensifying the aromas. It adds sweetness, body and viscosity, intensifies the impression of fruit, and adds “heat” – that sensation you get if take a shot of distilled spirits. All of the above make a wine seem “bigger” and more intense. This is all fine and dandy within the cultural mindset of “if something is good, then more of it is better”, but a lot of us don’t live our lives that way. In my world there is such a thing as too much garlic or too much hot sauce, etc., and I find that over-the-top wines don’t taste as good with food and the food doesn’t taste as good either.

Determining when to harvest is the most important, and for me the most subjective, decision in the whole winemaking process. One needs to consider sugar and acid levels, flavor and tannin maturity. Acid and sugar (or alcohol) levels can be adjusted up or down and tannins affected by processing techniques to some extent, but you really can’t change the basic flavor of the grapes. I plead guilty to allowing the alcohol levels in my wines to creep up over the last few years. There is a dilemma for a winemaker who has a philosophical belief of minimal intervention. I do use flavor as my primary consideration in harvest decisions, but sometimes this results in higher sugars than I want. I don’t like to add water, so I’ll add enough to ensure we can ferment the wine to dryness, but not necessarily enough to bring alcohol levels to what I consider ideal. Some winemakers will never add water; some will always adjust to a specific “target” sugar level.

To sum up, higher alcohol levels, whether desired or not, are often a result of harvest decisions. Alcohol levels can be adjusted. Changing consumer preferences are the biggest driving force behind this change.

Discussion

Q With such variance possible, it surprises me that anyone bothers with decimal precision (12.7, 13.6, 14.9, etc.) at all. With a 1 - 1.5 acceptable variance are these numbers really for accuracy or marketing?)

A As mentioned, most wineries used to put 12.5% or "table wine" for everything 11-14%. I don't think precise alc. is important consumer information, so I used "table wine" as our alcohol statement the first couple of years of our existence. Some consumers provided negative feedback (that the term table wine had inferior connotations of quality), so we switched to numerical alcohol labelling. IMO, you should be as accurate as possible - truth in labelling.
In some cases these numbers are for marketing or perception - if they're intentionally different than the true alcohol level. My belief is that most wineries try to be accurate.

Q Actually, couldn't a bottle labeled 14% be anywhere between 12.5% and 15%?

And a bottle labeled 14.5% be anywhere between 13.5% and 15.5%?

A No. The distinction between 14.0% and 14.01% is important to the Feds because the tax rate is different. A wine at 14.1% may not be labelled 13.9% and vice versa. When we have wines close to 14% we always measure the alcohol more than once to make sure we're accurate regarding tax class.

Q You sorta imply that your preferences aren't in sync with Robert Parker or the "conventional wisdom." Is it possible that your wines that score best in competitions aren't the ones that you believe are the best? Or phrased another way, which of your wines do you like the best? Are they also the ones priced the highest? Or are some of your less popular wines the ones you think were crafted the best way?

A I talked about pricing at some length in an earlier blog. One, but not the only, factor definitely is how much I like the wine. I do get surprised sometimes by awards and ratings, but the wines I think are better generally win more. One year we had an awesome Zin - multiple golds, 95 or better in two publications, but 80 in the WS, while our "cheap" Zin that I was trying to get rid of got an 89. Go

figure. Production quantities and demand influence pricing, but I usually price "my favorite" wines highest.

Q I got to participate in a tasting trial at a local winery this week, and I was amazed at how many things the winemaker can manipulate in the wine. Who knew tannins can be bought by the bag? With the # of permutations you can do to any single lot of wine, how do you decide when its done? (I ask this more of the hypothetical winemaker, as from your past columns, I get the feeling you try to manipulate your wines as little as possible).

A My goal is to make the "best" wine possible (to my tastes and style, not RP's or anyone else's). I have done experiments with tannins, different yeasts, enzymes, oak powder, etc. My standard is that unless a process unequivocally improves a wine, don't do it.

Some winemakers are formulaic, some like to think of themselves as innovative or cutting edge, some traditional. I think the key is to rely on experience but keep an open mind.

SB Just to elaborate a little bit on the "manipulation" aspect, the very definition of the word is somewhat dependent on your perspective. A few years back a winemaker friend stated that they didn't manipulate their Chardonnay with barrel fermentation, ML, sur-lies aging... In my book that is non-manipulative, old-style Burgundian winemaking; his stainless steel, temperature controlled, ML inhibited, bentonite fined, sterile filtered wine is the one that is more manipulated. Clark Smith, a UCD contemporary of mine who was mentioned in the comments on de-alcoholization, has an interesting take on "natural" vs. technological winemaking (and he practices both). He's written on the subject at appellationamerica.com. I know it may be slightly heretical to tout another site, but there really are some thoughtful commentaries posted over there. Alan Goldfarb wrote an interesting article about high alcohol wines and generational taste preferences recently that came to mind while I was writing this week's blog.

SB Funny how somebody brings something up and it becomes relevant in multiple ways. I'm reading The Billionaire's Vinegar, and a major thread is wine forgery. I've just gotten to the point where a sommelier has revealed that there are "recipes" for making wine that tastes like old Latour or old Cheval Blanc, etc. I had a dialogue with Clayfu a couple of weeks ago about how it's not that hard to make high Parker score wines if you want to. That became more relevant when one of the best Australian winemakers spoke

at a local seminar Monday. He really went off on Mollydooker: excessive alcohol, added grape concentrate and tannin, residual sugar, way too much oak, etc. Lest one think there is a touch of envy or "sour grapes", I should add that this winemaker has also received great reviews and numbers from Parker. He said he even met with Parker and implored him not to tout such over-the-top, manufactured, manipulated wines. If you want that taste experience you can get it for a lot less money by mixing good fruit juice with vodka. I haven't tried any of the Mollydooker wines (though I've had some of their predecessors, Marquis Phillips), so I googled. Just coincidentally, of course, up popped a Gary V. segment on Mollydooker, and his descriptions were totally in line with what I would expect the wines to taste like.

LS Well said. There are SOOOO many different ways to make a wine that each and every winemaker needs to find what works best for them. This can and should be altered year in and year out as mother nature never deals the same hand twice!

My favorite winemakers are those that are pragmatic in their approach rather than formulary. There certainly are instances where it makes more sense to simply do what you've done in the past without 'thinking', but in every case, one should always ask themselves 'what if I did this or that - would it make it a better wine?' . . . .

As far as tannin in bags, different yeasts, etc - no different than most industries. There are many different 'ingredients' winemakers can and do use - and these are only a small handful of them . . . You might be surprised what some even high end wineries 'do' to achieve the results they get . . . (Larry Schaffer – winemaker at Fess Parker)

SB Thanks for taking the time to comment. One way I like to think about it is that winemaking requires equal participation by both frontal lobes. You need to be able to understand what's going on analytically, but you also need imagination and creativity.

Q So given your green practices, particularly relative to solar energy, etc, how much of a possitive impact are you seeing now versus what you initially thought you were going to see?

A I'm guessing you mean financial impact? As mentioned in a previous blog, we ended our first year of solar electric generation at the end of March with no payment due. Right now we're putting electricity dollars "in the bank" for use during crush. Our

electricity provider is regulated, so price increases have to be requested and granted by the PUC. I haven't seen anything in the news recently but I'm sure price hikes are in store, given record petroleum prices and low winter rainfall which will reduce hydroelectric generation.

Q Were there particular varietals or vineyards that were effected more than others? If so, how will this impact the '08 releases? (I was thinking maybe there are specific blends or vineyard releases that you may have to adjust or skip, or is the damage more across-the-board?)

A Frost damage is always uneven. Early budbreak varieties like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were hurt more than late varieties like Cab and Zin. Vineyards in areas that don't normally have frost and therefore don't have frost protection equipment (Carneros, Sonoma Coast, some mountain vineyards) got burned. We even lost some Zin both estate and two of our growers.

Q Looking at some the new techniques described at the appellation america site was fascinating, and a little daunting -- unfortunately, I realize that there has been a lot of work I was unaware of in enology in the past 20 years or so -- it sent me back to my trusty Amerine & Jocelyn *Table Wines, the Technology of their Production* and the contrast is fascinating. Especially the whole 'hanging' later harvesting and the dealcoholization stuff. I suppose someone who wanted to be more or less of a tradtionalist without going back to prescientific days, could do worse than the 1970 version of Amerine & Jocelyn.

A At least one of the alcohol removal processes was developed in California, but most winemaking innovation and new technology and products are developed in Europe, where wine is a much bigger industry. There is way more R&D, both public and private, in France and Italy than in the U.S.

SB Due to my cyber-ignorance, I've copied the following article from the sfgate website, rather than struggling with creating a link. There's also a nice article chronicling Robert Mondavi's life in today's sfgate.

Saddled with the name Alice, I've long-suffered from the inevitable Wonderland reference. However, when it comes to the critical acclaim for New World-style winemaking, I really do wonder if I've stepped through the looking glass.
I shun popular fruit-driven wines just as I do cardboard tomatoes.

Others rush to them the way mice rush to sugar. Are we really tasting the same wines? Is my palate so peculiar? Or have others had their taste buds brainwashed?

It occurs to me that larger forces might be at play, pushing these bold flavors, especially when a respected winemaker gets publicly paddled for making wine in a restrained style. And especially when it's a vintner whose wines were previously lauded, like Steve Edmunds of Berkeley's Edmunds St. John winery.

I first experienced Edmunds' wine in the form of his Port O'Call New World Red. This was back at a 1989 wedding in the Berkeley hills, and it was everything I used to like about what California could produce. The grapes in the wine were identifiable as a Rhone-style blend with the taste of those lovely soft, barely cooked mi-cuit prunes from Provence, and didn't skimp on tannic structure, but it also had that California brightness.

Uber hater Robert M. Parker Jr. liked it as well. In his early criticism, he heaped on praise, calling Edmunds St. John perhaps the "finest practitioner" of Californians working with Rhone grapes. He remained an Edmunds supporter for nearly two decades, even stating in a 1994 write-up, "I love this guy's wines." But something started to turn. Parker's current notes might say more about where the hater is now, than Edmunds.

A couple of years back I traveled from New York to Paso Robles, on assignment researching the region's wines and attending Hospice du Rhone, an annual celebration of Rhone grapes. I'm a redhead who melts in the heat, and the sauna-like conditions on the day of the gala tasting - reminiscent of the real Rhone Valley - made me weak. I gulped some ice water and revived the old curmudgeon within as I grumbled, "OK, there must be something I can tolerate in this room."

A few wineries impressed me - Pipestone, Adelaida and Tablas Creek. But California generally is out of my usual taste preference. Still, I was there to experience the scenery, so I sidestepped the exhibiting French vignerons and made rounds of the locals. Right next to where the hefty wines of Turley Wine Cellars were being poured was their polar opposite: Edmunds St. John. With graying blond hair and vintage pre-'90s spectacles, Steve Edmunds, a boyish 58, had a get-me-out-of-here-and-put-a-guitar-in-my-hand kind of demeanor.

I took a sip of his Los Robles Red Viejos Rozet Vineyards Paso Robles from the 2000 vintage. I liked it and was so relieved to find Edmunds' mark of restraint still stamped on the wine. The 2001 Basseti Vineyard Syrah was next, all sunny and tasting of olive, with well-knit tannin. Good and healthy tannin. "There's hope," I thought.

But not everyone shares my love of tannin, like the guy tasting

next to me. He asked Edmunds: "Is this ever going to open up?"
Like Edmunds' way of dressing, or his eyeglasses, little has changed in his winemaking. He still doesn't have his own winery. He buys his fruit from trusted sources. He approaches the wines as he has for more than 20 years. The dirt the grapes grew in did not change; neither did Edmunds' approach to the grapes. He still interprets the parcels he uses, with vintage and maturity being the only variables. He picks earlier than most and has never bowed to the gods of new oak. His aim is to work with the power of California fruit and not, as is popular today, augment it. The wine was plenty open for me. I directed Mr. Closed Wine to Turley.
Parker on the attack
Though Edmunds enjoyed Parker's praise, his scores never made it to the cult status of 95 points or higher. Since his first vintage in 1987, Edmunds' restrained style has made him an unsung hero for those who believe California should lower the sugar and lift the personality in its wines. But in Parker's eyes, Edmunds seemingly started to falter in 2004 and cracked in the 2005 vintage, when Parker slammed him with damning scores ranging from 84 to 87. Where in years past, even middling scores for Edmunds were accompanied by glowing prose, this time the words stung.
In the August 2007 Wine Advocate Parker wrote, "What Steve is doing appears to be a deliberate attempt to make French-styled wines. Of course California is not France and therein may suggest the problem. If you want to make French wine, do it in France."
"Wow," I thought, "wine hater on the attack." Criticizing a wine for trying to be French? As Edmunds has said, he does not want to augment the power that is natural to California. Was he punished for elegance or has America and its most favored hater forgotten the beauty of restraint? The personal attack seemed out of line, more like a spurned lover. There were also some choice words that would quickly lay me flat on a shrink's couch if they were used about a piece of my writing: "innocuous effort," "one-dimensional," "superfluous."
Was Parker was playing the Wonderland Duchess, screaming, "Off with his head"? Parker's style has been quick to laud and hesitant to criticize. This show of displeasure was highly out of character. The words indicated offense, but what could be offensive? Did Edmunds disappoint by not succumbing to a preference for jam and oak? Was this to be a cautionary tale to those who take a stand against non-Parkerized wines?
I wanted to inquire what Edmunds' thought of it all. Before we met up for dinner this March, I retasted some 2005s. I found the 2005 Parmelee Hills compelling, with touches of mint, the deep smoked blueberry of Syrah and a definite touch of granite in the rain. The wine had opened more than the last time I had it and was far from

superfluous or innocuous.
In fact, over the next few days it opened up and showed even more complexity. The Red Neck 101 Eaglepoint Ranch, which Parker said had a "superficial personality," sang with cocoa, forest and plum. Both of these wines were quite closed when I last tasted them five months previous. Edmunds' wines need some time. Sometimes a few months. Parker is an experienced taster, shouldn't he have known this? (I would have contacted Parker, but I suspected he wouldn't take the call.)
I kicked off the Edmunds evening with a brilliant skid on the slick floor of New York's Gramercy Tavern restaurant that landed me right on my butt. As I nursed my wounds over a bottle of Beaujolais, Edmunds told me he, too, was mystified by the Parker debacle. It occurred to him that somehow he offended the hater. Perhaps it was a discussion of Syrah on Parker's Web site. "I said that I hoped that Syrah didn't get turned into an SUV, and Parker popped in on the thread and called me a wimp."
Vintner sticks to his guns
But there is evidence of discontent in the wings. Despite Edmunds' spanking, I'm hopeful that others might have the spunk to lower the dial on the fruit and expose the complexity California wine can have.
"Plenty of people offered me encouragement," Edmunds said, "for being willing to take such a beating for not making the style of wine that Parker seems to demand."
What helped ease the pain was that far from worrying about hurting his sales, Edmunds' East Coast sales rep sent out a mailing that said: "Edmunds St. John scores mediocre points in the Wine Advocate!"
And the wine sold like hotcakes.
Maybe I'm not in Wonderland after all.
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Even Winemakers Get The Blues

(May 2, 2008) A bad spring cold really zapped me for a couple of weeks. I even went and had blood tests done. They found nothing and I'm fine except for a bit of residual coughing. What with being low on physical and creative energy, I asked the w00t community for ideas, and you responded so well that there's not really space in one blog. Still, please keep the questions coming. So, in no particular order, here goes:

Joelsisk and yumitori both asked a series of questions about tasting rooms. For small wineries with limited distribution, tasting rooms are very important sales and profit centers. A recent survey reported that the typical 5000 case winery sells over half its wine retail. For some wineries it is essentially their only sales outlet. Over the last couple of decades even large winery tasting rooms have come to be treated as profit centers more than as promotional outreach.

We opened a tasting room three years after we first started selling wine. My father was quite resistant to the idea; he didn't want to be a shopkeeper, but $20,000 in sales at a barrel tasting weekend changed his mind. We sell almost 40% of our wine retail (including internet and wine club shipments, but not w00t), and get almost 60% of our gross revenue from those sales. Even after payroll and overhead it is far more profitable than selling to distributors. I don't spend much time with the day-to-day operation of the tasting room; I just try to give Toby the tools and support he needs and let him make most of the decisions. An added personal benefit of having a tasting room is the flexibility to make lots of different wines – that would be a marketing nightmare on the wholesale end.

Cesare asked about sulfites, providing great links to articles by Andy Waterhouse of UC Davis. Sulfite addition probably dates to Roman and Egyptian times, when someone noticed that the fumes from burning brimstone (sulfur) inhibited spoilage. Up into the twentieth century the only means of adding sulfite (as sulfur dioxide – SO2) was by burning sulfur in wine containers before filling them. SO2 serves two functions in wine. It protects against oxidation and it also inhibits growth of (but does not kill) spoilage organisms like vinegar bacteria and Brettanomyces. We now know that SO2 is also produced by yeast, probably an evolved competitive edge against bacteria. Unfortunately, the amount of SO2 produced by yeast is usually not enough to fully protect wine during the aging process. There are a couple of wineries that don't add any SO2; sometimes they succeed in making wine that isn't either severely oxidized or microbially spoiled, sometimes not.

A lot of people complained about SO2 in wine after the mandatory warning label went into effect in the 80's. "Since they started putting

sulfites in wine it gives me headaches", "Do sulfites cause cancer?", "Why did you start using sulfites?"…. Sulfite levels are actually significantly lower than they were several decades ago. The main winemaking text I had at Davis, Technology of Wine Making by Amerine, Berg et al, 1980 edition, recommended 75 to 200 parts per million (PPM) of SO2 at the crusher. We typically add 20 to 25 PPM, and I don't know of many wineries that use more than 60 PPM unless they're dealing with rotten grapes.

MarkDaSpark asked about frost protection and about pest control. The real traditional way of protecting against frost is to plant in areas that aren't prone to frost after budbreak. At our vineyard, which dates to 1892, avoiding frost damage entailed planting late budding varieties like Zinfandel, pruning late to delay budbreak a few days, and prayer. None of those methods are particularly effective when it drops into the 20's on April 20th & 21st. Wind machines and overhead sprinklers are the two main modern methods. Wind machines work by mixing warmer air from 30 or 40 feet up with the colder air that settles closer to the ground. They don't help a lot if there isn't temperature stratification or if it gets below the high 20's. Once upon a time orchard heaters ("smudge pots") were used in conjunction with wind machines, but air pollution issues ended that in these parts about 30 years ago. Overhead sprinklers give greater protection, but are dependent on having a large water supply because they use about 3300 gallons of water per hour per acre. This method takes advantage of water's high heat of fusion (for you physicists). What this means is that it takes a lot of heat to melt ice, and, conversely, ice formation releases a lot of heat. Ice forms on the vines when you use overhead sprinklers, but as long as you keep that ice wet it stays at 32ºF.

This year's frost damage occurred over a wide range of conditions and situations. Areas that had low frost risk and no protection, such as Sonoma Coast and some mountain vineyards, were affected. Between the combination of low amounts of rainfall and many nights of frost some people ran out of water. On one of the worst nights there was little or no temperature inversion so wind machines were ineffective.

Fortunately (he says, knocking on wood) there are no grape insect pests that require routine treatment in our northern coastal vineyards. We personally have never had to use any kind of insecticide or miticide in 20+ years. There are worries about excluding exotic pests like the light brown apple moth (LBAM) and the glassy winged sharpshooter (GWSS), so many vineyards have detection traps. It's unknown how much damage the LBAM would do to wine grapes. The GWSS is scarier; it is a strong vector for Pierce's disease, which kills grapevines. The introduction and establishment of GWSS devastated the Temecula winegrape industry in the late 90's. Mites and leafhoppers are the most common pests in Sonoma

and Napa, and both are easy to manage, usually without pesticides. Many bird species love grapes, and they are the worst animal pests. In areas with lots of grape acreage the damage is generally tolerable; we probably lose fifty to a couple of hundred pounds a year. Some people can't accept any loss, and deploy scare kites, Mylar tape, propane cannons (real popular with the neighbors), bird distress calls, balloons, trained falcons, or netting (extremely costly). Unless you have a small, isolated vineyard these measures probably aren't terribly cost effective. Deer can do a lot of damage, especially early in the year, when each tiny nibble can destroy what would become a pound of grapes; most vineyards have deer fencing. Rabbits, raccoons, foxes, coyotes, possums and even bears (one highly publicized incident in Napa) will all eat grapes, but usually not a significant amount.

Lighter asked for more "day in the life" stuff, but that'll have to wait until next time, and about how much lab work I do. Lynda (asst. winemaker) does most of the labwork; I do some when she's on vacation and during crush. We're pretty basic. We check each wine's pH (one measure of acidity) and free SO2 every time we rack, and sometimes in between. We check alcohol levels after crush, after any blending, and before bottling. We check residual sugar and malic acid during and after crush, until each wine is dry or has completed ML, respectively. We check volatile acidity (vinegar, basically) and total acidity at least once per wine (legal requirements, but only infrequently relevant to winemaking decisions).

Well, as Porky would say, "that's all, folks!"

Discussion

Q Thanks Peter. As always, very interesting and enlightening.

Today's post deals a lot with the growing / farming aspects of the business. We have heard a lot about "sourcing" of grapes, and how some people look for wines where the maker also controls the growth of the fruit as this can have a significant impact on the final product. Based on some comments made surrounding this week's offer(s) (Ty Caton), I am curious about use of other wine making "resources". You indicated that Ty Caton wines were made at your facilities.

Presumably Ty was still in control of the entire process, but I am still curious how this works. Is it like a time-share, and when he (anyone) needs to use it they come in and operate as if it's theirs for the week? Does he send the grapes or fermented juice to you for processing, and you follow his directions? Is their some form of cooperation between the two of you that results in a little of both

personalities represented in the final product?

These questions are phrased around Ty making wine at your site, but I am also thinking on a more general level -- if these arrangements are common how are they commonly handled?

A There are different sorts of arrangements, most commonly called custom crush. It can vary from a grower asking us to do everything from harvesting onward to someone being highly involved in all steps of the process. In the case of Ty Caton, his 2003 was fermented at Castle Vineyards, then transprted here in barrels for aging, blending, filtration and bottling. His 2004 vintage came to us as grapes, with he and his consultant winemaker deciding when to harvest. They gave us parameters for crushing and fermentation and supplied barrels for aging. By law, we did all the work on the wine. They made all the decisions regarding oak treatment, blending, fining, when to bottle, etc. Starting with the 2005 vintage, Ty has had his wine made elsewhere. In the case of Ty's wines, we had little impact on style other than using the same care and diligence we use with our own wines. We only acted without instruction from Ty's consultant when absolutely necessary.

There are now some shared facilities, allowed under a law that was developed in the 1990's. They are called Alternating Proprietors. Each one must maintain separate licenses and bonds and file reports and pay taxes independently. We make wine for Muscardini Cellars under that type of arrangement. They are allowed to physically work with the wine, but in this case we do all the work.

Q You mentioned tasting rooms above and it reminded me of an article I read recently in the Wall Street Journal about tips for wineries on how to run their tasting rooms. I'm sure you don't break any of these rules, but I thought you and the w.w community might find it interesting if you had not already seen it.

A The only one of these "rules" that we break is the one about having something for kids to do. (Dorothy and John had a young child with them when they visited us (incognito) many years ago. About the only thing I can do is look for frogs with them by the creek or show them the corndog plants (large cattails).

Q have a question about distribution. You mention that your inhouse retail is the most lucrative for you (together with wine clubs) and that woot is better than giving bottles to your distributor. How come you're allowed to price bottles below the MSRP, so to speak,

on woot and does that conflict with your distribution networks? A lot of business models have rules against 'undercutting'.

A More and more states have removed price controls and price posting. California did so in 1980. What this means is that we have no legal control over retail pricing outside of the winery. We do maintain full suggested retail pricing at the winery so as not to "undercut" local retailers. Of course we do have sales and club discounts, etc. Many people are surprised on their first visit to wine country by the prices, "Why is this the same or more expensive than at our wine shop back home?" They sometimes expect "factory outlet" pricing.

That slick devil WineDavid usually won't put a wine on w00t unless he can undercut every other on-line source's price

Q thanks for clarifying your roll in Ty's wines. My impression of TC vs. Wellington wines is that there are some stylistic differences. Now this is based purely on my impressions of a limited number of both your wines....and some of the impressions may have become lodged in my psyche as tasting bias. That said, I have often wondered how much of a "hand" you had in the process, as I try to reconcile the differences I've perceived in the styles.

A Equipment and processing techniques do have some influence on style. Our crusher, our press and the way we handle grapes and wine, including our cap management regimes do have an impact on the wines. In the big picture these aren't as critical as the grapes (always the biggest factor) or some of the other variables.

Q I'm not sure if this has been answered before, but what is the technical difference between the terms:

"Grown Produced and Bottled By" Vs "Estate Bottled"

"Produced and Bottled By" Vs "Made and Bottled By"

Most wine sites are claiming that "Estate Bottled" and "Grown, Produced and Bottled By" are the same thing, but the Federal regs never mention the term "grown" which would seem to indicate that the "grown" term is superfluous, and that "Grown, Produced and Bottled By" is really just "Produced and Bottled By". In fact they explicitly state that "Estate Grown" is the only term that can be used to describe said situation:

A Grown, produced and bottled by is Estate bottled. "Estate bottled" is the only legal description allowed on the front label. One other condition of the term estate bottled is that the wine never leaves the winery premises until it is bottled. The meaningfulness of the term estate bottled has been diluted by the allowance of grapes from non-winery owned vineyards if the winery has a "long term contract with significant viticultural input". This has been interpreted by the fed regulators as a three year minimum with someone from the winery visiting the vineyard at least once during the growing season. Under these guidelines we could call virtually all our wines "estate bottled. "Produced and bottled by" requires 75% of the wine to be fermented under the winery's bond. I didn't know about the fortification provision, although I don't think it really comes into play. That does make it sound like you could bring in bulk wine at , say, 13.8% alcohol, bump it to 14.1% and label it "produced and bottled by." I doubt if anyone actually does that - the "produced and bottled by" doesn't matter to most consumers. "Made and bottled by" and "cellared and bottled by" require only that any two of a short list of operations be performed at the winery. Filtering and bottling, blending and bottling or aging and bottling all qualify. These wines can be 100% bulk wine, so this is indeed a "softer" statement than produced and bottled by. There are, of course, fine wines such as Ty Caton's '03s that are fermented at one facility, then bottled somewhere else, that must use a "lesser" designation.

Q It looks like perhaps the regs were changed in 1994, and while most of the wine sites still say that "made and bottled by" indicates 10% fermented at that winery, the federal regs now require 75% for that designation (Same as "produced and bottled by".

Maybe the labelling reg change at that time also removed the "Grown, Produced and Bottled By" from the federal regs.

A Gee Andy, you're more up on it than I am. I've never considered using "made and bottled by" so I wasn't paying attention in class that day.

I Read the News This Week, Oh Boy

A Week In The Life - Sat. May 24, 2008

Monday started early with sulfur dusting dawn patrol. Thursday through Saturday were too hot to dust (risk of burning the vines), and Sunday was too windy, even at 5 AM. I got to the vineyard at about 5:15 and was done by 6:35. After my shower I checked w00t and made a couple of comments. Monday's payday, so I wrote ten paychecks. I tried a large national payroll "service" for six months last year, but it didn't save me much work, especially when you count all the hassle and time needed to get their frequent mistakes corrected. We tasted our first trial blends for our 2007 Estate Zinfandel – I wasn't much use, I think the sulfur made everything taste bitter. I then spent most of the rest of the day calculating cost of production and inventory valuation for our CPA.

Tuesday we tasted Zin again, a smaller variation of blends based on Monday's conclusions. With the exception of the Zinfandels, we've finalized the blends and adjustments for all the rest of the wines we'll bottle this year. We won't bottle the Estate Zin until next February, but the "leftovers" will go into the Sonoma Valley Zin to be bottled in August, so we need to finalize this blend soon. We're also at a bit of an impasse in the blending process for our other single vineyard Zin, Meeks Hilltop. High alcohol levels in a couple of the best lots are getting in the way of finding an ideal blend. I spent some time on the phone getting information on costs and logistics of having some wine "de-alced", and the rest of the day with my inventory valuation.

Wednesday: After several trials and some calculations we have decided to send nine barrels out for alcohol removal, the first time we've done this since 1999. Aside from the expense (it'll end up costing close to $3000 including the trucking), I don't like processing or manipulating wine any more than absolutely necessary. We'll do blending trials as soon as the treated wine comes back, with the option of "fine tuning" the alcohol level of both the Meeks Hilltop and the Sonoma Valley Zins anywhere between 14 and 15%. (The Meeks blend was going to be in the range of 15.5-15.8% otherwise). I finished inventory valuation and faxed a bunch of data to our CPA. Next was a packet of info for a prospective distributor (I don't want to say which state until/if we finalize an arrangement). I also met with the gentleman who specializes in grapevine grafting to plan some work for next week or the week after. The week after is more likely with the very cool weather forecast for the next week or so. We're going to graft some more Roussanne and Viognier and our first Malbec.

Thursday I did a quick w00t check-in and called a couple of distributors

regarding overdue invoices and remaining wine allocations. Then it was off to San Francisco for a trade tasting in a fancy downtown hotel. I'm a reasonably aggressive and decisive driver, but, Ovaltina my goat, I felt like Gramps from Podunk in downtown SF, getting cut off, flipped off, honked at and almost run into a couple of times. My blood pressure was almost back to normal by the time the tasting started.

Friday I spent more time replying to posts on w00t (beginning to sound like a bad habit?). We almost finalized the Estate Zin blend (57% ancient vine and 43% young vine, with a small reduction of acid). We'll look at a possible Petite Sirah addition of 2-5% next week. I had to go to Santa Rosa for a follow-up with my doctor to review lab tests. While there I did a few errands including picking up 1000 pounds of dusting sulfur. Santa Rosa is only 15 miles / 20 minutes away, but I still try to consolidate errands and only go once every few weeks because of time and gas. Speaking of gas, diesel at our local station jumped 50¢ a gallon Thursday, to $5.20. After a couple of restaurant wine deliveries I went home to rest up a bit before going to Sonoma Jazz+. What a show! Al Green followed by Herbie Hancock; talk about putting an indelible smile on your face. We had 11th 9row seats

Saturday: We got 0.5" of rain this morning, our first since 0.35" on April 23rd, the only rain that month. We only had 0.25" in March, making this one of the driest springs on record. We do have some Chardonnay and other varieties starting to bloom, but I don't expect any serious damage from this morning's rain. I'll just put in a little time writing checks and doing some minor bookkeeping after I'm done writing this, then take the rest of the day off. Tonight Diana Krall's playing at the Jazz+ festival; we saw her three years ago at the first Jazz+ and are looking forward to this a lot. Toby (our tasting room manager and so much more) has become the unofficial wine guy for the artists, and Wellington the unofficial wine of the stars. We give away wine (without having to pay for the privilege), they give us passes. For me, this is the epitomy of a win/win arrangement. Right now life is good. Oh yeah, tomorrow night is Al Jarreau and Bonnie Raitt, yahoo! Lynda and I will be pouring wine before the show and during the between acts dinner in the high rollers' tent.

Murphy Was An Optimist - Sat. May 31, 2008

The tractor's "charge" light came on Monday, and the forklift hour meter said it was time for service also. We can't exactly drive either to the dealer, so service calls at $100+ an hour were needed. I had the tractor guy do some other deferred repairs and routine maintenance after he replaced the generator. The forklift guy says we need two new tires; they're a hundred bucks apiece, but including installation and all the regulatory fees

it’ll be $450 for the pair. Our air compressor broke a belt, so I showed Sam how to look up the part and how to put on the new belt. Between this and other recent repairs it’s made me realize that my combined education and work experience has given me a set of abilities that isn’t all that common.

We’ve had an ongoing problem of etching in our tasting room glasses. A couple of months ago we had an ion exchange column installed in our glass washer feed line and thought the problem was solved. The glasses have started to show signs of etching again, and Monday the dishwasher started smelling fishy when we opened the door. After I tried a couple of different things we got the water guy (who sold us the ion exchange column) out on Friday. He’d done some research and found out that the source of the foul odor was breakdown of the resin in the IE cartridge. We’ve ordered a small reverse osmosis unit, and he says he’ll credit us the cost of the IE unit, but it’s still a big expense. No, we won’t be able to use the RO unit to concentrate wine or remove alcohol. This morning when I came in the tasting room staff told me water was seeping under the wall into the bathroom. The fill valve for the water softener (also in line with the dishwasher) wasn’t closing completely and the overflow hose was obstructed, so I got to play plumber again. Right now I’m kinda wondering what’ll break next.

Discussion

Q You're such a tease!!! Where might this PS be PoSsibly sourced from?

I'm also happy to hear about the viognier! Can you tell me more about the -sannes and what they bring to the table? I always get them mixed up.

A We've got both old vine and young vine Durif/PS in our own vineyard - every good Zin vineyard needs some. We refer to it as Dr. Durif. A little goes a long way for us.
We made varietal Viognier from 1994-2001, but abandoned it in favor of doing both Marsanne and Roussanne. Vio is very tempermental both in the vineyard and winery. I love it as a "secret ingredient" / blender. We co-ferment some with our estate Syrah, our Marsanne (through a serendiptous nursery error), and in 2007 Sauvignon blanc. We're grafting a little more just for blending, not with an eye on producing a varietal.
Based on physical characteristics, Marsanne and Roussanne are probably sisters or mother and daughter. The standard description in the Rhone is that Roussanne provides more aromatics and Marsanne gives structure. I find them to sometimes be

complementary, but they are similar enough that it really isn't a yin and yang matchup. Given different expressions based on where they are grown, I do find Roussanne to have more of a tropical fruit (mango, lychee) and floral (honeysuckle, jasmine) character, while Marsanne is typified by almond, honey and citrus blossom aromas. Marsanne also seems to be much more ageworthy.

Q I just checked, you *do* bottle a Roussanne on its own. My wife and I first tried this on our last visit to the West Coast in 2006; we're hoping to be out that way this fall (late, probably November.) We'll have to see if we can look you up then - do you anticipate having Roussanne available?

A We're down to our last few cases of 2006, but will be bottling the 2007 on July 2nd. It will probably be released by sometime in October.

Q I tried one of the Marsanne orRoussanne when it was offered in your Rhone Review Quartet (my introduction to Wellington) and loved it. I would like to see some of your whites up again one day.

How much Alc. will the removal process actually remove, or do you decide that and they continue to test it until it's just right? Curious as to how that works.

A We always try to treat as small an amount of wine as possible because any processing has some negative consequence in terms of flavor. In this case we had them treat about 11% of our Zinfandel. They lowered the alcohol from 15.8% to 6%. We then blended this back with some higher alcohol Zin. We also purchased the alcohol that was removed. As we work on finalizing blends we will also do some "sweet spot" trials with different alcohol levels. We'll use the remaining alcohol in Port production.
The process we used consists of two steps. First the wine is put through reverse osmosis with a 100 dalton membrane, which allows passage of water, alcohol, acetic acid and very little else. This permeate is then distilled to remove the alcohol, then blended back with the wine. The RO process also can be followed with ion exchange to remove acetic acid (VA), or can be used by itself to concentrate a wine (one of several "Parkerization" tricks).

Q I was a theater major in college and did tech work, scenery, lighting etc. We techies got to work the visiting shows as well. Al Jarreau plyed our school and a few of us helped to set up the stage. As is customary the band had a catered dinner at our facility. Al invited us to have dinner with them, a very nice gesture from a

very, very nice person. In the dozens of profesional shows that I worked, rock, jazz, classical, opera, musicals etc. Al Jarreau was the only artist that ever did soemthing like that. Tell him thanks from me if you see him, that was almost 30 years ago.

A I didn't get to talk to him, but Toby worked backstage as the wine guy for the whole festival and can vouch that Al Jarreau is still a great guy, loved by his fellow musicians as well.

Q As if we don't ask enough of you and as if you had any spare time to actually do it...but any chance of populating future blog entries with some pics? I'm with everyone in that it's absolutely fascinating to read all the day to day stuff you have to suffer through for your craft (and the non-suffering stuff too of course). It'd just be awesome to see some of this stuff through the magic of the digital arts as well. It'll help us with short attention spa...um, what were we talking about?

A I did include a picture of my wine stained hand back during crush. One of the techno-savvy w00ters walked me through the process (might even have been his Holiness Corrado, I don't recall). The process seemed arduous. If there was a relatively easy way I'd be happy to oblige.

Q It is great that you have developed all those skills. Running a business that relies on all that different machinery, it would be real expensive if you couldn't fix some of it yourself.

Real interesting hearing about all that goes into the blending process, especially after the discussion in your earlier blog. I am real interested in the Estate Zin, as that is what you were crushing when I was there. Unless that distributor is in CT, I'll have to find a place to ship to.

A The Estate Zin has been all retail for quite a few years now. As far as fixing things, it does save me some time and money compared to some of the more academic/cerebral winemakers. A good, independent small winemaker can often be described as a jack of all trades and master of none. I'd never make it as a full time welder or carpenter or electrician or mechanic or.....

Q It seems that all the repairs, alcohol removal and fuel increases would have some impact on cash flow. Might I suggest that a great way to raise a few bucks would be to get some wine flowing to WOOT. 

A Repairs happen. I did write about increased costs a few blogs back, especially the impact of fuel costs on so many things. I don't think the wine industry is unique in that sense. We have been raising some of our prices to distributors, but no retail price changes YET.

Wine flowing to w00t? I love having people speculate about upcoming w00ts, so I would be spoiling the fun if I said anything more than that WineDavid and I are in frequent communication

Q Do you consider yourself a full-time winemaker? Seems like you are a full-time winemaker, plus part-time welder, carpenter, etc. May explain why winemaking is not an eight hour a day job.

A Running a small business is kind of like being a small town GP. You're not a specialist who only does one thing. Most winemakers for all but the largest companies do more than just make wine. Running a small business of any kind means you only have to work half-days on Sundays, and you get to decide which 8 hours

Q A question popped into my head today that I'm not sure we've ever addressed before (I'll admit it...I don't read every single post). In general, why are white wines priced lower than red wines? Is it because they require less aging in barrels so there's less storage cost? Easier to make a white wine than a red wine? Or is it more a matter of perception and the market can just bear higher retail rates for reds?

A You've pretty well answered your own question. Faster to market (whether barrel aged or not) is probably the biggest general cost difference between whites and reds. Once you get into higher bottle prices, costs become less and less relevant. I've seen bottles on w00t with a msrp of $40 that cost less to make than some bottles on w00t with $20 msrp. Perception and supply/demand are huge factors in pricing of "high end" wines. Reds in general have intensity, more complexity and more variation.

Q I actually bring you up a lot to restaurants I frequent here in Chicago often. I would love for one to pick up a couple of your wines so I have a steady supply.

A We just this week applied for a license under the new Illinois law that will allow us, as a small winery, to "self distribute" to restaurants and retailers in your fine state. This is groundbreaking legislation, as heretofore DC was the only place outside California where we didn't have to go through distributors. (Naturally, our

elected officials don't want any impediments to purchase of their alcoholic beverages - too bad they don't feel that way about the rest of us.) I don't have anything against distributors, and would love to have one in Illinois, but they can be almost impossible to get, what with more and more wine brands every year and a trend of distributor consolidation.
When we get our license (allow up to __ weeks) your favorite wine purveyor(s) will actually be able to order direct from us, if they are so inclined.

Q Are distributors difficult to get because they are very selective due to the number of wine makers on the market today?

A Over the last couple of decades the number of wine brands, both foreign and domestic, has grown tremendously while the number of distributors has declined. Distributors can be (and need to be) very selective. Great wine alone isn't enough for many of them; they want either high scores or some other hook that makes their job easier.
edit: I said wine "brands" above because on top of the expansion of custom crush and negociant brands many larger wine companies are trying to increase their share of shelf space or wine list space by producing multiple brands - they aren't necessarily new wineries.

Q tried replying to your comments regarding alcohol removal and using some residual for port. is the port intended to be sold under your own label or to third parties? can you know at this point whether it will be aged for a certain time (20 years) or just at least a certain length (12+ yrs)?

A We started bottling a port with the 1992 vintage. We currently make three ports: a vintage dated port, bottled at about 18 months age and both tawny and white ports which are multi-vintage blends of well-aged wines.

Q To play Devil's Advocate around Parkerization, is it a bad thing or just evolution? Twenty years ago personal computers were marginally functional and the internet was something only University technogeeks knew anything about. People wrote by hand, looked up words in dictionary, and went to a library to look things up. Things change, baby.

So the average wine is changing to something different from what has been the status quo. It stands to reason that those who grew up in a pre-Parker era would look down their noses at Parkerized

wines. Many people were quick to write off the PC as pointless in a home or the internet as valueless to the average person. Things change, baby.

So, again, playing Devil's Advocate, if Parkerization makes a more 'drinkable' wine for the average consumer (typically a buyer who wouldn't even know what Parkerization was), is that a bad thing?

A This is a huge barrel of worms. Wines and winemaking have evolved constantly during the last 50-100 years. There are very few technically flawed wines now compared to even twenty five years ago, including California, France, Italy, S. America - you name it. Beyond that, when you get into stylistic differences, "better" becomes extremely subjective. On the Appellation America website, Alan Goldfarb just wrote a tongue in cheek response to the negative feedback he got from an article criticizing Parkerized wines; it's worth a look.
The aspect of Parkerization (and the Wine Spectator to an even greater extent) that rankles me is the focus on numerical scores, and the number of consumers who use those scores to make purchasing decisions. The latter aspect is both an American cultural trait (we want "the best"), and a reflection of the fact that so many Americans are relatively new to wine. Most American wine consumers did not grow up in households where wine was a regular part of meals, so it is something new and unfamiliar. As we gain experience, we will tend to develop preferences and trust our own palates rather than rely on someone else to tell us what is good. After all, we don't all like the same movies, books, types of food, clothing, etc. I like to try wines based on reviews and descriptions occaisionally, but I rely on my own taste for most wine purchases. As a parallel, I will buy books based on reviews that sound interesting. If I love something I'll often seek out other books by the same author, but if I don't like a book... Some best selling authors are great imo, others vacuum majorly, sometimes to the point they would fail English 1A.

SB More thoughts on the changes in winemaking and wine styles, not necessarily "Parkerization".

The quality of what we used to call jug wine has increased by leaps and bounds for decades now. Most commodity level, mass-produced wine is now marketed as varietal wine in cork finish bottles, blurring the distinction between "fine" wine and everyday wine. After all, the wine factory marketing folks are no dummies. These wines have benefitted immensely from technological advances and manipulations.

The reason there is so much debate about "Parkerization" is that there has not been an unequivocal quality improvement in fine wines. That is due to grapes, rather than winemaking, being the dominant quality factor. We all have different, rather subjective, definitions of what constitutes high quality in fine wine. Some think ageability is an essential factor, but how much of even the most expensive wines are cellared long term versus consumed young? Others, Parker included, value intensity. Still others value uniqueness, or complexity, or a wine's ability to enhance a meal. The main criticism of Parker's preferences, aside from issues of alcohol level, balance, etc. is that it encourages a "sameness" by sublimating the expression of terroir. If you pick grapes overripe and use lots of oak a Cote Rotie is not that distinguishable from a Lodi Petite Sirah, a Bordeaux not that different from an Aussie Cab. etc. As a result, the world of wine becomes less interesting. Ultimately, this aspect of the parkerization trend may drive backlash more than style issues do.

Q Peter, this is actually somewhat counterintuitive to some of your and Rob's reminiscences. I read comments here about the good ol' days or authors like John Fante and envision immigrants going to homegrowers/wineries in the depression and getting that d.ago red/claret straight from the barrel. I assume it had to be better (and cheaper) than the plonk making its way to stores.

But, in fairness, I'm a romantic about wine.

In something I asked in a different thread, would you have any interest in doing a side deal in the fall, shopping extra juice to people who were interested in trying their hand at home crafting?

A I'm not much of an immigrant, having been born in SF Children's Hospital, but I remember filling jugs at Sonoma Valley wineries for 75 cents a gallon. It was made from good ol' dry farmed, Zin based field blends. The wines certainly had more character than today's California appellation varietal wines, but the winemaking was rustic and uneven. Back in the day the stuff they bottled for stores and restaurants was probably pretty much the same wine, from the same redwood tanks. Barrels were virtually unheard of.

I have sold grapes to local friends a couple of times, but it's basically just one added stone around our collective necks at a time of year when we're doing our best just to tread water. There are companies that do make a business of just that, and source some

outstanding grapes. Peter Brehm comes immediately to mind. I believe his business is called Wine and the People.

Q links for you lazies: original article as well as satiric follow-up. love that white flag behind the boxes picture!

A TMR - Thanks for providing these links. As many of you know by now, I'm tech-NO-savvy.

Q You kinda eluded to this, but how does Parkerization affect the price and prestige of wine in general?

Can higher end wines (like yours compared to a bottle that cost $10-15) justify thier costs based on minimal manipulation of the wine and are hence of superior grapes?

Or does parkerization have no baring on this and is simply an alternative method of producing wine that just happens to reduce the parity between wines?

A Wow, I read your questions three times and I'm still not sure what you're asking. Parker has been one of many who have helped popularize wine in this country. Increased interest in fine dining is probably the biggest driving force. Wine styles change and evolve over time, and there is a vast continuum of styles rather than "parkerized" or "non-parkerized". Over the top wines certainly pre-date Parker. He has championed non-traditional, over the top wines, and that's fine. I just find it odd that so many wine purchases are based on a number someone assigns to a wine. It's fine to try things based on someone else's recommendations when you're beginning to learn about wine, but don't let somebody else tell you what to like.

Q You touch on certain aspects of the wine biz in this post. I think it would be great if you devoted an entire blog entry to the business side of wine making. I guess it intrigues me so much because I consider it the best way of life one could possibly have. You're one lucky dog.

I'm particularly interested in your distribution channels and the regulations you struggle under. Who can you sell to? (distributors, restaurants, direct to consumers, w00t, retail stores, etc,) Why would you sell in that channel? What are the regulations? Why do the regulations differ? Who benefits from restricting your channels? And why can't I find a bottle of Wellington at my local Ralph's store?

A I have touched on some aspects of distribution in prior blogs and forums, but will get into some of your questions in the blog after next (the next one's in the pipeline already).

Regarding the "local Ralph's question - our production is so small that we're only in a few supermarkets in a couple of states, and none in other states where we do have distribution. Where do you live?

I Heard it Through the Grapevine

What's Going On - Wed. June 11, 2008

We had a grafter (not a grifter) here for the last four days. This winter I collected Roussanne budwood and ordered Malbec budwood with the idea of t-budding some Merlot (thanks Miles, you *;;-ωλ!). I planned to do four rows of Roussanne and two rows of Malbec, with the idea of expanding the Malbec a couple of rows a year. After bad late April frost damage in part of the Merlot the potential crop was very small, so I decided to do more grafting. We now have six additional rows of Roussanne, four rows of Viognier and nine rows of Malbec. The man who owns the grafting company, Salvador Presciato, told me his business is way up this year due to the frosts. People who were planning to graft next year or the year after decided to do it this year. This type of grafting (changing varieties on mature vines) typically costs you about 1½years of crop, and it makes sense, if you don't have much crop anyway to have this be the no-crop year.

We finalized the blend of our Meeks Hilltop Ranch Zinfandel today, after eight tasting trials. All four of us had the same favorite, over other blends that only varied slightly in their make-up. The "winner" was 11 barrels "hilltop" block, 2 barrels "front yard", 2 barrels low alcohol "front yard", one barrel "over the hill", and 25 gallons of Durif (the grape variety commonly known by the misnomer "Petite Sirah"). Final alcohol will be around 14.8%. Next up is the Sonoma Valley Zin; anything that doesn't go into that blend will be used in a non-varietal blend (The Duke).

Another price increase: dusting sulfur went from $0.19 a pound to $0.44. I use roughly 1000 lbs. a year, so it'll only cost me about $250, but still, a 131% increase? PG&E just asked the PUC for rate increases due to fuel costs, so at least I can be happy that our solar power is "saving" us even more money.

If You're Not Part of the Solution, You're Part of the Precipitate - Fri. June 13, 2008

I coined the above (I think) when I was an undergrad in the early 70's (too many chemistry classes warp one's sense of humor). We just lost one of our best restaurant glass pour placements because of all the sediment in our 2003 Sonoma County Cab. It really presents a quandary. I don't like to treat wines more than is absolutely necessary. We do filter most of our wines tightly enough to insure against growth of Brettanomyces ("brett"), but we don't fine or cold stabilize. All red wines will throw sediment with time, but some of ours tend to do so within a year or two after bottling,

and a couple of them have formed alarming amounts of "muck" in that time.

And Now For Something Completely Different

I've been sharing an article from the June 3 NY Times with lots of people because it gives cause for great optimism. Futurist Ray Kurzweil makes predictions using what he calls the Law of Accelerating Returns. He has predicted when a computer would beat the world chess champion, when a handheld device could read a book out loud, and other technological advances, all with amazing accuracy. The cause for optimism arises from some of his current predictions, including: all our energy will come from renewable sources within twenty years and life expectancy will be increasing one year per calendar year fifteen years from now (making us statistically immortal!). Fun stuff to think about, and a welcome respite from the doom and gloom in most of our news.

Three Faces of Eden Tues. June 17, 2008

When I was growing up we used to visit family friends who had a walnut orchard in Napa. As far as I was concerned it could have been Appalachia (sorry if this offends anyone). I thought the locals were real hicks, goin' fishin' barefoot down by the crick, etc. Napa County was populated mainly by farmers and blue-collar workers. There were cattle ranches, dairies, cherry and walnut orchards, and, oh yeah, old vineyards. I can remember feeling sorry for native Napans starting about twenty years ago – they had become second-class citizens because of all the new money moving into their own hometown.

Santa Rosa was even smaller than Napa when I was a kid. It was a two-hour drive from San Francisco (longer on summer weekends) because the freeway only went about 8 miles north of the Golden Gate. Santa Rosa's population has grown about twenty fold in 45 years while Napa's has only tripled. Santa Rosa is much more accessible by freeway now, and most of Napa Valley has been protected from development since the late 60's. Santa Rosa isn't dominated by wine like Napa is, but I did see a Riedel billboard on the freeway there on Sunday.

When I moved to Sonoma Valley in 1971, it was still a quiet, out-of-the-way small town with little local economy. There were no commuters, and only a few tourists came to look at the Mission and taste wine at Sebastiani Winery. There were a lot of retirees and "hippie refugees" from the Haight Ashbury. It seemed like half the people in the grocery store used food stamps, and it was rare to see anyone of other than white skin color. At one time or another I was told by various people that Boyes Hot

Springs (my current home) had the highest per capita rate in California of: a) paroled felons, b) venereal disease, c) heroin addiction.

Sonoma is so different now. It's not as gentrified as Napa, but there is a lot more class distinction than there ever was before. House and land prices have been driven sky high by newcomers buying "lifestyle", and there is a large, predominantly Mexican, immigrant population that fills most of the lower paying jobs: restaurant, retail, factory, house cleaning and childcare, gardening, and vineyard and winery production jobs of course. There are locals who "blame" the grape and wine industry for the influx of Hispanic immigrants, but it really is a national phenomenon, not a local one. Most of the riffraff have moved away because it's expensive to live here and hard for them to get jobs, so maybe we're a little better off in terms of STD's, ex-cons and smack freaks.

Discussion

Q: What's T-budding? are there other kinds of budding?
If you're interested in The Singularity, the IEEE devoted its most recent issue to the subject. It's all online here -- http://www.spectrum.ieee.org/singularity
There has to be some sort of physical solution for throwing sediment... some small cap/pourer/filter to slide on the neck?

A: There are different grafting techniques for changing varieties on mature vines versus grafting onto rootstock. All grafting success depends on getting good cambium (the thin, actively growing layer between the wood and the bark) to cambium contact. T-budding can only be done a few weeks out of the year, when the cambium cells are multiplying rapidly enough that the bark peels away from the wood easily. The top part of the vine is cut off and a T -shaped cut is made in the bark. Then the bark is peeled away from the intersection of the two cuts, a bud which is cut slightly concave across the back is inserted, and the flaps are tied back over the top of the bud to hold it in place. This technique has a very high success rate because the entire surface that is exposed on the trunk is cambium, virtually guaranteeing cambium to cambium contact.

Regarding sediment restaurants want to be able to open a bottle and pour away without fuss.

Q: Where are you from originally?

A: I was born in San Francisco like my mother, and grew up in Sausalito (when it was a quaint little artists' village, not a Yuppiefied tourist trap).

Q: That's tough for a by-the-glass restaurant. If was a bottle-based sale, I would suggest playing up the 'green' frenzy in marketing world, including a blurb in the wine write-up saying that the sedimentation is the natural result of letting the grapes make their wine without extra additives and over-processing (yadda yadda yadda). For a glass, folks just want/expect a clean pour.

You touched on pricing over in the main woot thread this week. I finally finished up the Ferrari-Carano-inspired book "A Very Good Year" and will interject a few questions from time to time if you're looking for fodder for future columns. One of the things that seemed to be a concern was the lack of control of distribution in California. Per the story, FC hoped to get their $14 (Suggested Retail) Fume Blanc placed in high-end restaurants, but having it show up at 'discount retailers' priced at $11.99, thereby doing some damage to their attempt at making an elite brand. I'd be interested to know more about the trial & tribulations of getting a bottled wine out the door & on to shelves and moving all of a year's inventory.

A: I love questions. A Very Good Year was an interesting read, but unfortunately terribly inaccurate as far as what goes on in the vineyard and winery. The author got so many things mixed up that it really made me wonder if he hadn't also mixed up other "facts" and people , misquoted them, etc. If the part of the story that you know is misreported it makes you wonder about the credibility of the rest of the story.

I wouldn't know where to start re marketing. There's so many facets to it. I'm happy to respond to more specific questions.

Q: So SB, do you go out and taste grapes from vines that you are looking to draw new grafts from? Does it matter what type of vine the bud is grafted to? Will the vine impart any of its "essence" to the grape aside from the nutrients from the soil? And finally, could you regraft again down the line if the new grapes don't work out for you? For some reason I find this part of the business fascinating.

Oh and I finally found a place that has your 2003 CS near my house for $17. I wasn't actively looking but I was pretty stoked when I saw it. Might have been the 2002...dang now I need to go back and actually buy it to make sure.

A: Tasting grapes from the budwood source isn't useful. Every bud of Syrah clone 174 or Cabernet sauvignon clone 7 should be identical. It is the interaction of clone, rootstock, soil, climate and farming techniques that will give different aroma, flavor, color, structure and balance to the grapes from different vineyards. The rootstock used influences the scion due to it's physical charateristics (vigor, speed of ripening, drought susceptibility/tolerance, etc.), but does not directly contribute flavor charateristics. Changing varieties does result in an "interstock" that probably has no effect on the vine or grapes. Likewise, nutrients from the soil don't impart flavors directly, rather only through their effect on vine growth and metabolism. Yes, you can change varieties more than once.

'02, '03? Both good years for us. The '03 has got more sediment;)

Q: I wondered at the end what Don, Rhonda, George, and Steve thought of the final product. The author seemed to go out of his way to try to show/tell how well the winery did taking care of the illegal immigrant workers to the extent that it seemed like he had a not-so-hidden agenda.

I guess a decent place to start for Marketing would be to ask where you would like to see your wines end up and, assuming the story about winemakers having no concrete say where distributors sell their wine has merit, where it breaks your heart to see your wine show up.

A: I think almost all small wineries would like to see their wines in fine wine shops that don't discount heavily, and in good restaurants. Most of our distributors are small, and don't do business with chain stores or chain restaurants. It works the other way around, too - most independent restaurants and shops don't want to carry the mass marketed brands that dominate the shelves and lists at chains. I'm pretty lucky in terms of the relationship I have with our distributors, but it would be really sad to see my wine in a clearance bin at Long's Drugs.

Q: I have not seen Wellington Wines in a clearance cart, but I have seen them at pretty decent discounts at my local Lunardi's. You will be happy to know that your wine does not sit on the shelves long after it's been put on sale. ;)

I really appreciate the sentiment with regards to Hispanic immigrants. I have worked with many, and have often been very impressed by their work ethic and devotion to family.

A: Hispanic immigrants do work that very few U.S. born workers (of any background) are willing to do. I used to take pride in not asking anyone to do work that I wasn't willing or able to do, but as I get older there are more things I'm physically unable to do well. I used to say my employees work with me, not for me. I still pick grapes for a while each harvest; it helps me remember to be patient when the crew is slowing down on a hot day.

SB: There was an article about the "Aspen effect", or "Disneyfication" in the Napa Valley Register today: http://www.napavalleyregister.com/articles/2008/06/27/opinion/matt_pope/doc48655d4316b43966493572.txt

How Dry I Am?

El Brujo - Fri. June 20, 2008

It's official, this has been the driest spring in N. California recorded history. It's also been one of the coolest, so the vines aren't showing any signs of moisture stress yet. Shoot growth is well below normal for this time of year in all the vineyards I've looked at in Sonoma Valley and bloom is later than usual. It's been a lot windier than normal, too. Farmers always talk about the weather anyway, but it sure has been a strange year so far. I don't have any idea of what's in store for the rest of the growing season because I don't have my own personal weather forecaster anymore.

Enrico "Joe" Gallo sold us our vineyard in 1986. His father-in-law, Ben Biehler, had planted it, starting in 1892, and Joe started working with Ben when he married Ben's daughter in 1933. Joe lived in wine country all his life, and right across the street from our winery from 1935 until his passing ten years ago. I have never met an American who was more in tune with the earth than Joe. He knew which doe had given birth to twins the previous year, when and where certain mushrooms would appear, etc. He paid attention to bird, animal and plant behavior and used that, along with other signs, to predict both short and long term weather with startling precision. Several of the old-time growers in the area asked him regularly for predictions. His predictions made the NWS look like they were using a ouija board.

Over the years Joe taught me where the worst frost spots were, ripening sequences, soil variations and how to identify all the grape varieties. He offered wisdom, opinion, a lot of history and lore, and his two cents worth on politics, sports, sex and religion. He was individualistic and open-minded and had strong moral values that combined very socialistic left wing ideas with a bit of far-right libertarianism. He doused wells, including ours (seemingly unlimited), scared away government employees, and, best of all, predicted the weather so well that my vineyard guys took to calling him El Brujo.

Joe used to come over and tell me it was going to rain on such and such a date, and I only half way paid attention, thinking it was just the ramblings of my retired, somewhat bored neighbor. After a couple of years I started paying more attention because it seemed like he was often right. Once I started writing down his predictions I realized he had abnormal abilities and was pretty much always right. Time after time he predicted rain weeks in advance, to the day, or, at worst, one day off. Droughts, floods, date of last frost – he didn't predict, he knew. I'll never forget Oct.3rd the year

before he died. He drove over on a very warm, cloudless afternoon (he wasn't walking much at that point) to apologize for the mistaken prediction he had made in late August that we would have our first real rain of the season on Oct. 3rd. A storm had passed well north of Sonoma and was headed over the Sierra Nevada on its way east. The NWS was predicting clear and warm for the next week plus. Oct. 4th we awoke to heavy rain; in a rare occurrence the storm had come back from the east. I once asked Joe, very diplomatically, if he would consider sharing his methods with me, passing them on to another generation. He had already told me of 3 day and 7 day cycles, moon phases, watching the migratory birds and the oak trees, but I asked him if he might describe how he integrated all those factors. He came back the next day and said he had started to write stuff down but got to the point where he realized "ultimately it comes from here" (touching his heart). I still miss you, Rico.

Take My Wine, Please - Tues. July 1, 2008

Thanks to Penkauskasd for the following questions: "I'm particularly interested in your distribution channels and the regulations you struggle under. Who can you sell to? (distributors, restaurants, direct to consumers, w00t, retail stores, etc,) Why would you sell in that channel? What are the regulations? Why do the regulations differ? Who benefits from restricting your channels?"

In California, our state winemaking license allows us to sell retail (from a maximum of two locations), direct to restaurants and retailers and to distributors. When prohibition was repealed by constitutional amendment in 1933, the states were directed to write their own liquor laws, including drinking age limitations and how, when, where, and by whom alcohol could be sold. Naturally, in every state, distributors "influenced" their legislators to write laws that gave them as much of a monopoly as possible under the law. Illinois is the first state to reverse this policy at all, with a "self distribution" law that went into effect June 1, 2008, allowing small out-of-state wineries to sell direct to restaurants and retailers. Until the Supreme Court decision a couple of years ago, we could sell direct to consumers in only 11 "reciprocal" states, most without restriction. Many of the states have had to rewrite their laws in light of the court decision, and this has opened up a number of states for retail sales and shipping. Ironically, some of the former reciprocal states have become more restrictive and controlled.

Direct to consumer is generally the most profitable venue for us, but shipping is much costlier and less efficient for small amounts than larger shipments to distributors. Also, distributors actively market our wine in their states, resulting in much higher sales volume, albeit at a lower per

case return. Cult wineries like Williams-Selyem or Screaming Eagle can sell almost all their wine at retail, but most of us need to sell to restaurants and retailers, and to use distributors to do so.

The federal government's greatest interest in the alcohol industry is revenue collection (the ATT collects more money per dollar of its budget than any other govt. agency, including the IRS), and that is an important concern for many states as well. We have a lot of reporting and tax paying to do for most states where we distribute or sell direct.

Finally regarding who benefits from restricting our channels? The national wholesalers' organization spends a huge amount of money lobbying against any law changes that would lessen their control of wine sales. It does put a lot of small wineries in a bind because there aren't enough distributors for all the brands now in existence, and alternative channels still don't exist in many states.

Discussion

Q: My first thought on this was "Well, that must mean there are too many brands and too much wine being made." But, Europeans have a higher per-capita consumption than we do *and* they export a ton, so there's still room for more, I think (or maybe I'm wrong...is it a demand issue?).

How does our distribution model differ from Italy/France/Spain? Does theirs foster smaller brands and more diversity? Is it comparable enough that we can learn some lessons?

A: Per capita consumption has been falling in western Europe for decades, which has increased pressure to export to places like the U.S. where consumption is increasing. It has also led to EU programs that pay growers to remove vineyards. There are no legal limits or restrictions on vineyard acreage outside the EU, so vineyard acreage has increased in the US, Australia and New Zealand, South America, etc. More European brands exporting + new brands from other parts of the world + new US brands + fewer distributors = a buyers market as far as distributors are concerned.

The two challenges small producers face are regulations and representation. In the US we have a lot more legal restriction going state to state than EU wineries have going country to country. Marketing "muscle" is an issue for small producers everywhere; that's why distributors exist in all states and countries. As far as marketing foreign wine in this country, small producers typically sell to an importer (like Jorge Ordonez or Kermit Lynch) who sells

many brands to distributors. From a compliance and marketing standpoint, it's as if all the different brands came from one winery.

Q: Is there anything we as consumers can do to help the issue? Some place we can send emails? Fixing a broken wine distribution model seems like a monumental task.

A: freethegrapes.org and others have been mentioned regularly in the wine.woot forums.

Q: Is there a pride factor for being on certain restaurant lists? I feel like good restaurants can make up for small marketing budgets if they actually care about their wine lists enough to get consumers enthusiastic about wine.

I remember right after I wooted Seghesio I was thrilled to see it on landmarc's list in ny.

A: The term in the wine trade is "key accounts". High profile restaurant (and retail to a lesser extent) placements not only lend prestige, they also help sales elsewhwere. A wine BTG (by the glass) in a good restaurant can fuel a lot of wine shop sales.

Q: Is there a point at which you irrigate?

A: We started irrigating several weeks earlier this year, but so far haven't been irrigating as much as usual because tempertures have been well below average. When it does get hot we irrigate more frequantly and more heavily. We can't irrigate the old vines and I am concerned they may run out of gas before the final stage of ripening.

Q: why can't you irrigate old vines? At what age can they no longer take water?

A: You can irrigate them if you install an irrigation system (a few people do so). All the vineyards in coastal areas of N. California were dry farmed until the last 40 years or so. Before then only vineyards in desert areas (like California's Central Valley) were irrigated. The Central Valley is very flat for the most part, so flood irrigation is practical (although extremely wasteful). Modern methods, primarily drip irrigation, are used in virtually all coastal vineyards planted in the last four decades.

Q: My dad visited a few wineries in the old days, and swears he saw a wine maker hitting the vines with a baseball bat to "stress" the vine

into forcing more energy into grape production. While this seems extreme, I can see the reduced water as a method of reducing rot, fungus, and smaller/tighter grape clusters for heightened concentration of flavours.

Obviously, if there's no water at all, they aren't going to produce, but can't these conditions yield very favourable (although less) juice?

A: Too much water is bad for quality, but so is too little water. The French tend to be negative about California wines for many reasons, including that we irrigate. It rains in most French growing reasons during spring and summer, and the vines can't tell if the water came from a cloud or a drip hose. We can best control vine water status and vigor by using drought susceptible rootstocks and careful irrigation.

Q: Yes, but do you beat your vines up when they're acting naughty?

A: Well, not the vines themselves, but....

Random Ridge
Random wines from random vines
Marquis Billy Random, Vinemaster

1994 was a torturous year; the vines suffered even more than usual, but we managed to whip them into shape by the time harvest came around. The grapes for this particular wine were slashed from the vine on a cold, dreary September morning, crammed into a bin, stomped on, and then bounced to the winery in back of a pick-up. After being tumbled mercilessly and pressed until they burst, the grapes were then dumped in the middle of a cold field without a second thought. A different fate altogether awaited the juice. Forced to exist on nothing more than dirt from Wyoming and a little yeast, it was imprisoned all Winter in small barrels in a cold, damp cellar. Its spirit finally broken, the wine was sufficiently submissive to be bottled in July of this year. We think you'll find this wine to be restrained, with the smell of fear, somewhat lean of body and extremely obedient. It should go quite well with mashed potatoes, whipped cream, and beats.

Q: Can you speak a bit about what type/character of wines the weather conditions will produce for you?

A: It could be a negative for the old dry farmed vineyards. It will be positive for one block of one of the vineyards we buy from that

tends to have too much soil moisture late into the season. In terms of general quality and character, the weather the week before harvest is most important, the weather the week before that the next most important, etc.

Q: What is it about the old vines that would allow irrigation systems but not other irrigation methods?

A: The only other irrigation method I can think of is Mother Nature (rain or flood). I guess I don't understand your question.

Q: There always seem to be strong feelings about whether or not to irrigate in Sonoma and Napa. If I recall correctly, Frogs Leap is very much into dry farming - you might want to talk with Frank Leeds about it on Wednesday if you can join us there.

A: prefer to have a way of compensating for the large variations of natural rainfall. If you dry farm you have to use extremely vigorous, drought resistant rootstock. When you get a wet year like 1998 (an El Nino year, with serious rain all the way into mid-June) those vines keep growing actively all the way to harvest, compromising quality. The trick is to irrigate properly, producing enough leaves to get the job done, creating proper water stress between bloom and veraison, then maintaining enough green leaves through harvest. Many growers, even those with wineries, overwater. I think it's psychological - they don't think they're good farmers if their vines look stressed. Growers who sell grapes can also have a hard time doing anything that reduces tonnage.
I always get a kick out of wine dogma and the American tendency to take things to extremes. A common attitude in our society is that if something is good, more of it is better. Hummers, Hot Sauce From Hell, and Parker's "bigger is better, biggest is best " approach to reviewing wine, etc.... When Richard Smart introduced the concept of "Sunlight into Wine" to California in the 1990's some people went so overboard it was ridiculous. The idea is that grapes need some light to develop good flavors and color. If your vines are overly vigorous and the grapes in total shade, quality suffers. So, naturally, some growers removed every single leaf on the first 12-18 inches of every shoot, leaving their grape clusters exposed to full sun all day long. This resulted in very high fruit temperatures, basically cooking the flavor out of the grapes. I have to chuckle a bit when I hear winemakers focus on a single grapegrowing or winemaking practice without putting it in the context of everything else they are doing. Whether it's "hang time", "physiological maturity", cold soaking, extended maceration, or whatever, if

winemakers use a dogmatic, formulaic approach they are going to compromise quality in some of their wines.

F/U: Ah, yes, indeed. Winemakers like fruit from vines that haven't overproduced (think of the low yields of century old Zinfandel vines, but that's a bit extreme), but if you're growing grapes you want to maximize production, subject to keeping quality high enough to keep your price high enough. The tension between quality and production is always there -- especially in wonderful years where there is an overabundance of wonderful fruit: ultimately great for the wine drinker, but often not so wonderful for the grape grower who doesn't have a contract and sells spot (do people still do that?)

I also agree with your critique of the tendency to follow whatever trend or idea is hot pretty near all the way to *reductio ad absurdam*. I guess what little I know I learned from the old guys, and the really old guys, for whom balance was key. It's hard to get it right, and Mother Nature can sometimes need a little help. Drip irrigation makes sense to me, at least as a back-up system. It's the sort of thing 19th century and early 20th century winemakers would have appreciated.

A: It takes decades, and a replanting or two or more, to figure out the best combination of variety, clonal selection, rootstock, spacing and training system for any given site. In the 60's and 70's people were planting Cabernet, Riesling and Pinot Noir next to each other, on the same rootstock, with the same farming methods. We've come a long way in the last 40 years or so, and we learn more each time we replant a given site. The great European vineyards have had centuries to fine tune things, and we still have a ways to go as far as optimizing vineyard potential. As an example, I've used six different rootstocks in the replanting we've done over the last twenty years, including two that existed in the old dry-farmed blocks. My original choices require a lot of irrigation, and therefore energy for pumps - not an ideal situation. I've used more drought tolerant stocks in newer plantings, with the idea that when the vines are fully mature I'll be able to dry-farm some years and use a lot less irrigation water than in the twenty year old blocks. So far, it looks like all the combinations will work very well except one. Syrah clone 174 on 1103 Paulsen rootstock at 7x5 spacing appears to be too vigorous for our site, even in this drought year.

Yes, there is still a spot market. Growers can command higher than average prices when demand is greater than supply, like Chardonnay this year, but often have unsold grapes in times of

surplus. I've been bombarded the last few years by growers with grapes for sale, especially Merlot, Cab and Syrah.

Q: Do you ever consider off-labeling or one-off wines based on available quantities of grapes from reputable/familiar suppliers?

A: We did a bit of that during our early years, but it doesn't mesh too well with the way we work. To over simplify: we strive for long term stability and consistency over short term profits.

Q: Is there something about old vines that requires you to treat them differently (irrigation-wise)? Are they more delicate? Less delicate? Or is it not a function of the vines themselves but where the old vines are? I'm assuming that when you say you "can't irrigate" them (instead of "We don't irrigate" them) in order to get the desired result that you don't have a choice in the matter.

A: They were planted without irrigation infrastructure. The growers typically hauled a water tank on a horse-drawn wagon through the vineyard a few times during the first year or two, giving each vine a shot of water. The vines were dry-farmed once they had developed a decent root system. It would cost a couple of thousand dollars an acre to put in irrigation, which would not even be used some years. There are a few old vineyards that have retrofitted, and it's a nice tool to have in dry years. So I suppose the answer is: short term, we can't irrigate, long term, we choose not to make the sizeable expenditure.

SB: Gotta tell a Joe Gallo story - I've got so many. In 1989 we put up a six foot high fence around the vineyard to keep deer out. Shortly after that a Sonoma County Dept. of Public Works employee came by and started giving me grief about how the fence along the road would prevent his people from getting a backhoe in to clean out the six foot diameter culvert that went under the road. Right about then Mr. Gallo arrived home from an errand and, seeing a county truck, had to stop and see what was going on. I had already told the county guy I'd be very happy to open the fence to allow them access because cleaning out the culvert would cut down on flooding in our vineyard, but he was being a prick. Joe picked up on this quickly, and started in on how the culvert had never been cleaned, how the county wasted tax dollars, etc. The guy then went into how the county "gives permits allowing connection of driveways", etc. I could see Joe's temper rising, but the guy was oblivious. Joe started in on "Who gave the settlers permits to come over here in covered wagons?..." The guy still wanted to debate, and finally pushed enough of Joe's buttons that he got in the guy's

face with "I pay your salary. You work for me.", while poking the guy in the chest quite hard with his index finger. Joe was well into his 70's at this point, but still had the long, well muscled arms that had made him a Golden Gloves champion back in the 30's. The guy finally realized he was in some peril and made a rapid retreat to his truck. About an hour later Joe came over and apologized, saying he "hoped he hadn't caused any trouble" for me. I thanked him and told him the county guy had forgotten all about harassing me, and that I didn't think he'd be back anytime soon. It's now 19 years later, and I've never heard from DPW again (and they still haven't cleaned out the bleeping culvert).

There's Something Happening Here

For What It's Worth - Tue. July 8, 2008

Dan Berger, one of the more interesting wine writers around, would occasionally list various production costs when talking about wine prices. Some were very accurate, but others out of line with each other, e.g. cheap glass with expensive corks. In light of recent discussions on the w00t forums about price, quality and value, I thought it might be interesting to list our costs and some idea of the range of various costs.

Dan always gave the most detail about bottling costs, so I'll start there. Most of our bottles run around $9.00 a case, with a range from $7.50 to $12.00. Industry ranges are < $5.00 to > $20.00. Our corks are around 30¢ each ($3.50/case), with an industry range of < 10¢ to > $1.00 each (there are also low cost alternative closures). We use tin capsules, at 17¢ each ($2.00/case). Polylaminate, PVC, heat-shrink plastic and other alternatives run 2-10¢ each. Front labels @ 7¢ and backs @ 4¢ adds another $1.40 a case for us. Label cost is probably the biggest variable in packaging costs because there is a tremendous economy of scale; small runs of ornate labels can cost a dollar a label. Mobile bottling is around $2.50 a case. If you have your own bottling line (a large capital investment) costs are considerably lower. Bottling labor for us is around $0.60 per case. We spend $19 a case to bottle our wine. Big wineries can get it done for $7-8, high end "vanity labels" may spend as much as $50 a case or more.

Grapes are the biggest cost in Sonoma and Napa wines, but not in the Central Valley. Cabernet averaged over $4000 a ton in Napa in 2007, but only $330 in Lodi and $260 or less in the rest of the Central Valley. The average grape cost in a case of Cabernet is over $60 using Napa fruit, and less than $2.00 using Kern County fruit. Growing your own grapes can be a lot cheaper than buying grapes. In 2006 our own grapes cost us $1160 a ton, our purchased grapes averaged $2040 a ton. Our grape cost per case averaged around $26.

French oak barrels are $1000+ a pop. That means $20 a case for a winery that uses 50% new French oak, a common practice for high end Napa and Sonoma Cabs ($80 a case for Caymus Special Select @ 200% new oak). American oak is $200-350 a barrel; staves, chips and sawdust range from pennies up to $2 a case or so. We average $4 a case for oak (ranging from $0 to 20, depending on the wine). Other winemaking and lab supplies add up to a dollar or so.

Large wineries realize tremendous economy of scale with winemaking labor, often spending less than they do on bottling labor. Counting labor overhead and a portion of my salary, our winemaking cost is $7 a case. I

won't consider consultant's fees here, but some vanity labels pay "superstar" winemakers six figure fees to create cult brands.

Overhead can be quite variable depending on renting vs. owning, taxes, depreciation, loan interest, etc. We spent a buck a case on utilities before we installed our photovoltaic system, now we have to add both the accelerated depreciation on it and the interest on the loan to our "book cost" for IRS purposes.

I won't make you do the math. Our direct cost per case is around $57. Two Buck Chuck probably costs about $9-10 a case to produce, and an elite Napa Cab might cost $140-200. Add a bit of tax, warehousing, marketing (can be a huge expense) and overhead and you get to the winery cost of sales. Assuming sales through the three tier system, markup will be 100% between the winery and the store shelf. Hence Two Buck Chuck and $40-50 Napa Cabs.

Smoke Gets In Your Eyes - Thu. July 10, 2008

Dry lightning started over a thousand fires in northern California on June 22nd. Even though none of the fires were in Sonoma County, we were inundated by smoke for a week. One night the smoke detector in our bedroom went off at 3 AM. When I sulfur dusted on the 27th I didn't even realize the sun had risen until I noticed a pale red, moon-like circle above the mountains. I had Sam wash the solar panels when things cleared up last week – they were coated with ash and dust. I wish I had looked at the electrical output before washing; I'd be curious to know how much generation was compromised. After a week of blue skies the smoke returned Monday and has been getting thicker every day. There are still over 300 fires burning 18 days after they started, with 20 described as major fires. It's also been over 100°F all week, making for burning eyes, throats and lungs. I feel like I'm breathing with my body uider water; I can only imagine what it's like for people with respiratory diseases.

There's been speculation about diminished sunlight slowing ripening or other fire effects on grapes, but I don't think it really makes a difference right now. Light is rarely the limiting factor in photosynthetic rate. Heat determines rate of photosynthesis, with a maximum rate around 90-92°F, dropping to virtually no activity below 50° or above 105°. We have had a cooler than average year so far, and harvest may start a little later than average. I also saw mention of a company that can remove "smoke taint" - aromas from wildfires adsorbed by the grapes. I'm guessing that may not be much of an issue with these early season fires, but certainly could be if there are similar conditions closer to harvest.

The Circle Goes Round And Round - Wed. July 16, 2008

We're getting closer to harvest and closer to the end of my year of (mostly) voluntary servitude - blogging. I think my last blog may come during September, so if you have any burning questions, ask now or forever hold your peace. Besides, I'm worried about running out of cheesy cultural references for titles and headings – I'm down to Buffalo Springfield, The Platters and Joni Mitchell this week. We've finalized all our blends for this year, with the last bottling scheduled for Aug. 19th & 20th. The Sonoma Valley Zin is 14.3% alcohol, with 7% Durif (PS to you, Loweel). The Duke is 44% Zin, 28% Merlot, 16% Cabernet sauvignon and 12% Petite Verdot. We've started to re-taste the 2007 Cabernets and other Bordeaux varieties. Now that they have 9 months or so of barrel age we can confidently select candidates for Victory trials, and start blending other lots for the bases of our varietal and single vineyard bottlings. We'll do a few more tastings before harvest, then take a hiatus until December.

I've only got a couple of sulfur dust applications left (no need after veraison), and there's no more mowing – the permanent cover crops went completely dormant very early this year. After that, there's just irrigation and watching. We're starting crush plans – ordering yeast and other supplies, looking for crush help, making barrel plans, visiting vineyards. It's also time for Sam, Lynda and myself to take pre-crush vacations and make sure our batteries are fully charged going into harvest. I've got a one week sales trip planned just before (I hope) crush begins.

Discussion

Q I remember one of your prior blog posts expressing shock at how much the cost of tin has gone up. Since then, I've been saving most of my tin capsules (so I have 2 just-smaller-than-baseball-sized globes right now). Is there any recycling program or way to recycle them? It seems that, given the costs of the new ones, it might be cheaper to recycle at the current price-point, if the color additives will boil off at a certain temperature.

A You could try scrap metal dealers. We've had a couple of "drive-ups" offer us next to nothing; I guess they're basically looking for next to free tin. We're just putting it in boxes, waiting until we have enough to make it worth our time to recycle.

SB The inks are water based, so I don't think they pose any problem in the recycling process.

Q just one quick question wrt "$80 a case for Caymus Special Select @ 200% new oak." is the 200% a typo? or are you implying that the juice is moved to a second new oak barrel half-way through barrel aging? hope this isn't too silly a question.

A Not silly at all, amigo. They age that wine in 100% new oak barrels for almost two years, then transfer it to another set of brand new barrels for "finishing" (no personal editorial comment here;).

Q and does it taste like anything OTHER than oak upon release?

A Like I said re "finishing", "No personal editorial comment here" 

edit: The wine writers all adore it #1 in the Wine Spectator annual top 100 more than once.

Q Looking forward to finally trying the Duke. Thanks again for all of the hospitality of the last few days.

And...heh heh...you said "taint". 

A Twarnt nothing; I enjoyed spending time with ALL the RPM tourists. Everyone was interesting, interested, and extremely well-mannered. I wish I had had time to travel with the bus on Monday and /or Wednesday.

heh heh...I said "twarnt" and had had.

Q I hope that you continue the blog, even if more sporadically, after your agreement is up. I will be going through and putting all your blogs into a PDF for future reference. I can read them again and learn more than I could the first time.

Oh, and you should meet Scott Harvey sometime. I spoke with him at dinner on Wednesday, and his love of wine and willingness to share his knowledge reminded me a lot of you.

A I've only met Scott briefly; he's definitely one of the many good guys in the business.

I've been thinking about consolidating my blogs along with some of the relevant posts and responses, but am so technophobic that the thought of copying and pasting intimidates me. I'd buy a nicely put together collection for myself (hint hint).

Don't worry, I won't disappear completely. WD and I have chatted a little bit about the idea of guest bloggers or rotating bloggers. If something like that comes to fruition, (i.e. if WD can find a few more suckers) I certainly will take a spot in the rotation

Q i started a thread elsewhere on the possibility of planning a second tour to the left coast. i had a related question for you (though unrelated to your blog): if you had to pick a time when winemakers are least busy AND available in their wineries / tasting rooms (ie not on vacation) what would that be? mid-Summer (much like this year's tour)? or some other time?

in case YOU are curious, the leading candidate for now seems to be somewhere in the Pacific Northwest, but it's way too early to know if that will be it.

A The timing of this year's tour was pretty good. August is iffier as far as vacations, etc. Things get more hectic and sporadic during crush, but it is the best time to visit as far as both seeing things and weather. I think there are quite a few winemakers who could find the time to spend an hour or two with the group. If you did a tour during crush you might get a missing winemaker or two, but the overall experience would still be great.

Q With regard to bottling & closures, how does the cost of moving the bottling line from cork-type closures to screw-top cost out? Obviously there are considerations for both the raw materials as well as the infrastructure to be able to bottle screwtops.

A The mobile lines are set up for as rapid as possible changeovers between different packages, including bottle size and shape, label position and, for those who have the options, to screwcaps or different capsule types. They typically charge $150 per major change with one free change per day. If you're just changing wines but using the same bottle there's no charge.

Interesting that you bring up screwcaps, particularly costs. Our primary grower of Sauvignon blanc was by a couple of weeks ago to pick up a case and mentioned how wis wife was telling people we were now using screwcaps on the SB as a cost saving measure. I had to explain to him that while it is true screwcaps cost a bit less than a high grade cork and tin capsule, the move was strictly for quality considerations - to keep the Rose and SB fresher. I've had brokers and distributors, as well as consumers, ask me if we plan to do more wines with screwcaps, particularly the other whites. My response is that I have two reservations at this point. The first is the

extremely limited choice of bottles with a screw cap finish - the bottles currently available are very basic, lacking elegance. The second consideration is consumer acceptance (e.g. the comments by my grower's wife). Screwcaps are already being used on the majority of Australian wines, even $100 single vineyard Shiraz. All fine wine producing areas are looking into them and doing trials. Chateau Margaux has been bottling small amounts of their Grand Vin in screwtops for several years, and will monitor how the wine ages and develops long term. They aren't likely to make any rash decisions, but there is obviously a possibility they will change at some point in the future. I think screwcaps will continue to gain consumer acceptance in this country, and once people get over the "screwcaps = cheap wine" mentality we'll see a rapid growth in their use.

Q In regards to "smoke taint" is this ever a character you would want in your wine? Maybe not have all your grapes cleared of the taint and have a bottling like that? Do you know of any other wines that may have this smoke taint that you recommend we try? It seems like it might make for something interesting unless it really over powers the grape.

A Smoke taint: acrid, nasty, "old ashtray" at best. You can get "good" smoky aromas out of charred barrels, but not from wildfires.

Q One thing that occurred to me on tour, and this column reinforces is you get 5 years use out of a $1,100 barrel and then essentially it becomes worthless. Why do winemakers use barrels at all? Why not continue the aging in a stainless tank and just add pieces of oak to the wine, if you are trying to get the oak aromas/taste? It would also seem to save on the evaporative losses. Of course stainless is not cheap either - it just tends to last forever.

RPM Actually, there are people who *do* something like that, using barrel staves or even oak chips. It's faster, but (subject to what SB says) generally regarded as a bit dishonest and not conducive to proper aging of really fine wine. Any oak you taste in jug wines is likely to come from the use of chips. BTW, this technology has been around a very long time: I saw an ad for oak chips in a 1934 *Wines and Vines*....

I'm guessing that as the price of barrels goes up, the prevalence of (shall we say) alternative sources of oak will become more common and more accepted a bit further up the wine food chain.

SB I did go into oak alternatives at some length in a previous blog (A Paradigm Shift, 4/17/08). You can simulate, but not replicate, barrel aging.

Q Peter, forgive me if you've addressed this in another blog entry, but have you ever relied solely on wild yeasts? Is that resurgent with any winemakers?

edit: it only occurred to me as you mentioned ordering yeast at the end of your post. are the yeasts for wines ales or lagers (top or bottom fermenting?)? Is there a favored strain? Does UC Davis put out new strains the way Rutgers is bringing back a tomato? I'd probably know the answer if I read the temperature during fermentation.

A We "intentionally inoculate" most of our fermentations, but not all. We currently use about a dozen different strains - certain starins work better for us with different varieties and vineyards. Most commercial yeast strains are isolated from European wineries / vineyards, but UCD has released a couple.

Q SB - Did I miss a public announcement (I'm thinking I saw it in the RPM thread) - you're not going to be writing many more blogs for the W.W readers (contract expiring) ?

This would be a heavy loss to this community - imho.

A I stated something to that effect in the last paragraph of this blog (The Circle...). You need to slow down with the speed-reading 

I did catch even WineDavid a bit by surprise, but not to worry, I won't disappear. I just won't be doing a regular schedule. I've encouraged WD to approach other winemakers about writing blogs - I think it would broaden the interest because other winemakers will get into other subject matter.

BTW: no contract, I just do this for "fun".

This Could be the Last Time

Crush Waits For No One / On With The Show - Wed. Aug. 27, 2008

Back in May I predicted our crush wouldn't start until a week after Labor Day, but it started today. We still have a final bottling date Friday, and it's not easy to be preparing for that at the same time we're starting crush, but what else can a poor boy do? My obsession with pop culture references has complicated the writing of this. Before I'm out of time, I figured I'd see how many Stones references I could cram into one blog. Can you make the connections?

Hot Stuff - Sat. Sept. 6, 2008

After a very cool, dry spring we had a moderate, sunny, albeit smoky, summer until mid-August. The last four weeks have been scorchers, with most days approaching or surpassing 100°F. After an ideal temperature regime during last year's harvest (consistent low to mid 80's), I realize you can't always get what you want. At least the air is reasonably smoke free now. I have been saying it probably wouldn't clear up completely until the autumn rains begin. Our vacation in Yosemite high country (during the time of the fire that filled Yosemite Valley with smoke) was the only time we saw totally clear skies during a two month period. Sonoma Valley filled with smoke again just three weeks ago today, when the wind shifted and came in from the northeast.

Sticky Fingers / Stop Breaking Down - Mon. Sept. 8, 2008

We've been bringing in white grapes as fast as we can; unfortunately that's only 5-6 tons a day because the press holds 1.6 to 2 tons of whole cluster fruit and a press cycle is 3 hours. Today the first Sauvignon blanc load didn't arrive until almost 10 AM, so we were here until after 6 PM for just 4 tons (2 loads). Making whites is a royal pain – sticky, sticky grapes and pomace in the air and everywhere. The sugar becomes like glue as it dries, making the press and everything else hard to clean. Our grape sorting conveyor keeps stopping and starting. I checked all the wiring connections and everything seems okay, so I fear it's a problem with the variable frequency controller (freak drives are expensive). The yields have been a bit light so far. A hot spell in late May shattered a lot of the bloom and after we dump grapes you can see all the dead flowers coating the inside of the bins.

How Sweet It Is - Tues. Sept. 9, 2008

Thanks to the w00t regular who expressed the opinion that a higher alcohol level meant a drier wine. I was pleased to meet you, but I'll let them guess your name. You've inspired a little more wine 101. During fermentation, sugar is converted to ethanol (alcohol) and carbon dioxide (CO2) in a ratio of 51:49. Grapes / juice at 25% sugar, when fermented to dryness, will yield a wine of a maximum of about 12.8% alcohol by weight / 15.6% alcohol by volume (alcohol is lighter than water). Actual alcohol levels are somewhat lower because some sugar is converted to yeast biomass and some alcohol is lost via evaporation. Both sugar and alcohol have inhibitory effects on yeast metabolism, and the effects are additive. Dellè units are calculated as % sugar + (4.5 x % alcohol by vol.), with a sum of 80 generally considered stable against refermentation. This phenomenon explains why the very sweet late harvest wines such as trockenbeerenauslese have very low alcohol levels. Factors other than alcohol and sugar levels, including temperature and poor yeast nutrient status, can further limit fermentation. It gets progressively more difficult to ferment to dryness at higher sugar levels, and many wines above 15-16% alcohol have some residual grape sugar (RS).

The impression of sweetness in wine is affected by other factors in addition to RS. Alcohol lends sweetness, as do sugars and other compounds extracted from oak barrels. Fruity flavors accentuate sweetness and acidity counterbalances it. As cited by Scott Harvey, many German winemakers engineer balance into their high-acid, low alcohol wines with RS. Sugar, alcohol and oak add viscosity and body as well as sweetness. In this era of bigger is better many of the wines getting high scores from Parker and the Wine Spectator not only have lots of extract and lots of oak, but also high alcohol levels, low acid levels, and often significant RS.

I promised a short discussion of acidity and pH, so here's the low down: both affect perception of tartness, but pH is more important for several reasons. Total acidity measures the amount of acid present, but not it's strength; pH measures the strength of the acid – specifically the activity of hydrogen ions. This quality affects color, aromas and flavors, resistance to microbial growth and the effectiveness of SO2 (sulfites). The lower the pH, the stronger the activity of the acid. Most wines range in pH from 3 to 4 (3 is ten times as strong as 4). For reference, tart whites like Sauvignon blanc might have a pH of 3.2-3.3 and soft reds might have a pH of 3.8 or higher). Relatively low pH, low acid wines make winemakers happy, high pH, high acid wines are trouble. Winemakers can add tartaric acid (the main acid of grapes), which will lower pH, but also raise TA. If you're starting with a high pH, high TA wine, you have limited ability to lower pH to desirable levels without making the wine excessively tart.

It's All Over Now - Wed. Oct 10, 2008

I'm moving on with mixed emotions. I'll miss you, but like a prodigal son I'll see you all down the line and not fade away. I have no expectations that anyone'll get the right answer to the last trivia question, but use your imagination and let it loose. Till the next goodbye, SB.

Woops< that last paragraph was supposed to be dated Sept. 10 - I'm not into Tralfamadorian travel yet. Here's an addendum:

Random Ramblings of a Weary Winemaker, I Am Waiting

I didn't make my deadline for posting last week, so I thought I'd add a little to the blog in the aftermath of an out of control week (and use the opportunity to drop another 15 or 20 Stones references).

Paint It White Sat. Sept. 13, 2008

In a happy turn of events, it's been very cool all week. We harvested and pressed more white grapes than we ever have in a single week, with high sugars, but not over-ripe. Unfortunately, this put us between a rock and a hard place: add lots of water and dilute the flavors or make very high alcohol Chardonnay and Sauvignon blanc. I chose the former, rationalizing that I was just putting back water that normally would have been inside the grapes at harvest, and that I was only "diluting" them back to "normal". It's still seems a bit like dirty work, a little less respectable. Speaking of sweetness, while I was writing about sugar and alcohol I forgot to mention one of the common questions we get in the tasting room, "Does the _____ grape make a sweet wine?" The answer, of course, is that winemaking practices determine whether a wine is sweet or dry, e.g. Riesling and Gewürztraminer don't "make" sweet wines, winemakers just usually make them in a sweet style.

Get Off My Cloud Tue. Sept. 16, 2008

After a grumble and/or bemoan fate of a week last week, the continued much cooler than seasonal weather has allowed us the luxury of catching up on some "pre-crush" work that we hadn't gotten around to yet. It's been foggy until midday every day, and we even had low cumulus clouds and a few large raindrops after the fog lifted today. Daytime highs have been in the 70's for the most part, slowing ripening to a crawl. So after almost being out of our heads, now we've got it made in the shade. After doing about 25% of our projected annual tonnage last week we'll do about 1%

this week and less than 10% next week. A lot of our vineyards are at the same stage: enough sugar, but too much acid and not enough flavor/color/tannin maturity. I've told over half our growers that their grapes are one to two weeks of warm weather away from harvest. Sometimes I don't know why I go wild. How can I stop?

Discussion

Q Re: acid. That paragraph goes a long ways in starting to clear up what is for me one of the mysteries a bottle. I don't know what the sensations & perceptions are that separate high/low acid from high/low tannin or high/low RS, but at least that starts giving me information to feed into the palate computer.

When you're talking about TA vs. pH, am I correctly paraphrasing that the final pH of the wine is relative to the strenght of the acid component? A weak acid would require higher concentration (therefore more TA by volume) to get the wine to the same pH as compared to a strong acid? Therefore, the desired low TA, low pH condition gives a wine where the acid component by volume is low, allowing other wine elements to be more concentrated while maintaining low pH.

Am I on the right track or am I moonlight mile away from where I should be?

A You're right between the buttons except maybe the part about concentration of other elements. Reasonably low pH is desirable for wine stability and longevity, and in a low pH + low TA situation you can get that without excessive tartness. In a high pH + low TA situation you can usually add acid to lower pH without creating excessive tartness. In a high pH + high TA situation you're kind of up the creek without a paddle - there's not a lot you can do. The prevalent acid in wine is tartaric acid, with the other main, somewhat weaker, acids being malic and lactic. The ratio of these acids has some effect on pH, but buffering factors such as potassium level come into play as well. One high tech way to lower pH without adding acid is to run a small fraction of the wine through an ion exchange column, replacing potassium and other cations with hydrogen. This also is a pretty harsh process which can remove a lot of desirable components; I don't know of many people using this for high-end wines.

Q You defined a typical range for pH. Can the same range be applied to TA? When looking at a stat sheet, how does one know if TA is high or low?

A Typical range for "medium acid balance" is maybe .55 to .70 g/100ml. .8 or higher will probably taste pretty tart even if the pH is high. The legal minimum for California wine is .3g/100ml. I usually pay little or no attention to TA, either at the winery or when looking at stat sheets. If I'm going to get any inclination as to wine style from stat sheets I'm looking at alc.%, pH, type and amount of new oak, vineyard source (incl. appellation), and fermentation information.
BTW, TA is expressed as the equivalent amount of tartaric acid (different acids have diff. molecular weights). In Europe TA is expressed as g/l equivalents of sulfuric acid. There isn't any sulfuric acid in wine, it's just a common, stable standard for comparison. Since the MW of sulfuric acid is about two-thirds that of tartaric acid, what we express as a TA of .6 g/100ml (or 6g/l) would be equivalent to a TA of 4 g/l to a European.

A Tale of Two Harvests

Hard Times - Tuesday, Nov. 11, 2008

I can usually predict harvest dates quite accurately by early June, when grape flowering is complete. This year I projected that we might bring in our first grapes the week after Labor Day, but that we certainly wouldn't be in the thick of it until the following week. I planned a market visit to Ohio for Sept.2-8, figuring if one small batch came in during my absence it wouldn't be any big deal. I do travel under my own name, unlike my great-grandfather, a merchant during Victorian times who made a habit of registering in hotels as Martin Chuzzlewit because he didn't care for the sly looks he often got when he used his real name, John Smith. I had made my plans well before Lynda (assistant winemaker for the last 7 years) left for a dream job at Hanzell, and before the prolonged heat wave in late August. There was no way I could leave Sam and Dave (the Soul Men) what with it being the first crush at Wellington for both of them, so I postponed my trip until the end of October. My prior blog, This Could Be The Last Time, covered the "first harvest" when we brought in over 80% of our whites plus Malbec, some Zin and some Cab.

Please Sir, I Want Some More

Unseasonably cool weather the last two full weeks of September meant we crushed only 5% of our annual total during that normally busy time frame. Almost everything that was "supposed" to be ready at that time had already been harvested. This allowed us to catch up on "pre-crush" maintenance and preparation, keep on top of white fermentations very well, and recover both physically and mentally from the early September onslaught. It got to the point where I was thankful that one other prospective crush worker had backed out in late August, because there wasn't enough work. I had lots of time to check vineyards thoroughly and sample repeatedly, partly in hopes of finding something that was ready to harvest. The greatest benefit of the long cool spell was that the unharvested grapes had a chance to recover from the heat stress, re-equilibrate and mature slowly and evenly – probably the most important vintage related factor in high quality wine. We brought in our last grapes precisely three weeks ago and just pressed that tank this morning (Mohrhardt Ridge Cabernet sauvignon, only 6½ tons, after 16+ last year)

It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times

I'm very happy with the quality of everything that came in during the "second harvest", though Zinfandel gets an asterisk (see below). Quantity,

however, was way down – by 42% from 2007 if I don't include grapes from two new (to us) vineyards, by 32% even when those are added. Frost, drought and a heat spike during bloom all took their toll on what already would have been a smaller than average crop; fortunately none of mother nature's little “gifts” had a negative effect on quality. I've always been a Pollyanna, and my optimistic spin is that my bottling costs will be down this year and next and I'll be lowering my inventory going into uncertain economic times. Speaking of that, we set an all time sales record in October. Various explanations come to mind: that people are in denial, that they want to drown their sorrows, that they're drinking more wine at home instead of going to restaurants, etc. My favorite idea is that people want to trade down in price, but not in quality, and recognize the high qpr of our wines.

Great Expectations - Wednesday, Nov. 12, 2008

During my recent trip to Ohio several wine buyers asked me about the quality of the 2008 vintage. It's a common question, and I always preface my answer with an explanation of why you can't generalize about vintages in Northern California. This year's wines will definitely be a mixed bag, with some incredible wines, but also some so-so wines. It takes a while to assess wine quality; you get an idea of flavor and aromatic intensity during crush, but you really have to wait until the wines have gone through ML and settled clear to make a good assessment of balance, mouthfeel and concentration. In general, I'm concerned that the wines from the “first harvest” may be lacking in depth and concentration. I think most of our Cabs and other Bordeaux varieties will be outstanding. Zinfandel was our biggest challenge this year.

*** Naughty, Naughty Zinfandel**

The late Summer blast of heat caused shriveling, dehydration, and elevated sugar levels in all varieties.. This essentially affects all clusters and is more pronounced on the parts of the cluster exposed to direct afternoon sun. It is somewhat reversible in that the grapes tend to rehydrate and swell back up if they have adequate water and cool weather. Zinfandel, however, has a unique problem: random individual berry shrivel. It seems that the stems of individual berries shut down, restricting water movement into the berries. The result is a cluster spotted with raisins before the rest of the cluster is ripe. We have to harvest when the “normal” berries are ripe or we'll end up with unripe flavors and too much acid. This is why Zinfandel wines tend to have more alcohol than any other varietal. The amount of this raisining varies year to year, and 2008 was about as severe as I have ever seen. We had one tank that was

21.6°Brix at crush and went to 26.5°B after four days' cold soak. We drew off some juice for Rosé and replaced it with water, but the fermentation slowed at over 14% alcohol with 5% residual sugar, so we had to add more water to get it to go dry. By back-calculation, the grapes at crush had been approximately 32°B. A subsequent tank from the same vineyard had even more raisining, so I caved and we made our first late harvest Zin ever. Even with extended cold soaks and adjustments based on the assumption that sugars would still go higher, the average alcohol level of our Zins is over 15.5%. I guess we'll be looking into some alcohol removal again.

Only a couple of w00ters got into the spirit of the Stones last time. Maybe I'm too lowbrow for this crowd, so I thought I'd try a different twist this time. Cheers.

Discussion

Q So, just to be a nuisance, how would you rate some of your other varietals this year?

A Crush is always pretty intense, but this seemed like the easiest one in quite some time - at least as far as physical work.

We've got a lot of wines that haven't finished ml yet, and a couple that haven't even finished primary fermentation (are still slightly sweet), so we haven't done much serious tasting yet. Of the whites, both the Roussanne and Sauvignon blanc are nice. The Roussanne from Saralee's Vineyard (Russian River) was the nicest fruit we've ever gotten from that vineyard; the very dry spring helped their soil dry out early, leading to uniformly small berries without a hint of rot (usually a problem there). The Sauvignon blanc is a bit of a pleasant surprise, considering it came in at an average of 26.3 Brix. We will be doing some alcohol removal next week on some of the SB as well as one lot of Chardonnay that's stuck at about 1% RS and 14.5% alcohol.

For reds, most of my assessment is still based on harvest. For better or worse, it will be a much more Parkeresque year than 2007 - big, ripe wines with lower acid levels and more alcohol. Somewhere down the road we'll probably need to "de-alc" some of our Syrah and Cab as well as Zin in order to avoid excessive heat in the finished wines. Over all I'm happy with flavors. The Handal-Denier Cab is once again a standout, and will no doubt be the starting point, as usual, for our Meritage blend (Victory). Thinking back to informal tastings of samples pulled for analysis over the last few weeks, the EnglandCrest Syrah also is a standout.

I'll give further updates in the future.

Q I'm only going to be able to pull a tiny fraction of the corks that are out there. The "normal" way to deal with this issue nowadays is to just buy wines that have received a high score, typically from you-know-who.

A Wow, when I go into a store to buy wine while visiting relatives it's overwhelming. There are lots of varietals, regions, different vintages and a plethora of brands. Unless you're in the trade, you can't try everything. Critics can be somewhat useful if they describe wines; you can try something and "compare notes" to find out how they describe wines you like. If they only focus on point scores (e.g. WS) they're pretty worthless. A good wine shop person can be better. RPM has it right when he says "Pull lots of corks! Remember what you taste!. Early in my quest I tasted every chance I got: winery tasting rooms, wine shops, tasting groups, wine btg in restaurants, wine tasting events. I never took notes in tasting rooms or restaurants (some people do), but I always did so in tasting groups, wine shop tasting bars and events. I know you have wine shops in your neck of the woods that have tasting areas and regular formal tastings. The good thing about organized or formal tastings is that you can learn from other tasters - if someone says "Wine C has blah blah blah", you can smell/taste that wine and see if what they said is something relevant for you. Sometimes you'll think WTF are they talking about? but sometimes you'll go ahah! Get a tasting group of 12 people and you can compare 6 wines for half the price of one bottle.
Kermit Lynch says "Just say no to vintage mentality", and he's talking about French wines. Vintage is much less relevant in Sonoma and Napa than it is almost anywhere in France. My rank of importance would be producer>region>vintage.

Q So for those of us not living in 'wine country' are there books or websites out there that you feel are adequate starting points?

A Starting points? It depends on your goal. Wine is something that should make meals (and, therefore, life) more enjoyable, and I'm not just talking about the alcohol effect. You don't need to be knowledgable about vineyards or winemaking to enjoy wine, and you don't need to have a great descriptive wine vocabulary. I remember going with a friend to taste '78 first growth Bordeaux at a wine shop when they were first released. She told me there wasn't any point in her tasting because she didn't know anything about wine. I had her smell and taste a couple anyway, and her

response was Wow! The most important thing to know about wine is whether you enjoy the aroma and taste of a given wine. It is valuable to learn what you like, and remember or write down what you like (and why). If you live in a state where they don't have or allow wine tasting, all the more reason to start your own tasting group with friends. You can start off with more general tastings - maybe several different varietals from large producers to get a basic idea of how different varietals compare. Then maybe you could compare wines from different regions. As you get more experience your tastings will tend to become more esoteric and more expensive. Also, keep in mind that your tastes are likely to change with time.

There are a lot of good books out there if you want to learn about grapes and wine. Wine for Dummies and The Wine Bible by Karen MacNeil (sp?) are good references.

Q What I do each time I drink wine at home, is use my DRY CREEK supplied journal to record my tasting notes, even on the "cheap" stuff. It's blank, no guidelines, so I created my own. I practice to some extent every time I drink wine.

A Unless you are in the wine business it's more important that you use terminology that is meaningful to you. I developed a shorthand for common aromas, texture, acidity, sweetness, tannin and common flaws pretty early on so as not to waste time writing rather than focusing on what I was tasting. Nobody else can read my notes, but so what? Though my preferences have evolved, I can still look back at old notes and tell what a given wine was like.

Q What do you know about de-stemmers which have been modified to eject zinfandel raisins? A winery which I enjoy mentions on their web site that they have done this, and I would love to know your opinion on this modification.

A A lot of the raisins do end up with the stems at our winery, but when there are as many as we saw with the Zin this year a lot get through. Some wineries sort fruit post destemming, either manually or with a vibrating belt (the healthy berries roll off, everything that doesn't roll is garbage. That last reminds me of an incident during the early nineties. I looked up the word for stems in my English-Spanish (not Mexican) dictionary, and when I used it Jose's brother Juan gave me this Ever just think about breadsticks?? look. I asked him what the right (Mexican) word was for stems and he replied "basura" - garbage.

Q Oggling my goat?:
http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20026873.500-how-to-make-cheap-wine-taste-like-a-fine-vintage.html?full=true

A The Chinese also announced a similar process using radio waves some years ago. My opinion is that it probably provides some facsimile of "real" aging with cheap wines - kind of like adding vinegar or other adulterants to young wine, as was legalized at Repeal in order to imitate aged wines.
This electric current sounds a bit like a poor man's micro-ox in some ways.

RPM Back in the old days, they did all sorts of things to 'fix' wine - I remember a story about one of my great uncles saving something like 100,000 gallons of somebody's wine with ox blood - don't remember exactly what the problem was, or how it solved it (though I once knew, I think it was some sort of clarifying agent), but it was told as an 'old world wisdom' vs. smarty-pants American winemaker story.

C I recall reading something about that in your uncle's interview, which I read the majority of prior to the tour (who needs fiction when you can read a tale like that?). ah, yes, p. 22 of the pdf file. technology can be a wonderful thing.

SB Proteins are used to remove unwanted phenolic compounds (including tannins) from wine (fining). These fining agents include albumen (egg white), casein (milk), isinglass (fish), PVPP (synthetic) and gelatin (my little pony?). Blood was another traditional fining agent in old Europe, but is no longer permitted. Fining is a corrective measure that can largely be avoided by good, timely winemaking decisions.