

Vine Talk Summer 2011

To bloom or not to bloom, that is the question. The late cold season has delayed the natural cycle of most vines in the area. It could be a good thing though. The first weekend in June brought record rainfall, more than 3" in the mountains before dawn on Saturday. It is almost unprecedented. There is a silver lining however, and perhaps a method to the celestial madness.

The delayed bloom means that many vineyards are barely in flower and the rain will not suppress pollination unless the flowers are out. Instead the natural water (a politically "green" term) could feed the vines and puff up the buds. If a hot dry spell follows this wet crazy weekend we could be in for a fabulous bloom and record set. If not, we could be looking at a season similar to what the French refer to as "couloure", loosely translated to mean nasty wet spring contributing to a pathetic set.

Even a bad set isn't all negative. A cold spring and late summer usually means overall reduced heat units for the season. Late ripening varieties like Syrah, even Chardonnays in some areas, might benefit from significant crop thinning either through poor set or manually post set if Mother Nature doesn't do it for you. Review last year's harvest date and the harvest numbers recorded for brix, TA and pH. This season looks very similar to last and you may want to adjust your yields accordingly. Last season turned out remarkably well for many Pinot Noirs. Later ripening varieties squeaked through. Fortunately the commercial trend is toward lower alcohol wines, which will be perfect for a season like this. Studies show that the maturation process of the individual berry cluster benefit most from fruit thinning at set or post set. Fruit thinning at veraison creates uniformity at harvest but has less effect on the overall development of the berry. A poor set could allow the vine to better ripen what it has in a cold year.

Be prepared for a flush of late weed growth. The rains are sure to awaken a mass of seeds that may have been dormant for a decade. Canopy management will have to be a huge priority. The extra water will send shoots skyrocketing up. Don't hesitate to hedge if growth gets out of hand. Non-irrigated old vines will appreciate the long deep drink before summer and will probably show remarkable growth and recovery this season. If you took advantage of the late rain to throw down some compost or extra mineral supplement your vines and especially the roots will benefit tremendously.

Be vigilant when you finally see bloom in the vineyard. This is the most delicate phase of the vineyard's journey. Apply sprays in tight intervals during this phase to protect the vines from powdery mildew and botrytis. If you haven't been shoot thinning get out there and do it. The fruit on the vines hate crowded wet conditions and infectious fungal diseases love them. Keep light and air a top priority in the canopy. All the sprays in the world will do nothing if the canopy is too dense.

Bloom is also the time to take petiole samples. Get out in your vineyard and sample the weak blocks separately from the more uniform areas. Petiole samples provide an excellent real time snapshot of what your vines may need or not need from a nutritional standpoint. Micronutrient levels, especially zinc and boron, directly contribute to well formed clusters and whole fruit. Cliff Perry from Perry Labs will expand on this important subject during our next meeting.

Early on there was frost damage in some vineyards. I have heard of rust, and odd looking growth. Most of that can be attributed to the cold conditions. If you lost your fruit to frost in spring, take care of the vines, grow the roots, and plan a nice vacation. You may not get much harvest but at least your worries are over for the year.

I hope we all get a chance to enjoy a summer when the sun finally comes out and hopefully decides to stay awhile.

The Santa Cruz Mountains grow some of the finest wine in the world. We can do that in a year like this as in any other. It will just take more attention.

Buena suerte!

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