

Vine Talk. November, 2010.

November 18, 2010. Today I visited what is I hope is the last harvest I will see in the Santa Cruz Mountains in this first decade of the millennium. The one common thread this year is that it is different than all the rest. We started with a somewhat wet winter that lasted into the spring. Things dried up just in time for a decent fruit set before cooling down to record setting low temperatures and a long summer that never quite got hot. By late August it was hard not think of the impending holidays and harvest as one.

Suddenly the very end of August brought us record highs with thermometers topping 100 degrees F. Skins on some grapes just softening to ripeness were burned beyond recognition. Chardonnay seemed especially susceptible, reminding me of the skin of some Caucasian innocent from deep in the Midwest visiting Hawaii for the first time in February and foregoing the sun screen. Temperatures plummeted as fast as they had risen. September brought balanced weather promising just enough heat to ripen the fruit to perfection.

Just as we were beginning to think that temperatures had evened out the end of September blasted through with some of the hottest days on record in the lower areas. Thermometers topped 100 degrees F. for three days in a row in some spots. Brix spiked to scary levels. Patience, and perhaps chocolate to relieve stress, became our biggest ally. By simply waiting, and in some cases applying a copious amount of forbidden late season irrigation, growers were able to bring down the brix. In many cases fruit that ultimately ripened a week or more after this heat spike was nearly perfectly balanced.

Many growers ended up picking Pinot Noirs, and especially Chardonnays, Syrahs and Cabernets at lower brix than we have become accustomed to and more like our European counterparts. Perhaps this is the year that will remind us that wines with low alcohol and subtle flavors may be exactly what we have been seeking in our quest for greatness.

Now that we are through this crazy season (I hope) it is time to concentrate at last on putting the vineyard to bed. Post harvest is an important time to provide food for root storage in the vine. It is this source that feeds the spring bloom. It is also an excellent time to examine the whole ecosystem of the vineyard and to create and enhance biodiversity on the site.

Hedgerows of Ceanothus and other multifloral natives will grow to provide habitat for beneficial insects. Cover crops will both protect soil from eroding and produce nitrogen for next seasons wine. They also build up organic mass in the soil and provide habitat for the microscopic organisms that make the soil nutrients plant available. Wine grapes require remarkably small amounts of nitrogen compared to many field crops but they still need a little. Take a soil sample if you haven't in a decade or so and compare it to your petiole samples to see if there is long term depletion of a variety of nutrients in the soil that may affect crop loads next year.

There is a huge variety of cover crop mixes available to plant, some very complex and some simple. The bottom line is to encourage diversity, hold your soil to prevent erosion, and add a nitrogen source if possible with legumes. Bell beans, fava beans, vetch, and peas are all good nitrogen fixers that also produce large amounts of organic matter to improve soil tilth. Clovers are good choices aesthetically and also fix nitrogen in the soil. Though clovers are said to increase gopher activity it is my experience that the pressure from these rodents is not significantly greater in clover based covers than any others.

The bottom line is if possible plant some sort of cover crop in your vineyard rows to improve tilth, control erosion, enhance biodiversity in the vineyard, and encourage a sustainable system that will require fewer external inputs.

These practices can all be called “sustainable” and may even be useful in marketing the fruit and wine. Consumers are increasingly impressed by producer efforts to “go green”. (Except in the wine flavor of course.....).

Other late season tasks include trapping the last gophers that have appeared in the final warm fall weather, controlling weeds under the vine rows, testing soil and evaluating vigorous and weak areas in the vineyard for next years planning.

Check in with your winemakers to follow up on the 2010 fruit. How is the wine coming along? Were there stuck fermentations? Are flavors showing well? 2010 may have been a lower brix year for some varieties and out of the park for others. Talk to your winemakers about how they have handled the fruit and review what you might do next year to improve what nature bestows.

Most of all may you and your family enjoy a season of happy holidays and peace on Earth.

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