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The Grapevine

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER FOR VINESSE WINE CLUB MEMBERS



MARTIN'S JOURNAL

When it comes to picking wine grapes, patience definitely is a virtue.

As I sit down to write this column, there's only one week remaining in October, and California's North Coast harvest is still in progress. Depending on the variety, the harvest is anywhere from a couple of weeks to a full month behind schedule.

That said, "normal" in grape picking is similar to "normal" in weather forecasting. Just as the air temperature may dip 20 degrees below or soar 20 degrees above "normal" on any given day, the harvest season in California can begin as early as August and extend well into November.

More important than a harvest being "on time" is the quality of the grapes being brought in. That's why we've included a detailed harvest report in this issue (see page 3).

All in all, California's North Coast grape harvest appears to have been well worth waiting for.

Martin Stewart Jr.

Winter in the Vineyard: The Underrated Season

By Robert Johnson

A*h, winter. The most misleading of all the seasons in the vineyard.*

With spring comes bud break, the first real sign of life during a grapevine's growing season.

With summer comes berry growth, when the fruit of the vine assumes the recognizable embodiment of grapes. They may be purple or red or golden or green or virtually luminous, but there is no question that they are grapes.

With fall comes maturation, as the grapes develop the sugars associated with ripeness. Mother Nature determines the pace of the ripening — 2006, as an example, saw a relatively late harvest in northern growing regions — and there is little that growers or vintners can do except wait.

And what of winter? This is the season when the grapevines are basically dormant, resting before the next growing cycle commences. The vineyards will be rained upon and occasionally snowed upon, but no matter; the vines will not be producing for some time.

Yet winter is a critical time in the vineyard as the seemingly benign activity of pruning will have a tremendous impact on the vine's future growth.

Pruning involves cutting away the dormant growth of the just-completed cycle, and also knowing what to

leave untouched. The variety of grape being grown and the goal of the winemaker — in essence, quality versus quantity — will determine the number of buds left for the next growing season.

In that sense, the person doing the pruning is

not unlike a sculptor, and his solitary work is extremely important in the ultimate quality of the wine to be made nine or ten months hence.



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OUR MISSION:

To uncover and bring you wine gems from around the world, which you're not likely to discover on your own, and which enhance your wine enjoyment.

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The Art of Winemaking

There is plenty of science involved in making a quality bottle of wine.

However, creating a wine that's not only good, but also *memorable*, is an artistic endeavor. A vintner's artistic talents and tendencies determine the *style* of the wine and, ultimately, how it will be perceived by the people who are lucky enough to drink it.

We taste hundreds of bottles of wine each month at Vinesse, and only a very small percentage rise to the level of a work of art. There's plenty of perfectly good wine in the marketplace — wine that will taste just fine with Grandma's chicken casserole or Aunt Martha's "secret meatloaf." But when it comes to selecting wines to share with our club members, we won't settle for a first grader's finger-painting; we're on the lookout for Picassos.

I've met a lot of winemakers through the years, and I've come to believe that the quality of a wine and its personality in the glass are directly related to the vintner's passion for his craft.

There is no passion involved in making "Two-Buck Chuck" or any other

mass-produced wine. Such bottlings are the result of a manufacturing process that rewards quantity over quality in the pursuit of a specific profit percentage.

Truly great wines, on the other hand, come from exceptional grapes that are entrusted to a vintner whose craft trumps commerce and whose artistic tendencies lean toward uniqueness as opposed to sameness.

A good painter can depict a given landscape with accuracy and clarity. A *great* painter can bring that landscape to life, in effect rendering each section and each layer a painting unto itself. Likewise, a gifted vintner can meld various varieties of wine into an artful blend, or create layer upon layer of aromas and flavors by fermenting at varying speeds and temperatures, or selecting fruit from specific sections of a given vineyard.

Just as a painter has a number of tools at his

disposal — some critical, others merely utilitarian — a vintner makes numerous scientific and artistic decisions when crafting any given wine.

For a wine to stand out in a crowd... for a wine to rise above others of the same variety... for a wine to possess that difficult-to-define "wow" factor... an artist's touch is an absolute necessity.





A Grower's Challenge, a Winemaker's Dream

Members of the Napa Valley Vintners were in San Francisco on October 19 to revive a rich and long history between the city and Napa Valley — the tradition of celebrating the annual wine grape harvest. Mayor Gavin Newsom even proclaimed the day, “Napa Valley Day.”

After a year that kept grape growers on their toes, vintners and winemakers were beginning to breathe a sigh of relief as the 2006 harvest neared completion. “This was a grower’s year,” said Hugh Davies, winemaker for Schramsberg Vineyards, “and thanks to excellent agricultural practices, the quality of varieties across the board appears spectacular.”

Flooding kicked off the new year in Napa Valley, which made for great TV footage, but did little damage to dormant vines, as cover crops stabilized soils in vineyards while rain continued into spring. Bud break was delayed by a few weeks, but by June, the weather had turned and vines began to bloom and set fruit.

In mid-July, a record-setting heat wave lasted about 10 days, but with the crop a few weeks behind the historically normal cycle, damage was almost nil. In fact, most growers agree that the heat helped the vines



catch up to a “normal” place in the typical growing season. Clusters that received sun burns were removed during the normal post-veraison cluster thinning.

Some growers feared that if the heat of July continued, all varieties would need to be harvested in a tight time-frame, but seasonal and somewhat cooler weather returned in August. According to Jon Priest, winemaker for Etude, whose Pinot Noir harvest began in early September, “The mild weather pattern continued throughout our three-week harvest, allowing for moderately paced and deliberate ripening. The resulting wines have wonderful perfume and very good density. We are encouraged by this year’s harvest and are pleased with

another successful vintage.”

Cool weather dominated early October, with some rain coming in the first week, but most white varieties — those more likely to be affected by rain than red varieties — were already harvested. Sauvignon Blanc at Frog’s Leap in Rutherford was all in by September 10, and owner John Williams said, “We had very nice ripening weather.” According to Sauvignon Blanc grower Volker Eisele of Volker Eisele Family Vineyard, “In the Pope Valley District, the white wine harvest was excellent — good quality and quantity.”

No Sugar-Coating of the Chardonnay Report

For Chardonnay, many Napa Valley growers were happy to have a bit of botrytis in the crop as an added flavor layer, thanks to the rains.

Winemaker Pierre Birebent of Signorello Vineyards noted that brix for 2006 Chardonnay and



Pinot Noir are the same as 2005, but the acidity levels are higher. This should result in very well-balanced wines.



HERB-RUB PORK CHOPS

Try this tasty recipe, which makes 4 servings, with Zinfandel or Sangiovese. Add your favorite pasta for a side dish.

Ingredients

- 4 bone-in pork chops,
1 1/4-inch thick

For the Brine

- 3 cups water
- 1/4 cup lime juice
- 1/4 cup kosher salt
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 1 Tbsp. molasses

For the Herb Rub

- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 Tbsp. fennel seeds, crushed
- 1 Tbsp. fresh sage, finely chopped
- 1 Tbsp. fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1 Tbsp. fresh basil, finely chopped
- 1 Tbsp. fresh rosemary, finely chopped
- 2 tsp. kosher salt
- 2 tsp. fresh ground pepper

Preparation

1. Pour water into a 2-quart mixing bowl. Add lime juice, salt, brown sugar and molasses. Stir until dissolved. Place pork chops in a gallon Zip-Lock plastic bag. Add brine, and refrigerate for 4 hours. Transfer chops to paper towels.
2. Combine herbs in a food processor. Pulse a few times to thoroughly blend ingredients. Coat each chop lightly on both sides with herb rub.
3. Bring gas grill up to high heat, or set charcoal grill with a "hot spot" and the rest medium-low.
4. When grill is ready, sear chops for about 90 seconds on each side. Turn gas grill down to low, or move chops to the cooler area of the charcoal grill. Cover and continue cooking for six minutes. Turn chops over. Cover and continue cooking until the internal temperature reaches

145 to 150 degrees (approximately 6 minutes).

5. Remove chops to a warm platter and allow them to rest for about 5 more minutes before serving.

POACHED PEAR SALAD

This recipe yields 2 servings, and matches beautifully with Chardonnay. We suggest using the same Chardonnay you intend to drink in preparing the salad.

Ingredients

- 2 Bartlett pears, peeled
- 4-oz. Chardonnay
- 4-oz. water
- 1/2-oz. black peppercorn
- 3-oz. mixed baby greens
- 2-oz. diced tomatoes
- 2-oz. diced Cucumber
- 1-oz. dry blue cheese, crumbled
- 4-oz. shredded Parmesan cheese
- 3-oz. extra virgin olive oil

Preparation

1. Combine water, Chardonnay, peppercorns and pears in a sauce pan.
2. Bring mixture to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes. Set aside to cool, saving liquid for later.
3. Heat a non-stick pan and add Parmesan cheese. Brown both sides. Remove the cheese, and immediately place over a small mixing bowl to form into a bowl shape.
4. After the cheese cools, place on a dinner plate and use as a bowl in which to place lettuce mix, tomatoes, cucumbers and blue cheese.
5. Take one pear, cut in half and core.
6. Slice one-half of the pear and fan on top of the salad.
7. Core the other pear, place in a food processor and puree until smooth, adding 3-oz. of the reserved poaching liquid.
8. Add salt to taste, and drizzle over salad.