

HARVESTING WINE GRAPES

When many of us think of harvest, we think of the traditional harvest activities occurring in late summer and early fall. However, in the wine business, growers often start thinking about harvest when they prune the vines in late winter, because that's where harvest actually starts.

When a grower decides how many buds to leave on the vine, he's essentially taking the first step in determining how many grapes he'll be harvesting in the fall. Another decision affecting harvest is whether or not to drop fruit during the growing season. Deciding whether or not to water the vines prior to bloom affects berry size and therefore the size of the harvest

Another factor that influences harvest is vineyard temperature. Heat, or lack of heat, can be a significant factor in when bud break will occur, and when veraison begins.

Veraison heralds the visible changes of the ripening process, when the berries turn from green to purple in red varieties and when berries of white varieties begin to soften. Veraison most often occurs in late July or early August.

When there is a long bloom period, many growers will drop fruit that still exhibits a significant proportion of green berries when veraison is 60-80% complete. This fruit drop assures that when harvest occurs, most of the fruit will exhibit the same degree of ripeness.

As external changes occur during ripening, internal changes are also at work. When a grape begins to ripen, it's quite acidic, about half as acid as a lemon. And at the end of its life cycle it's a raisin with 40% sugar and virtually no acid. Harvesting grapes when they have the right balance between sugar and acidity is the heart of winemaking.

When the fruit is almost through veraison, the grower starts testing the grapes for sugar and acid on a regular basis. Another factor, physiological maturity of the grape, can be judged by chewing the pips, or seeds. If they are brown and crunchy, the grape is most likely mature. If they are softer and still somewhat green, you can expect some vegetal characteristics in the wine.

As harvest approaches, the final decisions about when and how to pick the fruit must be made. Many growers with large vineyards prefer to use a machine to harvest their grapes. Pam Gill, Lockwood Valley Vineyards, states, "We prefer using machines to harvest our 220 acre vineyard. With a normal crop of 5-6 tons per acre, each machine can pick up to 3-4 acres per hour. Using 4 machines, we can pick approximately 80-90 tons in 6 hours. We harvest at night when it's cool, and transport the grapes early the next morning".

Large harvesting machines seem to give the best results in level or gently rolling vineyards with mature vines that can withstand the action of the machine's automatic beaters.

Paul Getzelman, Chalk Ridge Vineyards, prefers to hand-harvest his grapes from the family's San Antonio Valley vineyard. "Our vineyard doesn't lend itself to machine harvesting. The vines are young, closely spaced, and on a steep, rocky hillside. This year our crew was able to pick our 5-acre vineyard in one morning, assuring the grapes arrived at the winery in good condition".

Our next article will talk about the status of the 2006 harvest in Monterey County. Current conditions indicate that many vineyards will be harvesting well into November. For further details on Monterey Wine Country, visit www.montereywines.org, email info@montereywines.org, or call 831.375.9400.