

## **Grapes: Odds ‘n’ Ends**

(Number 16 in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

As the vintage, the year and the millennium all draw to a close, this column includes one follow-up to an earlier column and a few items that didn't fit into the earlier ones. So, just like turkey sandwiches on Thanksgiving weekend, here they are: the leftovers.

### **The Great Trellis Experiment**

We told you a few months back about the changes being made in trellising grapevines and the dramatic impact those changes have made in yield and grape quality. Our own small-scale trial was to add four more cordons (the thick branches of the vine that support the growing shoots) to the four that already existed on each of 180 of our excessively vigorous cabernet sauvignon vines. Prior to the change in 1998, when the entire vineyard yielded about 31 tons, those vines produced 22.5 pounds each for a total of 2.02 tons. With the added cordons this year, not yet at full production, the yield was 32.7 pounds per vine, for a total of 2.94 tons, and the entire vineyard yield was exactly the same at 31 tons (that means that the yield of the other vines was actually down slightly from 1998). The extra grapes, 0.92 ton, had a value at last year's price of \$970.00, and since the total cost of material and labor to convert the four rows was just under \$900, that means that the extra grapes paid back the entire investment *in less than one year*, and with a handsome interest payment to boot! You don't need a stockbroker to tell you this is a good place to put your money.

### **The Thank-You Drink**

Many years, the rains have come by October, soaking the ground and allowing the vines one last flurry of root growth and energy storage before they lose their leaves and prepare to hibernate for the winter. When the rains are late like this year (or when the harvest is early, like 1992), it's especially important to give the vines a "post-harvest irrigation," and it's a good practice in any year. One complete irrigation cycle after the grapes are picked will help to put the vines in prime condition for their long rest. A cold six-pack of beer serves the same purpose for the weary grower after the grapes are finally off the vine and resting in the cozy confines of a winery tank.

### **The Birds!**

One of the great sources of frustration each year is watching birds fly into and out of the vineyard, stealing your grapes as they approach ripeness. It's especially devastating the first year that the vines are in production, because as likely as not, the birds will consume the entire crop before it's ripe enough to pick. (Not all grapes have equal attractiveness for birds—they ate every single berry on our 76 Sangiovese vines and weren't attracted at

all to the Charbono grapes growing all around them; just as they ignored our young Malbec grapes while consuming almost all of the Petit Verdot in the same field). But the fact remains, after at least three years of hard work and hope, it's very depressing to watch these winged thieves gorging themselves on what is rightfully your fruit (even if there's not enough to sell, you might like to pick the grapes for your own home-made effort to provide bragging rights to an "estate-grown" wine).

### **Visual Effects**

What to do? There are many remedies that have been tried with varying degrees of success. The simplest is to erect large shiny balloons ("they look like owl eyes," says the brochure) with circles on them to scare away the birds. Many have tried it, but few can testify that it really works well. With a little more effort, you can tie shiny red and silver mylar tape around the top shoots. Some people think this works, others think it gives the field more visibility to the birds ("Hey, look, you guys! Doofus marked his vineyard with that shiny stuff for us. Now we can see it all the way from Mt. Aukum."). A new item, just introduced by the Bird Gard Company (800-555-9634), is a metal windmill with ultraviolet-reflecting paint in a random pattern that simulates the flapping of large bird wings. It sells for \$59.00, but has had limited trials so far.

### **Chemical Warfare**

In the past, there was a chemical called meserol that could be sprayed on the grapes to make them taste bad to birds, but few wineries were willing to chance that it wouldn't have some slight negative effect on wine quality, and it has now been removed from the approved list of agricultural chemicals.

### **Noise Pollution**

Some growers escalate bird wars to the level of heavy artillery. A "propane cannon" can be obtained for about \$300, and can be programmed to emit sonic booms at more or less random intervals (if the noise is regular, the birds seem to accept it the same way we stop hearing a new grandfather clock chiming after a few weeks). It might scare the birds away, at least for a while, but it is certain to drive your neighbors, even those a couple of miles downwind, to distraction. Practice kindness, if not to our feathered friends, at least to those of your own species! The worst side effect of the cannon is the fact that in order to make its loud, scary noise, it must create an explosion. And an explosion, no matter how well shielded, can sometimes escape and set your vineyard, house or the entire countryside afire. Remember, the time you need bird protection is the time of highest fire danger, and to use the cannon, you'll have to judge the value of your crop against the horror of wildfire. Lest you think this is just a *theoretical* possibility (like the beautifully photographed vineyard fire in the film "A Walk in the Clouds"), you should know that at least one El Dorado grower set a vineyard on fire with such a device within the last five years. Oh, by the way, the grapes were still on the vine and carried the smoky flavor of the fire all the way into the wine (top three names for the wine: "Kick-ash Red," "Burning Leaf" and my own personal favorite—"Merlot Fumé").

The next level of sound-based combat is possibly more effective (it's also 100% organic), and even more offensive to your neighbors. There are a number of systems that will broadcast sounds that literally frighten birds so much that they don't want to be in the area. Among these are the distress call of the starling, the hunting call of a hawk and other synthesized sounds claimed to be even more effective. No person in his right mind would ever aim the high-powered loudspeakers at his own house (it's advertised to protect up to six acres), so naturally they are pointed toward the neighbors, who contemplate mayhem while going gradually insane from the incessant, irritating screeches. It may work, and you are probably within your rights to use it, but you need to be sure that those grapes are more valuable to you than the good will of everyone within earshot, not to mention the risks to your personal safety.

### **The Gentle Approach**

The last measure is one that really works—the only drawbacks are that it's more expensive and a lot of work. Polypropylene netting, with openings about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch square, can be spread over the vine rows as ripeness approaches and taken off just before harvest (Wildlife Control Technology, Inc. 559-490-2262). There's even a tractor-mounted rolling and unrolling device that minimizes the labor involved. And while there will be some bird kill (a few of the younger and smaller birds will get tangled in the mesh and expire), it is clearly the most effective and least offensive option. The cost, for a vineyard with ten-foot row spacing, is about \$700-\$900 per acre, but with care the netting will last quite a few years.

The ultimate solution, though, is coexistence. Bill Naylor, who manages our vineyard, insists that “The birds take a ton from every vineyard, every year, and it's only right and fitting to share the bounty.” With the experience and perspective of a third-generation grapegrower, he advises against overreacting when the birds make off with your entire one-ton crop in the vine's “third leaf” (the third fall after the vines are planted), and contends that the fight isn't worth the casualties, *on either* side. The amount they'll take in future years will hardly be noticeable, and in our case, we consider the reduction in yield on our seven acres of mature grapes (from perhaps 32 to 31 tons) to be a small tax for the songs that greet us each summer morning as we trudge out to combat the real problems in the vineyard.

### **What's that Grape?**

This is a story that will be read by those who see the label resulting from the first harvest of one of our new grape varieties, but we thought it was just too good not to share with a wider audience. After the last grapes were pulled from the vineyard, the crew was enjoying a picnic brunch when one of the workers asked: “What was the name of that funny grayish-pink grape with the small clusters that we picked this morning?” Bill Naylor explained that in France, it's known as Pinot Gris; while in Italian, it's called Pinot Grigio. He finished by saying he didn't know what it was called in Spanish. “I know,” remarked crew chief Marcos Torres-Ramos with a broad smile, “It must be *Pinot*”

*Gringo!*” And that’s the name the label will bear, at least until we produce the wine commercially and the Government has to approve the wording on the label.