

## **Grapes: So You'd Like to Work in a Winery?**

(Number 19 in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

Depending on the size of the winery, when you visit you may see anything from one tired, grumpy owner-winemaker to hundreds of employees. What kind of jobs are there in a winery, what do the people who work there do, and how much does it pay? A recent salary survey in "Practical Winery and Vineyard" magazine (15 Grande Paseo, San Rafael, CA 94903, (415) 479-5819; \$29 for a one-year introductory subscription of six issues) is the source for salary information provided here. The salaries are based on full-time employment, and were collected from 200 wineries across the country, but primarily in California for the year 1999. The larger the winery, the higher the salaries, but for this exercise, we'll look mostly at wineries the size of our own local examples (between a few thousand and 25,000 cases per year)

### **Getting in On the Ground Floor**

The entry-level position for someone just starting their career in a winery may be officially referred to as "Winery Helper" or "Cellarperson," but everyone who works in this business refers to the position fondly as "cellar rat." The job description has two main instructions: 1. "Here, hold this." and 2. "Clean that up." Winery work is about fifty percent actually doing something (crushing, pressing, racking, pumping, etc.) and about fifty percent cleaning up the mess you make doing it. No matter the season, there is always something that needs to be cleaned, from crush equipment to barrels to tanks to hoses to floors—there's just no end to it. And while many jobs in the winery can be done by one person, it always great to have another person around to help lift heavy stuff, and hold up a hose so wine doesn't leak out of it onto the floor to cause more clean-up problems.

This position usually requires very little formal education in the field; usually a strong back, ability to follow instructions and good work ethic. Salaries ranged from \$12,000 to over \$30,000, but averaged about \$23,000.

### **Master of All You Survey**

With a little more experience (or in a slightly larger winery), a position exists that's known as cellar master (*maître du chai*, if you're French or have delusions of snootiness). This person may actually supervise the activities of one or more Cellar Rats, or may do all the same work with a more grandiose title and slightly higher pay. It's a good position for someone without a college degree, but with a little more experience and ambition than the first level. Many cellar masters will go on (or back) to school to learn more about enology (winemaking), with the hope of becoming an actual winemaker someday. Others will stay in the job long enough to figure out many of the mysteries of winemaking, and can become candidates for better jobs (some may even strike out and open their own winery, but only the most outrageous do so). Cellar masters at wineries between 7,000

and 25,000 cases per year earn from \$15,000 to over \$50,000, with an average of just under \$35,000 per year.

### **At the Right Hand of the Throne**

Assistant winemakers are usually fresh graduates of U. C. Davis or Fresno State, and are all waiting for the time that they can quote enough experience on their résumés to qualify for the “really big bucks” that the winemakers get. The job of assistant winemaker in wineries large enough to have one is do all the boring, repetitive work that the winemaker doesn't feel like doing (a lot like “Here, hold this” and “Clean that up”). The difference is that these men and women can see a career path before them, and know it's just a matter of time before they're giving the orders. It's common to spend ‘a few’ years with a first job, to find out the difference between the university theory and the grimy practice, then perhaps to move on to be the head winemaker at a smaller or younger winery. Salaries are very sensitive to the size of the winery, with an average for wineries under 7,000 cases per year of \$28,538 and for 7,000-25,000 cases of just over \$41,000.

### **The Grand Poobah**

The person who ultimately determines the quality of the wine (and to some extent the price that the winery can gouge out of buyers), is the winemaker. The winemaker makes most of the decisions about how the wine is made, from crushing the grapes to the source and age of barrels, to the laboratory analysis, and finally, to the technical details of bottling. The job demands strong mechanical skills (especially forklift driving talent), physical stamina, and an excellent palate to guide the progress of the wines in the cellar (actually, nobody *really* knows what they do all those hours in the cold and dark). He (and increasingly, she) will usually have a university degree in enology, and several to many years of experience to back it up. In the smallest wineries (where the owner is not also the winemaker), the salaries averaged about \$48,000 per year, jumping to \$64,000 for wineries in the 7,000-25,000 case size. It's worth noting that the salary range for winemaker in this size operation is very wide, from \$35,000 to \$127,000, reflecting everything from poor, struggling wineries in the outlying regions to pricey boutiques in the heart of Napa.

### **All Creatures Great and Small**

The people who interface directly with the public in a tasting room, who pour and smile and do their best to answer the same Top Ten Tasting Room Questions every day, are paid almost a fixed rate, regardless of the size of the operation. In the smallest wineries, the average across California is about \$9.50 per hour (although starting rates for people without experience may be as low as minimum wage in some areas!), and in the very biggest and most expensive, it increases only to about \$11.00.

And, at the other end of the scale, the artistry, scientific skill and diligent efforts of the winemaker are not always what are most highly prized and rewarded in the industry. Sales managers, marketing directors and especially general managers are all more highly paid than the winemaker, sometimes by twenty or thirty thousand dollars per year for the same size operation. Whether they take the same risks, offer the same contribution to the

value of the product, or represent the winery as well to its adoring public is something that each organization has to answer for itself, and gauge its compensation plan accordingly.

### **The Grim Facts**

Just as only a fool builds a winery to get rich, those who choose to earn their living in this very special, if unusual, business will have to work harder, and all but a few may have to forego the more lucrative salaries available in other parts of the business world. But they know, even as they drag their weary bodies to the bank to cash their meager paychecks, that they have the satisfaction of creating, contributing to, or presenting liquid works of art that many people can enjoy. Also, the working conditions are generally more enjoyable than the mall or a high-rise office building, and employees usually get really good discounts on the wines, so they can afford to bring some home to make the end of the day a little more enjoyable.