

Grapes: We're Doing it *All* Wrong!

By John L. Smith, Oakstone Winery

(Number 28 in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

A few years back, one edition of this column was about the changes being made in the practices of growing grapes and training vines, as taught by Dr. Richard Smart, the "Flying Vine Doctor." His book, "Sunlight into Wine," is available from the UC Davis Bookstore (530-752-6846) for \$35.00, and is an excellent source of information about new approaches to growing grapes. Dr. Smart has a standing offer when he consults for grapegrowers: "If you don't think my advice is economically sound, I'll pay for the changes and you give me the increase in grape sales you get over the next two years." To my knowledge, no one has yet accepted the challenge, and many growers around the world have been converted to his new ideas.

The first few years of a vine's life are critical to its success, but this is an area where so little scientific research has been done that it's dominated by folklore and "old wives' tales." Before we get to Smart's most recent heresies on the growing of grapes, let's review what we have all been taught. In the first year, we tend to let all the shoots of the vine grow relatively wild. In the first winter, we prune every vine back to two buds, usually just a few inches above the ground. In the second year, the growing tip is always pinched off when the trunk reaches the desired height, in order to encourage the growth of lateral branches that will become cordons or spurs for the future. All grapes are removed so the cordons can develop (and usually also in the third year), and then in the fourth year, more or less a full crop is allowed to mature. Richard Smart says this is all wrong!

Year One

Writing his column "Smart Viticulture" in the May/June 2001 issue of Practical Vineyard and Winery magazine (published bi-monthly for \$31/year; 415-479-5819 or www.practicalwinery.com), Smart lays out his rules for *profitable* vine growth. First of all, plant only healthy, strong young vines (dormant "bench grafts," if you can get them), and plant them early in the year; March if possible. Planting a strong vine the following year will build a better vine than planting weak vines this spring or any vines later in the year.

In the critical first year, he insists, provide lots of water and nitrogen, don't remove *any* leaves, and control the weeds that compete heavily with the surface roots of the young vines. Thin back to a single shoot when the shoots are two to three inches long, so that you'll have one strong shoot instead of several weak ones.. Don't ever pinch the growing tip, but stop shoot growth late in the season by reducing nitrogen by late July and water by the end of September. It's important to grow as much vine as you can the first year, but it's also important that the shoot has time to develop into wood, and that the wood has

time to mature, so it can survive the first winter. If the green shoot grows into the fall, it won't harden up and become frostproof.

During the first winter, prune back vines *only* to pencil-sized wood (smaller diameter wood will die off during the winter). The practice of cutting back one-year-old vines to two buds to make the roots grow strongly, Smart says, is as ridiculous as cutting off a young person's arms to make his legs grow longer. Any wood that reaches pencil diameter will grow bigger and stronger the next year, and will form a good start for a trunk or a cordon. If you intend to cordon train the vine, wrap the cane loosely (after pruning) around the cordon wire, only one wrap for two feet or more, then tie the end to the wire. If, and only if, canes are less than three feet long and spindly, you can cut back to two buds, but you should then examine your practices (or the vines you bought) to find out why you lost a whole year's growth.

The Terrible Twos

Here's the most surprising change of all—if the vines grew strongly the first year, you can actually harvest some grapes the second year! The buds that were left on the shoot last year should grow as quickly as they do on mature vines. At bloom time (when the flowers on the clusters open up and emit their subtle honeysuckle perfume), you should decide whether to leave the clusters on the new shoots. On any shoots that have stopped growing (no new leaves or tendrils being formed at the growing tip), remove all the clusters. On all shoots that are growing vigorously, you can leave at least one cluster (the clusters will tend to be smaller than when the vines is mature, so you're not likely to overcrop the vine) or both. The grapes will mature about the same time as older vines, and actually make very good wine, since there is good sunlight exposure to the leaves, and the vine's fruit growth will be in balance with its woody growth. The trunk should be allowed to grow to its maximum length, and wrapped loosely around the wire. (Only if the vine is to be head trained, as for dry-farmed zinfandel, should you pinch off the trunk's growing tip at the desired height.) This will give you a strange appearance, called a unilateral cordon, where the trunk bends over and becomes a single cordon, but the benefits are worth the effort. In most varieties, you'll have enough growth the second year to run the cordon all the way along the wire to the next vine.

The Third-Year Bonanza

Following this approach means you'll have a mature cordon the third year, and you can grow a full crop! From here on out, just use the weight of the prunings as a guide to the proper crop load (a good average for most varieties is about five pounds of grapes for every pound of prunings from the previous year). It's tedious to keep track of and weigh the wood pruned from the vines, but you don't have to do it for every vine, and after a few years, you'll develop pretty good judgment with respect to the number of buds to leave on a vine.

If you'd like to see this approach in use, stop by and look at Oakstone's viognier vineyard (see picture below), across the corner from the winery on Slug Gulch Road, or the new

zinfandel vineyard called “Paso Vista” on our side of the street. If it works as well as advertised, we’ll be sure to take full credit for it. If not, please forget where you read this! The final warning, just as in 1998, is: **if you try to grow too big a crop, it will be of lower quality and may not ripen in a cool year.** The addition this year is, “**growing young vines intelligently can increase your return and shorten the time to break even on a new vineyard.**” Just be sure to follow the advice presented here (and freely given by all the enthusiastic grapegrowers who have gone before you), and maybe, this time, we can do it all *right!*