

Grapes: Volunteers

#53 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine by John Smith

Pouring Volunteers

Ask not what your winery can do for you; ask what you can do for your winery. A little overdone, perhaps, but vitally important to every one of the wineries that operates in our little corner of the world. The sales at a small winery depend heavily on “Events” (which, as detailed in the latest revision of the County’s draft winery ordinance, can be divided up among Special, Promotional, Charitable and Marketing), and the success of those events depends heavily on the willingness of special friends of each winery to help out. Most wineries have just a few hard-working employees, and when the annual Passport Festival, the January White Sale (or Sadie Hawkins day or any other plausible excuse for an Event) hits, there are just not enough employees to do all the jobs that need to be done.

The biggest area where volunteers fill in is in pouring wine for visitors, along with answering dozens of questions about what kind of grapes are these, and where are they grown (and what is the trellising, what kind of soil do you have, what rootstock do you use, how many tons, barrels, cases and bottles do you get from each acre, what your total acreage is, how many varieties you grow, what the winemaker’s middle name is, etc., etc.). The owners are prepared with the answers (or sometimes just make up random numbers late in the day if they get tired and cranky), but for the hapless volunteers, it’s necessary to prepare cheat sheets, or that is, “information packages” to which they can refer to appear knowledgeable concerning the less well-known facts about the wines and the winery. In addition, the experience wine enthusiasts gain by spending some time on the other side of the tasting bar may even heighten their sensitivity to the difficult job winery employees have the next time they come in as customers.

The other big calling for volunteer help is serving food, filling serving containers and cleaning up the spills and debris after wine tasters help themselves to the “snacks” that are provided to complement the wines at each event.

Compensation

Volunteer compensation is an interesting subject — the unofficial rate of reward since the beginning of organized wine tasting has been one bottle of wine per hour of volunteer work, but at some wineries the better wines are not offered to volunteers, or only at the cost of **two** hours of work. Some wineries even extend a courtesy of the standard employee wine discount of 50% to volunteers who are “employees for a day,” allowing them to stock their cellars at reasonable prices in exchange for the assistance they provide. A less honorable practice has been for some wineries to print up business cards for volunteers as if they were actual employees, which would allow them to purchase wines all across the state at the “inter-winery” discount of between twenty and thirty-three percent. Word spreads quickly about who engages in this practice, and the ersatz business cards become valueless.

Many winery employees begin their employment as volunteers. An Event provides an excellent opportunity to see how a person handles the multitudes, continues to smile and respond politely to the same Ten Top Tasting Room Questions, even at the end of a long festival. It takes a special personality to pour, answer, smile and still sell wine after many hours, and those people who successfully do so may be invited to return and receive an actual paycheck in the future. Anyone who is interested in being a volunteer is urged to call their favorite winery to let them know. They may not need anyone today, but a few weeks or months from now, they may be delighted to have the help.

Winery Help

A good way to gain experience with commercial winemaking (and a good way to help a beginning winery owner control payroll costs) is to volunteer to help out at a winery during crush, racking and bottling, the times when additional labor is required. When we first bought our vineyard in 1989, I offered to help Les Russell at Granite Springs during the harvest. Even after seventeen years of home winemaking, I knew that there were real differences between working with pounds of grapes in the basement and the tons of grapes that go into big fermenters and tanks.

After borrowing a pair of black rubber boots (I didn't realize how much water was involved in making commercial quantities of wine) and processing about ten tons of grapes from nearby Single Leaf Vineyards, I wearily made my way back to a borrowed travel trailer on the edge of my new vineyard. Early the next day, the heavens opened up and began an unprecedented four-day September rainstorm. The power in the trailer went out (which means the water supply went out), and the steep dirt driveway became too slick to get a vehicle up to the road. Walking down Slug Gulch Road (and **up** Perry Creek) to the general store for sustenance, and using the great outdoors for bathroom facilities should have provided fair warning of the life that would follow when I built a winery (but it apparently didn't).

Vineyard Volunteers

In our County, a winery needs to start with at least five acres of grapes planted on the same parcel, and quite honestly, many of us slide into this odd alternate lifestyle after planting grapes to produce our own homemade wine. The first harvest, usually in the third fall after planting (the "third leaf" of the vine, in vineyardists' jargon), is generally less than half a crop, meaning only one to two tons per acre. Faced with bringing in the grapes, the excited grower usually sends out the call to friends, relatives, home winemaking buddies, and sometimes even casual acquaintances to come and help pick grapes. Everyone enjoys the experience of picking, carrying and helping to crush the grapes, and the day is usually completed with a barbecue and consumption of mass quantities of wine.

By the next year, with a harvest of perhaps twenty tons of grapes, the weight of reality appears, and volunteers are no longer sufficient. This is when professional vineyard workers are called in, and the difference in productivity is astounding. People who make

their living picking grapes (and picking is still generally the only area where workers are paid for “piece work” or according to the amount they pick) are many times as efficient as even the most dedicated volunteers. In a (sort-of) controlled experiment, we once held a harvest party where visitors, largely from the East Coast, who were eager for the “total vineyard experience,” offered to pick grapes the following morning. As luck would have it, we had only a small crew of professionals available that day to pick a few tons of merlot grapes, so we had a chance to compare the picking rate of the groups.



Fourteen volunteers (“Hey, honey, look at this cluster here — aren’t the grapes really pretty on it?”) who, to be fair, had consumed mass quantities of wine the night before, picked two bins of grapes for a total of one ton. In the same length of time, two professionals picked a total of four bins, or two tons. The amount picked per volunteer worker: one seventh of a bin, while the experienced pickers each brought in two bins. This ratio of fourteen to one may not match everyone’s experience, but needs to be considered when deciding how many of your friends you’d need to call as volunteers to harvest a sizable crop.