

Out of the Vineyard and into the Winery

(The fifth in a series of highly disorganized but strongly opinionated articles on grapegrowing and winemaking in El Dorado County)

Assuming that you have not succumbed to the temptation to start your own winery, the primary reason to grow grapes in this area is to sell to one of the rapidly-growing number of El Dorado wineries (owned by people with substantially less self-control or common sense than you). We've touched earlier on the quaint customs that wineries have regarding payment terms, but it's worth looking a bit deeper into the process of establishing a meaningful relationship with your winery partners. To avoid many of the hassles described below, long-term contracts are sometimes negotiated between the parties, with all of the salient points addressed. They can become lengthy and complicated documents, though, and will quickly remind both seller and buyer that they got into this activity in an attempt to simplify life.

BY THE NUMBERS

The first and most fundamental conflict between growers and winemakers concerns the price of grapes. Elegant statistics are compiled each year by the California Department of Food and Agriculture and published in the "Grape Crush Report" (P.O. Box 942871, Sacramento 94271-0001, 916-498-5177). The total tonnage, sugar at harvest and prices paid are tabulated for each variety, separated geographically into seventeen districts (El Dorado County is in District 10, along with Placer and Nevada counties to the north and Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne and Mariposa below us). The listed prices for last year are frequently used to establish the prices for this year's crop. An infinite number of variations are used, including percentage increases over the average (because you know your zinfandel is the best in the county), selling at last year's price (so you'll know what you'll be getting), to averaging prices over two or more years (to smooth out fluctuations). There are two big drawbacks to the Grape Crush Report: the final version isn't published until March 10 of the following year (February 10 for a preliminary version), and until this year the report included "sales" from a vineyard to a winery owned by the same person. Many of these transactions are made and reported at arbitrarily reduced prices for tax (or greed) purposes. The big problem this year is that there may be a significant increase in prices as those "arrangements" are culled from the list. (Of course, it's much less of a problem if you're selling grapes instead of buying them).

BIG CROP OR GREAT WINE?

A further area for disagreement concerns yield in the vineyard. The impoverished grower wants to get the maximum tonnage he can, in order to recoup some of his perennial losses, while the winemaker seeks the lowest possible yield per acre to maximize quality. (Only on rare occasions, as in 1997, will vineyards bear heavily and still maintain excellent quality). A creative compromise has been worked out in a few places, where a winery will arrange to pay for the grapes on a per acre basis, providing the grower no

incentive to increase the size of his crop. An alternative approach diminishes the tendency to overcrop by significantly reducing the price per ton as the number of tons per acre increases. However it's done, it's important that the parties understand the depth of their co-dependency to avoid bad feelings in the fall.

Of course, the grower is only partly in control of the crop size. Some years, in spite of good intentions, you may be blessed with an overabundance. When this happens, wineries will often accept the excess tonnage **IF** you didn't forget them and sell your grapes at higher prices to a winery in a distant county when crops were small and prices were high.

SWEET REWARDS

Another ongoing issue is the ripeness of the grapes when they arrive at the winery. The grapes must be reasonably close to the sugar levels desired by the winery--note that the requirements may vary widely from grapes for white zinfandel (as low as 20% sugar), to table-wine grapes (usually 23-24%) to port or late-harvest wine grapes desired at 28% sugar or above. Part of the reason is that alcohol content is directly related to the sugar content of the grapes, but the flavors of the wine also are impacted by sugar content and degree of ripeness. Because the grapes lose weight as they mature on the vine, growers lose tonnage as the grapes ripen, and can lose a lot if the grapes turn to raisins in a late hot spell. Mistakes can usually be avoided by learning the art of sampling a vineyard for ripeness, and by frequent and vigilant monitoring of the grapes' sugar content.

PLAGUE AND PESTILENCE

It seems the nastiest fights each year are caused by grapes arriving at the winery with the correct yield per acre, sugar content and ripeness, but with infections of powdery mildew or botrytis (bunch rot). Beginning growers are often unaware that what appears visually as a small amount of fungus on the grapes can severely degrade wine quality, often making the wine unfit to carry a varietal label. This means the winery gets a fraction of the price per bottle, and can hardly afford to pay the same price sound grapes would command. To avoid this problem, many contracts are written with clauses stating a maximum percentage of the grapes that can show signs of disease, with dramatic price reductions above a certain level. If the level exceeds the winery's threshold, they may reject the entire shipment as unfit for winemaking. Tolerance levels vary however, and you can avoid an unpleasant surprise by discussing in advance the winery's expectations.

To summarize, while there are plenty of areas for concern regarding the sale of grapes, most transactions are trouble-free and pleasant. You can increase the odds of a happy harvest by discussing the details with different wineries, and establishing a good rapport with someone who sees things more or less the way you do.

