



## Some Comments about the 2009 Vintage

Recent tastings of 2009 white and red wines from Pennsylvania and Northern Virginia demonstrated to me that there are growers and wine makers who were able to cope very capably with the challenging conditions of the growing season. There are valuable lessons to be learned from their experience. In a bumpy vintage like 2009, vineyard practices are a blend of preventative and reactive practices. Growers with more experience who have developed viticultural intuition tend to perform better than those with less experience in harsh conditions. They have a sense of weather and vineyard conditions and know how to prepare and respond to them. This kind of empirical wine growing is in the European tradition and works well in our conditions.

The 2009 Merlot wines I tasted were grapes from the same vineyard made by different wine makers and represented an interesting terroir comparison. For a cool and wet vintage these wines, across the board, had remarkable depth and balance. I was expecting issues with acidity, methoxypyrazines (too much), and concentration, tannin (too little) but, in fact, the wines were very complete. Cool and wet often shows itself on the mid-palate and finish and did with some of these wines but overall they represented great achievements given the difficult conditions under which they were produced.

It was interesting to note that most of the grapes were harvested between 20 and 21 brix, yet ripeness and flavor were not an issue. Sugars hit the wall very early but the patient grower continues to wait for flavor, phenolic development and balance. The grower told us that the Merlot colored early and held onto it and this was very evident in the wines. Seed color and development was not as advanced as warmer vintages but pushed along enough so they didn't impart harsh tannins to the wine. The skill in the cellar is very evident in the seamless and accurate chapitalization of these wines that raised alcohol to a level that brought mouth-feel/and texture into fine balance.

While these are very young red wines they already demonstrated very nice balance of acidity, oak and tannin. They are not short on color, flavor or depth. That is a result of thoughtful extraction processes and we discussed the various methods used including pump over/irrigation, submerged cap, punch down, rotary fermenter and the Ganimede tank that uses CO<sub>2</sub> to roll the cap. They produced different results but the amazing feature was the common thread of the vineyard across all of the wines of dark cherry, spice and pepper. After 10 years of surveying wines in the region I am more persuaded than ever that we need to excel in the cellar every bit as much as in the vineyard to have any hope to make fine wines in a vintage like 2009. To me, the focus in the near term should be on:

- Achieving proper fruit maturity, evaluation and harvest handling
- Sorting grapes in the field and at the winery using humans and machines
- Proper fermentation vessels and extraction practices that include rotary fermenters and concentrators
- Correct blending techniques to make the best wine possible

I hope to host workshops this year with wine makers and growers from Europe and France who can help us to learn more about these methods.

The vineyard was a conundrum in 2009. With all the rain, it was difficult to keep vines in balance, even on well-drained sites. With vegetative growth going full bore it hardly made sense to remove fruit even though it was very clear early on that the harvest would be significantly delayed. One grower mentioned that thinning Merlot to one cluster per shoot in the past had resulted in grapes with high levels of methoxypyrazines. Research in New York by Dr. Gavin Sacks has demonstrated the importance of managing both crop and canopy to reduce levels of MPs at harvest. None of the 2009 red wines, including those tasted in northern Virginia had issues with MPs, a remarkable achievement in my estimation.

Good disease control and canopy management were essential in 2009. Downy appears to have been the main problem in vineyards. Growers need to make sure that they have a sound strategy for controlling all diseases and make necessary adjustments as the season develops. In '09 the intervals should have been getting shorter and full rates used earlier. The Merlot producer said he started with full rates from the start of the season in anticipation of a wet season. The quality, type, maintenance, and use of spray equipment is very important. I will write extensively about this topic in the near future and a disease and pest workshop in March will cover all the essential of disease control and spray technology and applications.. I cannot emphasize enough the need to get good coverage and proper calibration and using the correct materials and rates. Grape berry moth was highlighted as an insect problem last year. For some, the absence of an insecticide application for Japanese beetles may have opened the window for GBM to enter and it did significant damage in tight clustered varieties. Once it got started, the rots spread rapidly. A couple of growers explained how they only target shoot tips in their JB sprays to reduce insecticide use. All of the growers agreed that vineyards and woods are not compatible and should be as far apart as possible. This is becoming an increasingly important site selection feature for our region. Just like in the movies, the woods harbor bad things. Birds and yellow jackets (and even hornets) continue to be a significant threat at harvest and must be dealt with if fruit integrity is to be preserved. Growers stated emphatically that jackets are stinging berry skins and feeding, which opens the door for secondary pathogens. A Long Island wine maker told me that the single viticultural practice that is most responsible for the improvement of red wines is the use of nets, which allow the wine maker to hold the fruit under bird pressure and to harvest at maturity. The challenge to the grower is to pick the grape at the right moment and these 2009 Merlots are testimony to this truth. It was not easy to determine this point in time last year with the rain storms dancing in and around the vineyards. Grapes can be picked too early or too late and quality can suffer. The Merlot was harvested at low sugar but high flavor and phenolic content, perhaps not at 2007 levels but good ripeness for a cool and wet vintage.

You may be tired of hearing me extol the virtues of white wines in Pennsylvania, from full-bodied Chardonnays in SE PA to the amazingly aromatic whites from cooler regions to the north. I think we can do whites consistently well because in a year like 2009 they often come in weeks before the later reds. That means they are off before a lot of problems mentioned above arrive in the vineyard. As a rule, anything we can do viticulturally or through site selection to speed up the ripening process will benefit red and white wines alike. There is a balance between adequate hang time and too much heat that pushes sugar past flavors but that will not often be a problem in Pennsylvania. If you can beat the season-ending hurricane, frost, rot epidemic or whatever the plague that vineyards are regularly subjected to in October, you have a good shot at making a nice wine.

A grower asked me to help with decisions about varieties, rootstocks and vine spacing. The vineyard has gone through its first iteration and data was collected and lessons learned. Now there is an opportunity to use that knowledge for the improvement of wine quality. Every newly planted vineyard is an experiment. The first generation of vines are grown simply to explain the terroir. The clever grower uses empirical and research methods to determine what mistakes were made (as well as acknowledge the correct decisions) and then wait for the opportunity to redesign the vineyard to perform better. In this case, Steuben was pulled because it was on a site that potentially could grow high quality vinifera. This is a good decision for a winery focusing more on its dry wine production. In this case, rely on others to grow high quality native and some hybrid varieties so you can pay attention to the finicky vinifera. James Fisher and his mentor, Dr. Tom Rice from California Polytechnic University – one of the best 4-year viticulture programs in the country, came and looked at backhoe pits. It is no surprise that there were surprises in what they saw, including glacial till and loess. Loess plays a prominent role in the production of Gruner Veltliner in Austria and a dominant soil feature in Washington State. This winery excels at Riesling, Gewurztraminer, GV and Vidal. It also makes very fine Cabernet Franc. The myriad of questions relate to the interaction of soil and climate and what viticulture (rootstocks, clones, spacing, trellis, etc) can be most effectively applied. My natural tendency is to assume that every wine grower wants to make the very best wine possible but I learned from our discussions that this is not a realistic approach, that marketing realities are an important component of viticulture decisions. This is within limits, of course. If marketing needs push wine out of viticulturally limiting boundaries, bad wines will result and they will be difficult to sell. The question dwelled upon the most was in-row vine spacing and the relative merit on a shallow, well-drained soil of planting vines 4' vs. 4.5' apart. In a recent article in Wine Business Monthly, Mark Greenspan pointed out that it is better to give a vine too much space than too little. The goal of every grower is to fill the trellis for profitability but if the vines are packed in too close it could result in viticultural problems such as shading that can negate the benefits of tighter spacing. Add on top of this the choice of rootstock and exactly how, for example, the performance (vigor) of 101-14 will compare to 3309? Will vine vigor be reduced enough to make 4' spacing the correct vine spacing? Maybe that is experiment #2. In case you did not read the Greenspan article, he also proposed that the use of rootstocks for vine vigor influence can be replaced by increasing or decreasing in-row spacing according to soil capacity, assuming an accurate knowledge of it exists. Between row spacing affects mostly quantity of fruit by increasing or decreasing linear feet of trellis. This measurement is influenced by equipment dimensions, amount of hill/side-hill and, this grower believes that 9' spacing is the minimum to do a good job of hilling up and taking down. It's a mess of variables but each one needs to be

carefully considered for its relative merit and affect on the final product. White grape varieties, as a general rule, are more viticulturally forgiving than reds, tend to sustain higher yields and ripen earlier and make good wines over a wider range of maturity. So there is some forgiveness in designing the white wine vineyard. Reds in a cool climate often need to be pinpoint perfect to make consistently fine wine. Pinot noir is a good example. By just about every measure 2009 was a crummy PN year. I was reminded that PN is the “exaggeration” grape – it’s either really good or really awful. Even though it is an early red, it has trouble pushing to the limits of ripeness before bad things start to happen to it. That’s what makes Burgundy, Lehigh Valley, Sonoma Coast and other great PN regions so interesting, and frustrating.

With each new year comes the hope of a better vintage. It would be hard to do worse than 2009 in most areas of Pennsylvania. The trick is to learn lessons from all vintages, good and bad, and remember them when the time comes to use the knowledge. When that happens, consistency arrives in the wine and that is something most wine consumers really appreciate!

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