



In Viticulture Veritas

For all their inherent flaws, wine competitions are a window into the quality of wines and an opportunity to measure the quality of many wines in a somewhat controlled environment. As an infrequent judge in competitions, I take my own sensory response with somewhat of a grain of salt, as I do simply reading the results from other competitions. But there is some truth in the veritas statement. What is in the bottle represents the truth of the vintage and the wine grower. Recently a trusted friend who is a skilled taster confided in me about the quality of Pennsylvania wines at the Pennsylvania Wine Society and Farm Show tastings last autumn. There were concerns about technical flaws in some wines but mainly it was a matter of concentration and availability of varietal flavors in the wines. I have seen this issue before in wines from Ontario to Virginia and, in my humble estimation, the solution is derived somewhat in the cellar but mostly in the vineyard. Good wine - native, hybrid or vinifera – requires fully ripe fruit. Yes, some varieties are more forgiving than others, but if Pennsylvania wine growers want to win medals in competitions and the respect of our peers and the wine press, we need to grow grapes to their fullest possible maturity and harvest them when they are at the peak of ripeness. I know...so easy to say yet so hard to do in vintages like 2003 and 2004. These were tough vintages by anyone's standards. Even the best California wine maker would have hid in a cave if confronted by those conditions – that's why they are in California. And, for the most part, our growers and vintners performed admirably. But the wines in the competitions demonstrated just how much further we have to go. This is the single great challenge we face. The weather is what it is and we will surely be confronted with more lousy vintages. It is up to us to adapt, not Mother Nature.

Let's get one thing straight to begin with...there is such a thing as a RIPE grape. It is definable, measurable and attainable in Eastern viticulture. A ripe grape is necessary to make a great Concord wine as well as a delicious Cabernet franc. A ripe grape is necessary to make fine wine on Scott Henry at 6 t/a or VSP at 3 t/a. To the extent that we can achieve full fruit maturity will determine how this wine region measures up against the competition. Knowledgeable wine makers, wine writers, and wine drinkers do not like wines made from unripe grapes.

I think the long term solution is a greater understanding of soil-water-plant relations and how we can manipulate and optimize the interaction between these three important variables in the wine quality equation. The best way right is through very careful site selection that mitigates the need for intervention.

Intervention comes in the form of viticulture and this is the area I need to focus on and get growers to use in their vineyards. This is nothing that you have not heard before it just

needs to be done more and better during vintages like 03/04, otherwise you get wines like those my colleague. I would like to humbly suggest, as your viticulture extension educator (at least those of you in Pennsylvania) that this winter as you reflect on the past vintage and plan for the new one, that you resolve to excel in these areas of viticulture:

- Canopy management
- Crop management
- Disease and pest management
- Weed management
- Winery relations

If you can do these five, I'm pretty sure you will end up with better grapes, no matter the type of vintage we have. These are all extremely familiar terms to you so there are not any surprises here. It is fortunate for us that we know the tools at our disposal to manipulate quality during the vintage. I am mainly talking about effort and expense to do each of these well. I realize there are impediments – labor, time, funds, etc. But if the goal is to produce really delicious grapes, then you somehow have to overcome the obstacles and attend to these matters. For my part, I will do my best with the instruction and make sure each of you know how to execute each of these tasks to their greatest effect in the vineyard. For growers who do not have a vineyard yet, or just started, we'll start with the a-b-c's of these viticultural practices and make sure you know what to do. There should not be any frowns on the crush pad in September, and if there are, there should be a very clear understanding why.

Canopy management – begins with balance pruning or at least a clear sense of what a balanced vine is in your vineyard. Pruning sets the tone for the entire vintage. Doing it well and leaving the correct number of buds begins the process of defining quality. It is cutting with a purpose, a goal in mind. Bear in mind winter injury to buds, remember the cold snap in December? Shoot thinning and crown suckering begins at early shoot growth. Next step is where our growers often fall flat – shoot positioning the first and second wires during that early grand period of shoot growth. No excuses – you have to be ready and out there and do it when it needs to be done. Shoots straight up, evenly spaced, wires placed and locked with clips to keep shoots positioned. This takes timing and the right amount of labor. Be prepared. Remember May? The shoots grew a foot in a week. They don't wait for you. Your big issue here is labor. You must have enough hands to do the work at just the right time it needs to be done. Labor is a big issue for our vineyards, one we need to discuss

Crop management – this, along with canopy management, are probably the two viticulture practices that can affect grape quality the most – good or bad – within a growing season. Big reasons for managing yields are to maximize production and quality together (you do not want to short change yourself) and to give your fruit the best chance to reach optimum maturity as well as fully ripen the wood for cold hardiness. Start by evaluating grape and wine quality in 2005 relative to crop load and try to set the parameters for this year. Balance prune some vines to set the node count according to yield expectation and also decide analyze vine balance issues, eg canopy division, etc.

Remember that some canopy management practices will affect yields such as shoot thinning and hedging. Crop estimating is the best way to evaluate yields and make critical adjustment decisions. If you do not have a statistical method of estimating crop you should adopt one now and put it into practice in 2006. You will find no better tool to help improve the quality of your grapes.

Disease and pest management – it's no secret that fruit with disease creates a wine making problem. It also contributes to vine health and survivability issues. The biggest concerns are fruit and foliage diseases like powdery mildew, downy mildew, phomopsis, black rot and botrytis. Now we have the late season rot complexes to worry about and a host of trunk diseases. Insect pests often provide the opening that fungal pathogens need to wreak havoc and subterranean pests like grape root borer and phylloxera are hidden and insidious. An integrated management strategy based on control and sustainable viticulture practices needs to be developed for every vineyard, no two are quite alike. The NY/PA Pest Management Recommendations for Grapes: 2005 should be your starting point but also blended with all other cultural and scouting management tools you have in your tool box.

Weed management – Controlling weeds is important in new and mature vineyards. It is a challenge in our climate. Anything less than excellent control in a new vineyard probably is hurting your vines. I prefer a blended method of herbicides and non-chemical methods with a greater emphasis on using chemicals in early years just to make sure the weeds are under control and then a slow weaning from pre-emergence chemicals to post-emergence only. We have vineyards that rely completely on occasional spot treatments and 2-3 passes with a high quality grape hoe. It can be done!

Winery relations – okay... I have gotten an earful this winter about grape quality. Let me say that this is nothing unusual. It happens in Napa, Bordeaux, anywhere a grape is grown. It just means that if you are a winery you have to take the necessary steps to assure grape quality. Engage the grape grower! Make him or her a part of your product and production. If you are an independent vineyard a quality product is the best way to separate yourself from the pack and make more money. Find a winery that wants/needs/appreciates/can afford high quality wine grapes and work as hard to cultivate a long term relationship as you would a newly planted vine. Make the wine maker an integral part of growing wine. Vineyard and winery: taste wines, preferably together and not just wines from your grapes. Develop a global sense of benchmark wines. That's how you build quality.

I do not believe that any of us are in this business to win medals at wine competitions. Competitions are just a standard for comparing wines, often flawed, but the best we can do for now. Eventually we want Parker and Wine Spectator to acknowledge and respect us for our wines. The road to respect is well marked and clear for us if we want to take it.

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