

The Harvest

by Ted Bucklin

Six a.m. in mid-September, it's still dark and there's a crispness to the air, the unmistakable feeling of autumn is pushing summer away. Over the past few minutes ten or more cars have rolled in, headlights on bright, tunneling through clouds of dust, and parked alongside the vineyard. The team of Mexican grape pickers, 16 men in thick shirts and hooded sweatshirts, from teenager to septuagenarian, baseball caps and balding pates, gathers quietly at the edge of the road awaiting orders and enough light to see by. The field boss, Miguel Santoyo, jokes with the men, a casual and familiar banter. They've done this before. Miguel's boss, Phil Cotturri, stands aside planning the day logistics with his lieutenants and with my brother the farmer and winemaker, Will Bucklin.



This is the first several early mornings in September and October that grapes will be picked from our family's Old Hill Ranch vineyard set in the heart of Sonoma Valley a couple of miles south of the town of Glen Ellen. Old Hill Ranch was first planted in the 1850's by William McPherson Hill and a treasured 14-acre block he planted in the 1880's remains the center, both in location and spirit, of the vineyard. My brother farms and makes wine from this vineyard and I have left my home in New Mexico to help him through the hectic time of "the crush." This year could be particularly hectic, as we've moved our winemaking operations to a new facility that as of today's pick has only been in operation for two weeks.



But first things first. By about six-fifteen there's enough daylight to see, though the sun is still an hour from cresting over the eastern ridge. The men grab their picking bins, the tractor roars to life and we head down the road in a boisterous parade to the far end of the vineyard. The pickers break up into teams of three, each team working a single row of grapes. Each picker has his bin and a hooked serrated blade to cut the grape bunches from the vine. When his bin is filled with 20 to 30 pounds of fruit he heads for the tractor, which crawls along just ahead of the pickers, and dumps his bin into one of the thousand-pound bins on the trailer.



Each of the big bins is monitored by two people who sift through the arriving fruit and pull out any unwanted materials such as weeds, grape leaves, unripe or botrytis-infected bunches, or tree frogs. When the bins are full the tractor lugs them off to the staging area and another tractor with two empty bins takes its place. Picking continues unabated.

Of all the many mysteries and complexities that govern the process of growing grapes and making them into wine, it became apparent to me during my visit that the most difficult task of all is deciding when to pick the grapes. Many of us who have some passing knowledge of the winemaking industry are familiar with the ubiquitous measure of grape ripeness known as “brix,” which refers to the sugar concentrations in the grape juice. What I learned however, is that brix is a rather crude measure and determining ripeness is more a matter of seeing with your tongue beyond the seduction of sweetness, attending to the amazing array of lovely and elusive flavors that effervesce upon your tongue after the initial blast of sweet slides down your throat. If only you pay attention long enough to see it.



Many of those intimidating adjectives you hear tossed around at wine tastings are among those flavors you might see as you bite into a ripe grape out in the vineyard. For me, with what you might call a cretin’s palate, only a few of the most obvious came through, like pepper, tannin, spice, fruit, raisin, but what I found remarkable was how much the flavors varied throughout the vineyard. And listening to my brother and his vineyard adviser Phil as they walked through the vineyard tasting grapes and talking about factors that influence the flavors, factors related to farming practices and soil conditions and exposure to the sun and weather, it began to dawn on me just how much art was involved in this crucial, if somewhat obscure aspect of the wine-making process.

It must be said that this has been a very favorable year for ripening the fruit, and Will, thinks it could be our best vintage yet. The weather has been very

mild this summer, and the flavors have developed slowly as the fruit ripens. But what Will won’t say is how his extraordinarily attentive farming has brought this ancient vineyard to a new peak of health and vitality. And perhaps most importantly, with his careful attentions Will has developed a relationship with this vineyard and the earth from which it grows that can only be described as intimate. What struck me this harvest season was the intimacy of the farmer with his vineyard, and how as winemaker he is able to carry that relationship from the field to the winery.

Now, for those of you who like me have yet to develop a winemaker’s palate, all this fuss about flavors in the vineyard may seem superfluous. How many of us would be drinking wine if it didn’t have alcohol in it? Maybe sugar really is what it’s all about. But even though I can’t list the flavors one by one as they parade across my tongue, whenever I open a bottle I am, much as I saw my brother in the vineyard tasting the fruit, mystified and enchanted with the complex sensations and tastes of the deep red wine.

In the weeks before harvest, quite a number of experts marched up and down the vine rows tasting grapes, picking sample quantities from throughout the vineyard to measure brix, and opined about when the pick should start. In some ways growing grapes is like painting works of art. Painters say that the art of making a good work is knowing when to put down the brush, one more stroke and the work is diminished, one less, it’s not quite done. The art of deciding when to harvest is knowing when one more day is not going to improve the flavor of the grapes.



That said, logistics, the simple matter of getting enough pickers on site, all the necessary equipment, tractors, bins, forklift, trucks and drivers, and being ready at the winery to process the grapes when they arrive, plays into the decision as well.



Our “winery” occupies three large bays of a warehouse complex on the east side of Sonoma, about ten miles from the vineyard. No vaulted ceilings, no fancy tasting rooms, no priceless views of dramatic mountain slopes, a lot of stainless steel and corrugated tin, pipes, pavement, other warehouses. We share rented space and equipment with a number of other small producers, and so our harvest has to be scheduled to accommodate the winery schedule as well. In addition, we sell a third of the crop to Ravenswood Winery, so they have to agree to a pick date, too. And yet the pick date keeps getting later as the weather remains cool and the grapes, while hovering at the very threshold of ripeness, are not quite ready. The picking crews sit idle, unpaid, getting restless. Phil worries about losing his pickers to other employment when the pick drags on like this. Equipment has been rented but is not being used, plans are drawn up and discarded almost daily. The grapes are ready when they’re ready. Will sweats the decision with more tasting and more testing.

Finally, the Petite Sirah and parts of the younger Zinfandel are ready. Ready enough, anyway. I think a factor in Will’s decision was that he was simply tired of waiting, so in addition to the science, art, and logistics of this process, one must also acknowledge an emotional component. There we were at six in the morning waiting for it to get

light enough to go to work. By eleven that morning the picking was done, seven tons brought in, fourteen full bins overflowing with luscious fruit sitting in the bright sunlight ready to be stacked on trucks and delivered to the wineries for processing.

This was to be our first test of the new winemaking facility, and the third run-through for the team at the winery, the third time they’d crushed grapes there. Will and I arrived as our fruit was being unloaded from the truck one bin at a time by forklift. Each bin was weighed and set aside. When all was ready, Will and I took positions on either side of the conveyer belt that would ferry our grapes into the mouth of the crusher/stemmer and waited for the first load. A forklift fitted with a special rotating fork arrived with the first thousand-pound bin, hoisted it about twelve feet into the air and rotated the bin until the grapes fell into the giant stainless steel hopper. A large screw pushed a measured flow of grapes out from the bottom of the hopper.

Plump bunches of grapes plopped heavily onto the conveyer and slid past us toward the crusher. Will and I plucked foreign materials like leaves, earwigs, and unripe bunches from the stream of fruit. The grapes fell into the crusher/stemmer, which removed the grapes from the stems and dropped all the berries and juice below into a steel bin, which was then hoisted and dumped into small stainless steel tanks for fermentation.



Meanwhile, my brother prepared for the next round of the harvest. For more than a week, we’d been hearing rumors of a storm bearing down on

California from the Bering Sea. While it's not uncommon to see rain in September, it is always a source of consternation for grape growers, as rain can complicate the harvest in a number of ways. Joel Peterson, the Ravenswood winemaker who has been making wine with our grapes for the past 23 years, was in the vineyard tasting grapes a couple of days before the storm was predicted to hit. He told me that "once the storm door is open, it never really closes back up," by which he meant, that first storm is the harbinger of significant change in weather, from summer's warm and dry, grape-ripening weather, to a cooler and wetter trend. Rain not only complicates getting into the vineyard to harvest the grapes, but it can swell and split the grapes, which in turn encourages Botrytis rot especially in tight-clustered grapes like Zinfandel, and Botrytis can ruin a harvest virtually overnight.

So now Will is being pushed into a high-stakes gamble. Pretty much the entire year's efforts in the vineyard, some \$200,000 worth of fruit on the vine, not to mention the fate of the '07 vintage for our winery, is facing a significant threat from the weather. The odds for complete disaster are not high, in fact it's more probable that the storm will do little or nothing, but farming is one of the rare industries where one can actually anticipate with some certainty the arrival of bad news, actually see it on the evening news inching across the radar map toward your little patch of ground, carrying with it a hint of catastrophe, a suggestion of utter vulnerability. For a whole week Will tracks the storm's progress while he weighs the odds and tries to make up his mind about whether to pick before the storm or wait it out. The fact that the TV weatherman is practically foaming at the mouth with excitement over the approaching storm doesn't help Will at all. Suddenly the artful little decision of when to pick, which only last week was a matter of ripeness, flavors and afternoon high temperatures, feels like life or death.

One thing I know about my brother is he hates to make snap decisions, especially when there's a lot riding on the decision. He hates being pressured; indeed it looks like maybe the storm has arrived early, there's a bit of a black cloud hanging over him. Two days before the storm is due, Will and Phil walk out into the vineyard, popping little

purple berries into their mouths and rating flavor and ripeness with exclamations of "um", "yum" and "hmmm." An occasional "wow." According to the latest models, the storm is likely to pass north of us, just grazing Sonoma County with a dash of rain. Cool weather is expected to settle in for a few days. Will and Phil agree that tomorrow we'll pick the ripest section of the old Zinfandel block.

So here we are again, it's dark as the first cars roll in. At about 6:20 the men turn off their radios and climb out of their cars, the team of pickers assembles in wan light to await the go order. It's seems noticeably darker than it was last week at the same time. To the east clouds line the ridge and catch the first crimson light of the sunrise. "Red sky at morning, sailor take warning", the old binary nautical weather forecasting equation, comes to mind. "Red sky at night, sailor's delight." We walk down the gravel road out into the vineyard, we take our positions as the tractor with bins pulls in between the first rows. Miguel shouts out some instructions about which grapes to pick in Spanish, and then the harvest begins again.



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