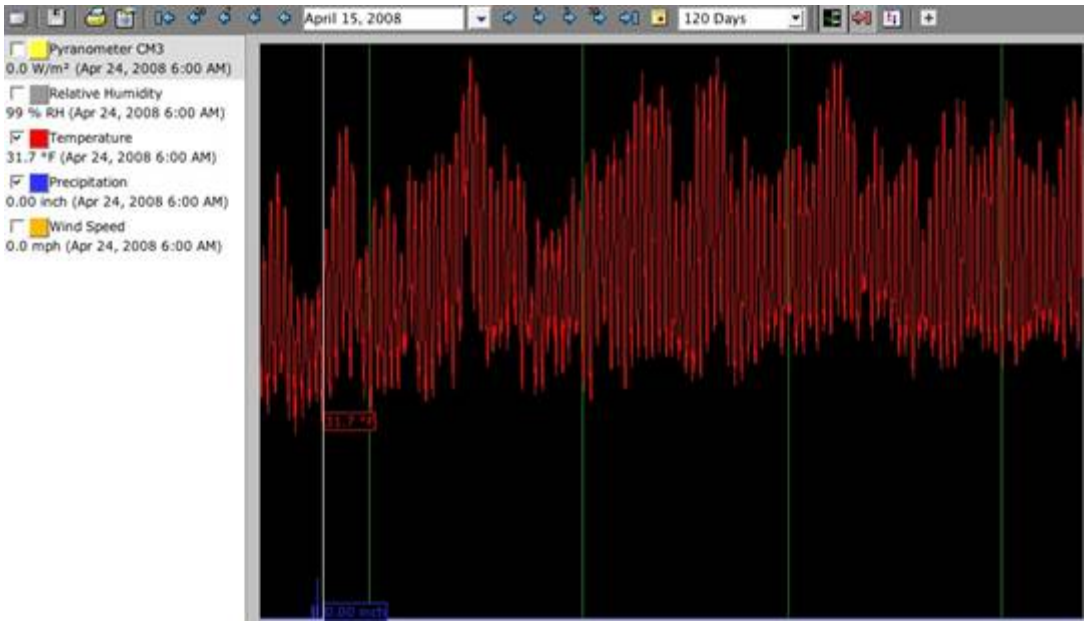
September 23, 2008

To celebrate the end of harvest the guys and David Munksgard went out and picked second crop from the Thomas Road Pinot blocks. We got in another 0.9 of a ton, for another 55 cases or so of Rosé de Pinot Noir, which can't hurt, especially this year. I confess I take the drop in yield personally - down 13.75%, when comparing apples to apples, from last year. It didn't help that my effort at crop projecting was so far off I would have merited the critique the physicist Wolfgang Pauli once gave a paper, "it's not even wrong."

So as I look back at the season and engage in ratiocination I can't help but wonder, did we do anything wrong? We didn't over prune, quite the contrary. No problems with powdery mildew or botrytis. No shatter like in 2007. No deer issues. We survived the extended frost season, unlike many, I am sorry to say. We didn't drop any fruit. When we needed to irrigate, which was often, we did. We fed the vines as much as we could. We held in check the phylloxera in the AXR blocks as well as eutypa elsewhere. Looking at the vines before harvest and even now and they look quite healthy. As Kevin Skene (our PCA, Pest Control Advisor) often noted during his last visit on July 25, 2008: "Vines look good. Fruit looks good. No issues."

So if we didn't do wrong what happened? Well first let me be perfectly clear, I have confidence in the wines. Credit for that must go to David Munksgard, who led harvest better than Leonard Bernstein led the New York Philharmonic. So the culprit, I think, was the weather, the fronts were simply not where they should have been. Not enough rain, too cold, too hot, not enough, or more to the point, no fog, etc. Blame global-warming, some incontinent butterfly in Hong Kong, or my favorite, George W. Bush, if the problem was the weather there wasn't anything we could do about it. Of course all will be better once we elect Barack Obama president.



My theory is that because of the lack of rain and a very hot July and August, the vines did what had to be done, concentrate growth and resources on vegetative growth at the expense of reproductive growth. I always tend to forget how well plants are at adapting to current weather conditions. For example, the oaks this year a producing a huge amount of acorns, which is, apparently what happens during droughts.

In the meantime I'm picking tomatoes and making tomato soup, tomato sauce and tomato paste and I am happy to share my recipe for tomato soup, tomato sauce and tomato paste. First have your Father grow about 287 different varieties of tomatoes. When they are ripe, pick as many as you think you can handle on a given day (see photo above). Bring them home, wash, remove the stems, quarter and cook in a covered pot - but not too hot as you don't want them to burn – for as long as you want, they are your tomatoes so don't worry about your carbon foot

print, just by doing what you are doing the planet will be a better place. Once the tomatoes are all pretty mushy (a technical cooking term), turn the heat off and let cool. Notice that I haven't peeled or seeded the tomatoes, nor have I added onions, peppers, basil, salt, pepper or the ultimate cheat, sugar, which I'll address later. I don't need to seed or peel because I use a hand cranked food mill (use the interchangeable bottom with the smallest holes to keep the seeds from getting into the final product). Take the product of the milling and return to a clean pot and cook at moderate heat until reduced by half, which won't happen if you put the lid back on. What you get is thick enough to serve as tomato soup, cook down some more for sauce and a lot more to make tomato paste. When heating up for soup or cooking down for sauce, that's the time to season, etc. If making paste no seasoning is necessary, the tomato flavor is so intense best to leave it alone.

Another great way to use up large amounts of tomatoes (which is what you get when your father plants 287 plants) is to make tomato water. Take fresh picked tomatoes, clean, quarter, then puree. Line a sieve with cheesecloth, pour in the puree then tie up the cheesecloth and let the resulting water drip into a pot. If impatient like me, go ahead squeeze from time to time, speeds up the process, although there will be some color, but I think that's fine. Once done, i.e. you don't feel like waiting anymore, transfer the water to ice cube trays and freeze. There's nothing better when it's cold and wet in winter than to throw in some tomato water into a dish and all the sudden there's summer just when you need it. Don't freeze all of the water, a true luxury is a tomato water martini, one part vodka and two parts tomato water, or to taste, with whatever garnish you like (if trying to slow down your alcohol consumption try a chili pepper). I like to add hot sauce, and Worcestershire Sauce and some fresh ground pepper. Another great luxury that I find quite soothing, is bacon from your own Champion Berkshire Pig.

With that succulent image the 2008 season is over. Time to start working on 2009.

September 9, 2008 **(Days 15 through 19)**

Harvest is finally over. We brought in a tad over 280 tons, or about 17,640 cases worth. I think the sparklings and the Chardonnay, and notwithstanding the heat, even the Pinot Noir will be some of the best we have ever made, mainly thanks to David Munksgard who had the whole “precision harvesting” thing really dialed in – other than we did pick on a Sunday, so there goes my perfect record. I joke that once harvest starts I’m like the pilot of a B17 and David’s the lead bombardier, and the plane is now his for the bomb run, only the goal is not to drop any bombs. By opting for more sparkling we avoided the main problem with all the heat the grapes had to endure, that of over ripe fruit, particularly Pinot Noir. As one colleague bemoaned to me, his Pinot was “riper than a fart.”

The highlight for me was Saturday, September 6th when David, Steven Batten, our intern (far left in the shot below), cellar master, Rigoberto Moreno (in the center), Jose Puga (rear left), chief gardener and groundskeeper, five other guys from the cellar: Cesario Briano (back next to David), Ismael Moreno (left of Rigo), Cruz Briano, Javier Rodriguez and (far right) Mauricio Celestino, who actually know how to pick and drive a tractor, and me (someone had to take the picture), picked all 1.82 acres of Z Block. We decided to put together a B Team so the A Team could pick Chardonnay in P Block and still pick Z, before it was too hot. I think when the winemaker and a crew of volunteers assembled from the cellar come out to help like they did, that speaks volumes about the winery and it’s people- mainly good stuff.

Nominally, I was in charge, which is scary as after all, I'm management, I don't know how actually to do anything. Still everyone seemed to know what to do, although, it took us two hours to pick just .86 of a ton. I did learn some valuable lessons: Picking is work, not a workout; wear the safety glove; don't carry a camera and try to pick at the same time, especially if you're not wearing a safety glove; and keep some band aids in the truck for when you do pick while carrying a camera and not wearing a safety glove.

See how beautiful the Z Clone cluster is, and the uniformity, not just within the cluster, but from cluster to cluster and from vine to vine, was astounding, the same was true the next day when we picked the Hyde Old Wente in Ca, Cb, Cc, Cd and Ce. The juice from Z was fantastic; we'll get maybe 40 cases of a Chardonnay 'to kill for' (that's a higher standard than 'to die for').

Finally the fog came back on Monday and Tuesday. Cooler temperatures help, but doesn't change the fact that picking is hard work.

After picking out the lower part of L Block (Old Wente Clone) and M (Stony Hill Clone). The crew was allowed to relax and celebrate the end of harvest (at least here at Iron Horse) with a well-earned soda and a burrito.

One final point, while the amount was more than disappointing, I feel very, very good about the wines we are going to make from 2008. I also feel very good about the condition of the vines after so little rain, followed by extreme cold and heat. In retrospect it is obvious that the vines simply redirected limited water and nutrients, etc. to vegetative growth, which hopefully means we'll be back to normal and ever better next year.

September 3 & 4, 2008 (Days 13 & 14)

On the 3rd we picked 3.80 tons of Pinot Noir in Q then 12.51 tons of Rued Clone Chardonnay in O Block. It was pretty dark when we showed up at Q so we had to wait around a bit.

We started at 6:20 when the temperature was 46F. By 1:45, when we were done in O, it was 98.6F. To say the least, we have an incredible crew this year. They understand we need to get the grapes in a quickly as possible and they need to pick all of the grapes out there (rule one: no grape left behind), except for the grapes we don't want (rule two: leave behind bad grapes). It was impressive to see Senor Moreno (patriarch of the Moreno clan) carefully trimming away grapes affected by botrytis, and saving the rest of the cluster.

On the 4th we picked 14.75 tons of Pinot Noir from P6 and P7 (Thomas Road). We started a little earlier than the day before like 6:12, when it was about 46.1F. We had been waiting for about 15 minutes and the crew was chomping at the bit. The fruit looked clean (i.e. free of lots of raisins, I don't like raisins), and our eyes were used to the dark. When winemaker David Munksgard showed up I said to Victor Arreola, our Field Manager, "David's going to be mad." I was right, he was mad, but for all the right reasons, and by the time we were done it was a relatively pleasant 82F and the fruit continued to look good.

Here's where it's getting scary. Everyone else is picking and it looks like we'll be done by Tuesday, September 9, which is fine; except chances are real high we'll be picking on September 7, a Sunday, there goes my perfect, 'never on a Sunday' record. On the other hand, that means I'll have water left for the baby vines in H, J, A and Train B and for the lone morning cormorant.

No notes or numbers, they’re busy making wine in the winery.

September 2, 2008 (Day 12)

8.35 Tons of Pinot Noir from the hill portion of P7.

Winemaker David Munksgard noticed a clear difference in the maturity of the grapes on the hill as compared to those on the swale. Each row was carefully marked where to start and where to stop. I call it “precision harvesting,” only we’re not so much ‘managing’ variability within a block as ‘coping’ with variability. Still we didn’t have to pick over labor-day weekend and so far never on a Sunday, more proof of the benefits of precision viticulture. Of course we are not error free in the vineyard.

We should have picked this particular vine for sparkling, but we always forget about it and then it's too late. We're still dealing with the heat, improvising where possible…

While pursuing other channels to obtain relief…

No numbers and comments from David as it all went into the tank for a good cold soak (see the first photo above).

August 30, 2008 (Days 7 through 11)

We finished picking for Sparkling, a total of 161.05 tons of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay (just under 10,000 cases worth). I'm particularly pleased that Chardonnay ended up at 28.5% of the total, our target was 30%, which is easy if you pick the Chardonnay after the Pinot is all in, which simply wasn't the case this year.

As can be seen by the expression on Ramiro's face above, it has been intense. To get the grapes in before it's too hot we start picking as early as we can, and with enough people to make an impact, so we don't need to pick at night.

Heat has been a problem as it has been a warm week: 24th, 96.2; 25th, 90.5; 26th, 94.4; 27th, 102.8; 28th, 105.5; 29th, 102.4; and 30th, 97.1. But it's a problem we can cope with as we had and did apply plenty of water on the vines - some years you just shouldn't dry farm or even think about deficit irrigation. However water's kind of short now so we also appeal to other forces for help keep the temperatures down, such as music...

And a more traditional approach.

Still, notwithstanding the heat and the lighter tonnage, the fruit and resulting juice still looks and tastes great. Here are some of winemaker David Munksgard's and intern Steven Batten's comments and numbers:

"C-4 Plus C-1: 20.6 Brix; 1.02 TA; 3.16 pH. Status: Cold settling. Will rack & yeast Monday. Tuesday will go to older French oak barrels for barrel fermentation. Citrus (orange & lemon) & green apples (Steven).

Block F: 20.9 Brix; 0.79 grams/100 ml TA; 3.10 pH. Status: Cold settling. Will rack & yeast Thursday. Soft ripe pear with cinnamon (Steven)."

So we'll have great sparkling wines starting in 2011, and meanwhile to keep us smiling, the sunflowers are fantastic.

August 22, 2008 (Day 6)

At last, Chardonnay, and two press loads in one day -18.7 tons, from C8 and C4 (still down 15% from last year). One of the guys managed 87 panellas, about 1.31 tons in just four hours. The fruit continues to look and taste great, as does the juice, here's Chardonnay coming out of the press:

And here's what will be the 2008 Brut Rosé after a seven-day cold soak:

Very cool, of course nothing beats dry ice for a great photo effect.

From the Winemaker's lab: 20.6 Brix; 0.98 TA; and 3.01 pH. Status: Cold settling. Will be racked & yeasted 8-25-08. Much, if not all will be barrel fermented in older French oak.

August 21, 2008 (Day 5)

It was a bit warmer than usual, about 63 F when we started picking in P9 along with the first 33 rows of P6, even though it was before daybreak when we arrived.

It didn’t take very long to bring in 9.9 tons of Pinot Noir for Sparkling (down about 15% from last year).

The fruit looked great, and yes there’s a little Chardonnay too, but it’s okay as don’t we make a Blanc de Noirs anymore.

David Munksgard's numbers and comments: "21.0 Brix;1.13 TA; and 3.03 pH. Status: Cold settling; will rack & yeast 8-23-08. Ripe red apple with a splash of really good lime juice. Yummy & refreshing."

"Yummy" and "refreshing," are, of course, technical terms.

August 20, 2008 (Day 4)

It was a beautiful morning to pick in E Block. The winery looked great in the rising sunlight. We brought in 6.42 tons of Pinot Noir for sparkling in about two and a half hours.

On the other hand, the juice from the press is looking and tasting great.

Here are David Munksgard's numbers and observations: 20.7 Brix; 0.95 TA and; 3.03 pH. Status: Cold settling- will rack & yeast on 8-22-08. Think of juicy ripe red caramel apple.

August 19, 2008 (Day 3)

A disappointing, but delicious, 7.065 tons of Pinot Noir from G Block. We started a little earlier than usual, 6:05, because the guys had a lot of real estate to cover, 11.3 acres. Much of it up hill (of course some was down hill too)…

So, a picker can work up a good thirst.

David Munksgard's notes: "20.4 Brix; 0.78 grams/100 ml TA
2.96 pH. Status: Cold settling. Will rack & yeast Thursday.

Shows flavors of green apples and peach/nectarine; great stuff."

I think he's trying to make me feel better.

August 18, 2008 (Day 2)

We started at 6:15 and picked all of I and K Blocks, and got 14.01 tons. Given how steep it can be, everyone was happy that it was cool and cloudy.

It looks like the Pinot Noir crop this year is going to be down from last year (which was a pretty low year too), so this year's policy is, like last year's, "no grapes left behind."

Victor, and, sometimes, me, will follow behind the pickers to snip off any clusters left on the vine or that missed the picking box or "panella."

Here are David Munksgard's notes for the day:

"20.0 Brix; 0.85 grams/100 ml TA; 3.02 pH. Status: Cold settling will rack & yeast Wednesday. Very nice numbers! Much like very good "road side farm apple stand" freshly pressed non-pasteurized apple juice.

Even in a light year the guys want to know who brought in the most grapes.

August 15, 2008

The 2008 harvest started today, 12.977 Tons of Pinot Noir from P2 (Thomas Road) destined to be Brut Rosé. Now before getting all worried about how early the harvest is, please note, by May 22 P2 was close to 100% full bloom or 85 growing days, more than enough time. In fact it's exactly 365 days since we started the 2007 harvest. The key date is February 27, 2008, the last day this year we recorded any significant rain, which explains, maybe the following data from David Munksgard: "51 F and dropping (dry ice is still sublimating); 21.8 Brix (probably stable); 1.00 grams/100 ml TA (will go up upon pressing); 3.21 pH (will go down upon pressing)."

We started as early as we could, 6:15 a.m. when the temperature was around 54 F. As it was the first day, each picker was assigned a number (there were 21 in all), given safety gloves, a picking knife and picking cutters.

I'm going to try to keep the "blog" as current as possible, including where we're picking, how much and any other details I've got.

As is always the case we look for help wherever we can get it.

August 5, 2008

The naked ladies are coming out. I love looking at naked ladies.

The lettuce is looking and tasting great.

The smell of the peaches almost a narcotic.

The grapes are coloring up (technical term, veraison), and are looking fine (below P6 Clone 13 Pinot Noir, but you knew that).

Which means… drum roll… time to buy a pig. Not just any pig. A $1,446.00 pig, raised by the very sweet Kasey Schalich of the Forestville 4-H and who (the pig) was the 2008 champion 4-H Berkshire at the Sonoma County Fair.

Note a Berkshire is a 'black' pig and is a 'rare' breed, which is good. According to Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall (a BBC TV type chef, River Cottage): "Their slow-grown meat is much more inclined to show marbling, and they will tend to put on a copious outer layer of fat. All these qualities naturally make for better, as in *tastier*, pork." According to Peter Kaminsky (he wrote Pig Perfect), Berkshires are "pork known for its tenderness and marbling." In other words they taste better than bacon pigs.

A Little Blasphemy

When was the last time you blasphemed? Probably can't remember. It's become a lot harder in the 21st Century to blaspheme, than say the 16th. Still, I try. What greater target than the now sacred cow, pairing food and wine.

Here's the food pairings we recommended for the 2001 Blanc de Blancs:

This is a traditional match with oysters, smoked salmon, pâté and sushi. It is delicious with melon and prosciutto, garden fresh radishes dabbed with rich, creamy butter with *Fleur de Sel* sea salt. It is a natural with Peekey Toe crab, Porcini tart, roast chicken because it adds a clean, lemony flavor to the dish, baby bok choy and steamed dumplings. Pairs beautifully with Redwood Hill Crotin.

Imagine, I walk into one of the 80,000 plus restaurants in California, look at the menu; appetizer, there it is, Peekey Toe crab with radishes dabbed with rich creamy butter and fleur de sel sea salt; entrée, roast chicken with porcini tart and baby bok choy; and for dessert, Redwood Hill Crotin. Of course I've memorized the tech sheet so all agog, I order the 2001 Blanc de Blancs, instead they have 2004 Wedding Cuvée ("all you really need are fresh strawberries dipped in dark, bitter-sweet chocolate"), oh the humanity. Just as an aside, Peekytoe (yeah we misspelled it on the tech sheet) crabs used to be culinary flotsam until some canny Maine lobsterman figured out 'marketing,' making the Peekytoe the Portobello mushroom of crabs.

Instead of going to a restaurant join a bunch of us wine people at a party. We all bring wine, after all, we have wine, it's cash we don't have, and did we call the hosts to find out the menu? Heck no. We bring that which we want to show off. So all sorts of people show up with all sorts of wines, and the food, it's good, great even (go ahead and be jealous), and more to the point, the wines work with the food.

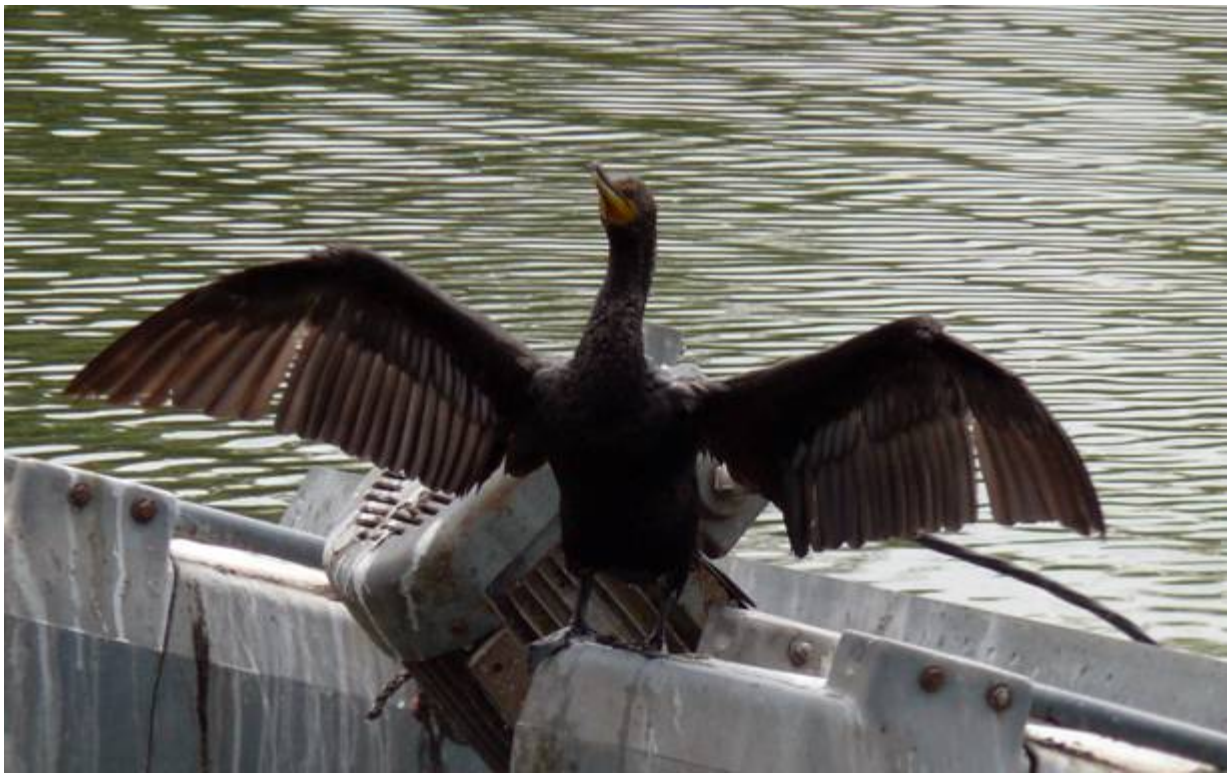
Another scenario, and this has happened to me, I'm at a restaurant that may have Iron Horse on the menu (and if not, oh the humanity) and of course if there is enough of us I always order Iron Horse, no better way to be sure to get a good bottle and maybe influence other diners, but for just two, well, lets see what else we can try. I order the tasting menu and look to the sommelier for guidance on the wines, never underestimate the positives of a sommelier. They know what's in the cellar and what's on your plate. In the olden days we didn't have wines by the glass. In those days I'd try to send a message to the sommelier of what I liked, what I knew, and more important, what I could afford, by venturing a decent guess, and then hope for an excellent recommendation, and I've never been disappointed. Now, the world is better. At the finest establishments you can buy by the glass and the sommelier can find that perfect food and wine match for every single dish. The problem? Not that the wines and the food aren't a perfect match. They are. The problem? I didn't like the wines.

Finally, good sales clerks in fine wine shops will often ask what you planning to serve and with that knowledge make a recommendation. Most of the time, and I have this on good authority from a source that doesn't want to be named, your friendly clerk has already been told what to sell that day and somehow those wines cover a multitude of situations.

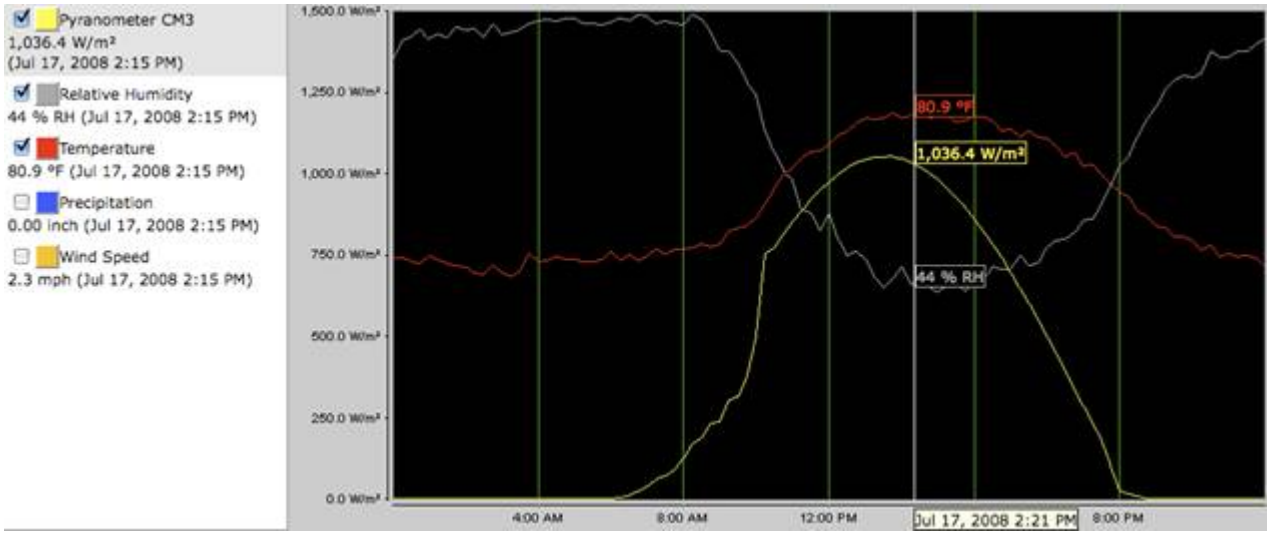
Now I admit, food can be better with wine and wine can be better with food. Still, don't forget the old saying of English wine merchants (now backed up by a scientific study in the ASEV Journal) "buy on water sell on cheese." Fact is cheese dumbs down the palate, and please don't serve table grapes at a wine tasting (not all grape varieties pair well). There are some obvious matches, like artichokes, Sauvignon Blanc, Baena olive oil and cat's pee (look it up). Red wine is a natural with meat. It seems, according to an Israeli study, red wine has polyphenols that eliminate cancerous polyphenols, from meat, in our stomachs. Of course this is based on studies involving rats. Hearing this I assumed Israeli scientists studied a Catholic rat and a Mormon rat. Both ate meat, except the Catholic rat had wine with his meals. Granted the Mormon rat was more productive, until he contracted terminal cancer and was euthanised. The Catholic rat was also euthanised, but only as a result of budget cuts. Except that wasn't how it was, it seems scientists can be really hard hearted.

So, eat what you want, drink what you like. If I'm doing my job right and winemaker David Munksgard is doing his job right, our wines taste great, and there's a whole range of foods, dishes and preparations that will just be great with them. So yeah, on our tech sheets we still write about food matches, just don't take them seriously.

July 22, 2008



The marine air layer (some may call it fog) is back. The cormorant is happy, I'm happy, the guys working in the field are happy, even the grapes are happy, insofar as it is possible for grapes to be happy, because as long as we've got a layer of marine air it's a lot cooler. For example compare July 17 below with the temperature chart for July 7 (see the July 8 posting):



I calculated the average temperature between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. (it seems I've got nothing else better to do): On the 7th the average was 80.5 degrees, on the 17th, 67 degrees. When we had heat we had a lot of growth, as can be seen in P Block, Stony Hill Chardonnay (doesn't that look nice?).

Observe not only the size of the clusters, but also the canes and the leaves. Now for some that would be an argument in favor of heat. The problem is that we are seeing the first hints of veraison, as in K Block (Clone 115 Pinot Noir).

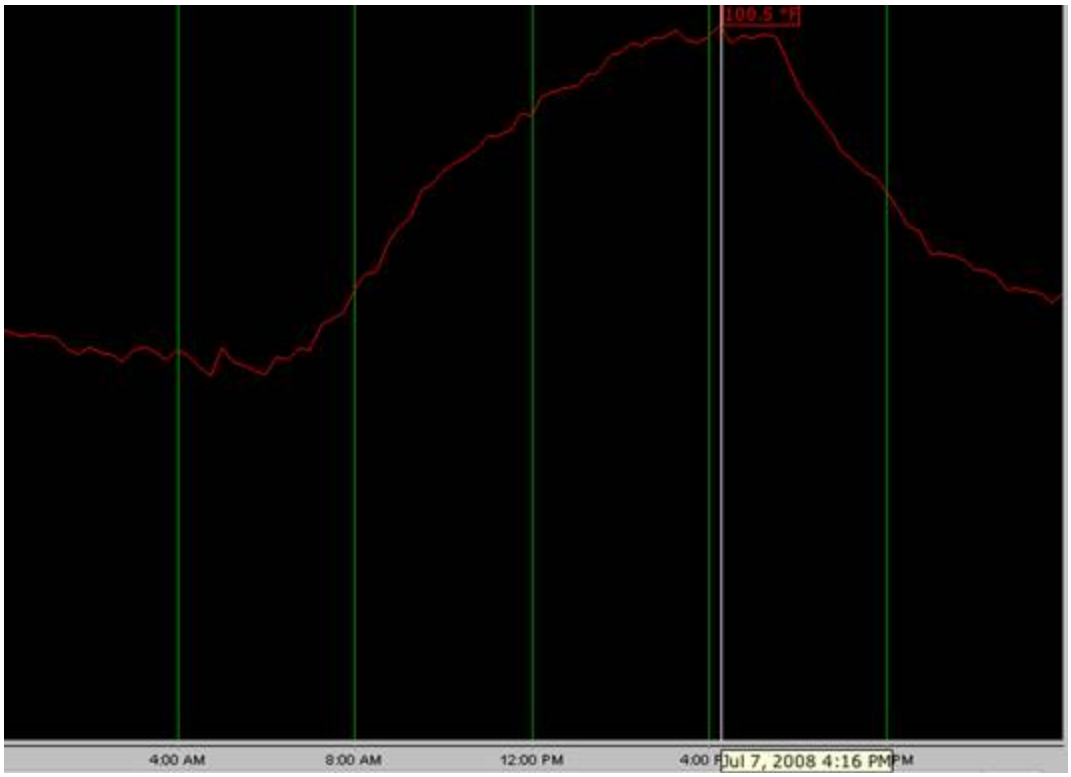
So at this point we're moving into a new phase, in phase one, the goal was get a crop, for phase two, the goal is to ripen it, not simply in terms of sugar or degrees 'brix' but flavors and aromas too. Too hot and the grapes sugar up way too fast and then David Munksgard gets hot under the collar because he wants to work only with cool grapes so we have to start early or pick at night. But, what if we have fog. Then it's way cooler and, according Dr. Ron S. Jackson (currently affiliated with the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute, Brock University): "with 'Pinot Noir' … aroma compounds appear to be produced in higher amounts during long, cool seasons, compared to early hot seasons." I.e., we want hang time, but hang time with corresponding physiological maturity. We want the tips to stop growing and the tendrils to fall off so the vine focuses its 'energy' on the grapes. While we're at it we also want the fruit to mature evenly within a block. We don't want sunburn, but we also don't want botrytis. While there are things we can do to help the grapes, like pulling laterals and removing internal leaves - which is what we are doing now (to improve air flow and still provide shade and filtered light); drop clusters from shoots that are too short and second crop - which we did last year; and we can irrigate - which we did earlier in the month, which is fine for the only Green Egret I've ever seen at Iron Horse (easier to catch fish).

(Rather cool birds, it seems they'll catch an insect and drop in the water to lure fish. I assume they are called Green because of the their politics.) Still, there's nothing we can do replicate the benefits of marine air.

On a totally different note, on the 16th the West County Grill in Sebastopol put on a classic dungeness crab feed serving only our 2003 Classic Vintage Brut. No plates, no tablecloths. It was great fun and I got to take pictures of my food.

July 8, 2008

It's been hot. The problem is no fog. The closest we've had to fog is the smoke from the fires in Mendocino County. Fact is, if you want fog, go to the Green Valley web site. If it seems like I am complaining it is because I am complaining. No fog means it gets warmer earlier, hence warmer longer and it's also warmer, as in hot, so, more heat summation units, as is obvious looking at a temperature chart for July 7. At about 6:00 a.m. the low was 49.5 F, a little after 4:00 p.m. we suffered a high of 100.5 F, quite a spread, but for over nine hours the temperature was over 80 F.



More heat summation units mean more vegetative growth. Which means more work for us. In the photo below, taken in Z Block (we used to call it Cf, but we planted Z Clone Chardonnay, a 'ruedesque' clone, and we figured 'Z' would look better on a label than 'Cf''), even though we're dealing with pretty young vines (dormant bench grafts planted in 2006) many of the shoots are already over five feet in length.

Meantime the rootstock planted in Upper A are popping up…

As are the field grafts in H - in some cases I'm worried that our internodes may be too long.

Even the feral vine I check on from time to time to see what a vine really wants to do has exploded.

Which is surprising. I wasn't expecting so much growth this season, especially as the willow the vine had been growing on went down in a storm. Still, I'm looking forward this year to actually being able to pick the grapes without falling into a poison oak patch. Another positive, the first black berries of the season - note, the first always taste the best.

With all this heat we have to irrigate more often, which is good for the Heron (easier to find fish in shallower water)…

But, more irrigation means less available water and helps to fuel the vegetative growth.

At this point I was going to address an article in the June Wine & Spirits that extolled the virtues of dry farming with a well reasoned but scathing response, as well as an impassioned argument in favor of Chardonnays (like ours) that are malolactic fermentation free, but it is just too hot for any more hot air.

Instead compare the color of the recently bottled 2007 Brut Rosé (cool yellow crown caps)…

And this particularly successful male House Finch; it seems the redder a male is, the more desirable he is to females of the species.

An obvious conclusion: The male of our species who serves Iron Horse Brut Rosé is also more desirable.

June 21, 2008

Good bye Spring.

Hello Summer…

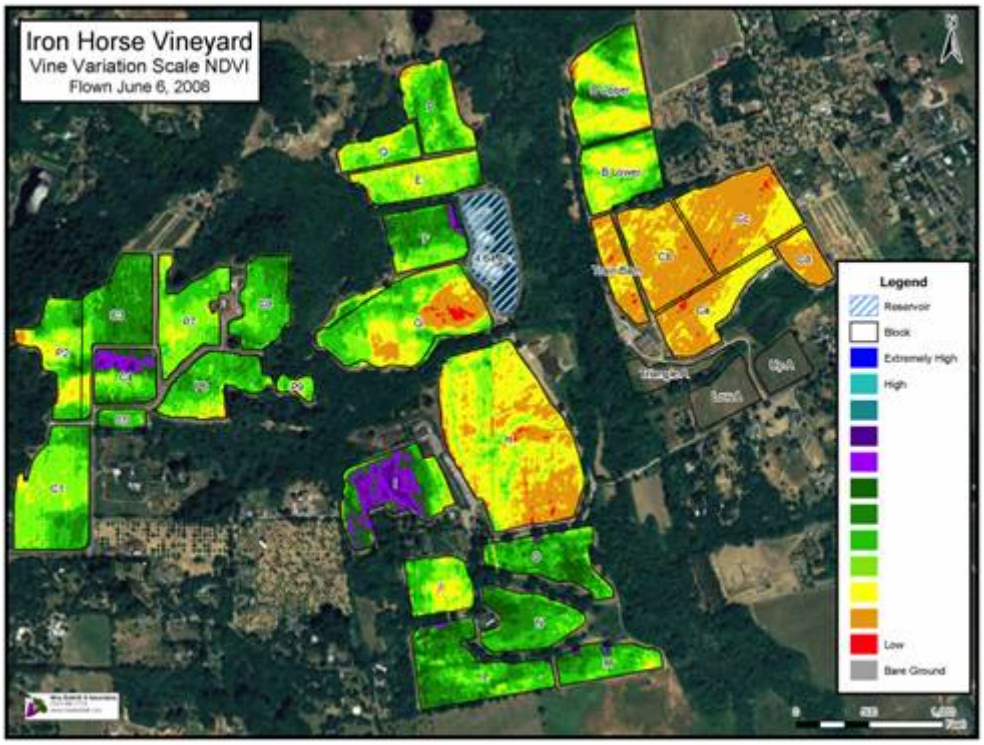
Now, chose your favorite superstitious activity, like knocking on wood, crossing fingers, spitting, whatever works for you. It looks like we have set, and a fine one at that, as can be seen by these beautiful clusters in N.

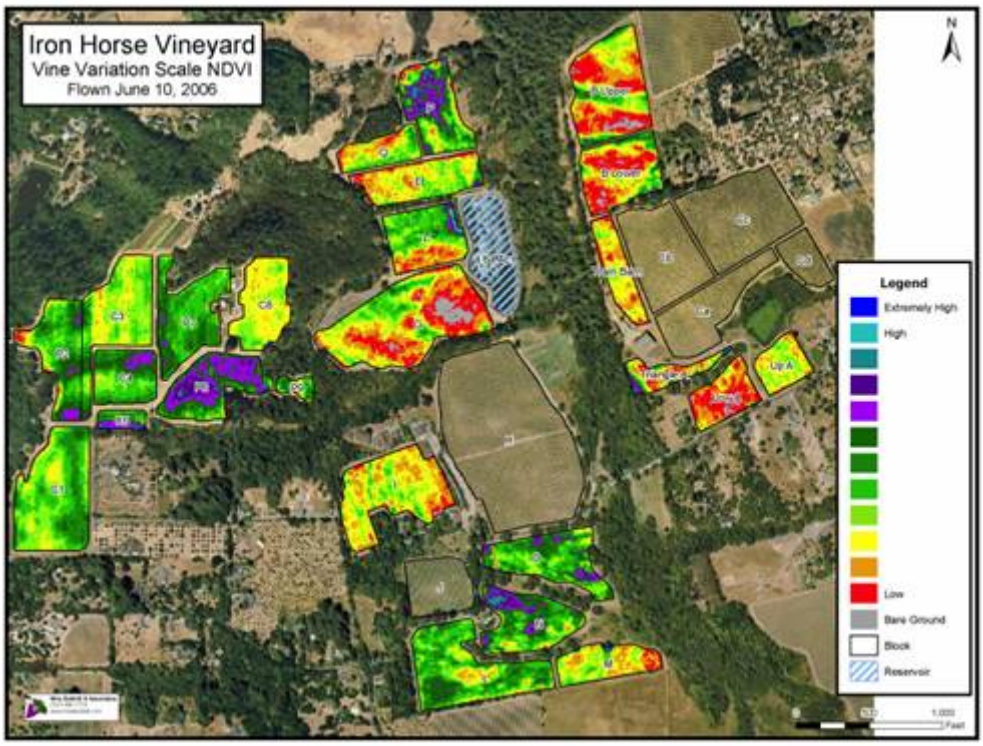
We survived heat, cold, more cold, heat, wind, cold, heat and most unexpected, normal, followed by heat, and yet not only has set gone well, all of H & J has been grafted and all of the rootstock has been planted in Upper A, Lower A and Train House B. Granted it wasn't easy. On Tuesday, June 10, it was hot, but not off the chart hot (around 91.5 F). The rootstock had been planted in Lower A but the drip lines hadn't been laid out. The directions that came with the rootstock require that the roots be "moderately moist," so fifteen of us, including me, except when I paused to take some photos, winemaker David Munksgard, Cellar Master Rigo Moreno and others from the cellar, José Puga and Juan from the garden, and all of the vineyard crew led by Victor Arreola and Manuel Briano, first pulled the drip hose from the risers at the top of the block down to the end of the row and then hand watered each mound all the way back up to the top of the row – it was like a moment from Shakespeare's Henry V, just before the battle of Agincourt, "we few, we happy few," only without the killing and armor and arrows, okay it wasn't like that, but what a great effort by all.

So we're past phase one which is 'get a crop' and are on to phase two, 'ripen it,' which explains why we're shoot thinning (a vine can only ripen so many clusters), and shoot positioning, to get better light, discourage laterals (they are like parasites to the grape clusters), avoid bunched up clusters to reduce the risk of rot, etc. I confess I hate shoot positioning, especially in the older blocks where the wires are fixed. It's really easy when trying to manipulate a shoot to break it. I seem to lack dexterity and patience. So I came up with a time and shoot saving solution, use clips, as demonstrated below, to at least hold the shoot on the wire.

Meanwhile, just a few weeks after grafting H & J we're getting growth. In some cases shoots are already well above the carton.

Finally, over all, the vineyard is simply looking better, as can be seen from the NDVI's (from Wikipedia, "the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) is a simple numerical indicator that can be used to analyze remote sensing measurements, typically but not necessarily from a space platform, and assess whether the target being observed contains live green vegetation or not") first June 2008 and then June 2006.





Purple means too much vigor (not good), red, not enough (bad) and grey, bare ground (really bad). The improvement in just two years is obvious. There's a lot less red and grey and not too much purple.

Of course all this good news just makes me nervous. There are many hazards ahead and a lot can go wrong before harvest. So we need to remain vigilant and proactive. By way of illustration (mainly for the benefit of David Munksgard because he doesn't like snakes) below is a four-foot long critter (by next week it will be five feet when I re-tell the story of how I tried to catch it) I found lurking by the Winery…

June 5, 2008

I admit, I'm actually pleased. Barack Obama is the "presumptive" Democratic Party nominee. Clinton has suspended her campaign (i.e. she wants her money back). Efren Carrillo (he's the young guy below) led the voting and is in a November run-off for 5th District Supervisor, and at just 27, if he wins – and if he doesn't I shall weep for Sonoma County – I can see the day when he's governor of California and possibly more. I've never met a harder working candidate.

More important, were almost done with bloom, so I almost ready to move out of panic mode every time I read a weather report.

Meanwhile everyone is working really hard – almost everyone. I confess, work fascinates me, I can watch other people work for hours. Which is what I've been doing, and I've had plenty to watch. On a recent Friday we had three guys cleaning (i.e. removing the tops) of the rootstock in H readying the vines for field grafting.

We had five more people grafting.

We had five putting milk cartons and drip lines on the vines already grafted and eleven digging holes and planting new rootstock in Upper A.

Two were busy finishing the irrigation in Train House B, three were engaged in various tractor work, ten were shoot thinning in G and another three were shoot positioning and clipping in K. Two more were planting vegetables (including 289 different kinds of tomatoes) in what was Triangle A, for a total of 44 (45 if you include me - watching - as someone who was working).

Fertilizing Update

As I often remark, what we do here is neither native nor natural. Below are the preliminary 2008 bloom petiole results:

DELLAVALLE Laboratory, Inc.
Chemical and Consultants

Report of Tissue Analysis

1910 W. McKinley, Suite 110, Fresno, CA 93728
FAX (559) 268-8174 - (800) 228-8690 - (559) 233-6128

Iron Horse Ranch & Vineyard
9786 Ross Station Rd
Sebastopol CA 95472
9751
51

Identification Grape Bloom

Lab No. 114919
Sampled 5/20/2008
Submitted 5/22/2008
Submitted by Adam Carter
Reported 5/30/2008
Job/Ranch/Site Iron Horse
Copy To D. Roberts, H. Uriarte
FAX
E-Mail heather/daniel@integratedwinegrowning.com

No.	Description	2% Acetic Acid Extract mg/kg NO_3-N	mg/kg PO_4-P	% K	Total % N	Total % P	Total % K	Total mg/kg Zn	Total mg/kg Mn	Total % Na	Total mg/kg B	Total % Ca	Total % Mg	Total mg/kg Fe	Total mg/kg Cu	Extract % Cl
Methods		P3.10	P3.10	P3.10	P2.20	P4.20	P4.20	P4.20	P4.20	P4.20	P4.20	P4.20	P4.20	P4.20	P4.20	P3.10
1	Iron Horse Block P7 Pinot Noir 50% Bloom				1.18	0.48	2.23	67	171	0.01	46	1.50	0.50	40	14	
2	Iron Horse Block I2 Pinot Noir 50% Bloom				1.32	0.34	2.26	82	140	0.01	30	1.49	0.49	40	13	
3	Iron Horse Block I1 Pinot Noir 50%				2.22	0.43	3.44	63	92	0.01	32	1.73	0.38	45	13	
4	Iron Horse Block G2 Slope Pinot Noir 50%				1.21	0.22	2.70	67	71	0.02	32	1.53	0.42	53	18	
5	Iron Horse Block G1-Hill Pinot Noir 50%				1.13	0.25	2.69	64	111	0.01	33	1.36	0.38	46	17	
6	Iron Horse Block G3-Swale Pinot Noir 50%				1.39	0.23	3.05	68	66	0.01	39	1.43	0.43	42	15	
7	Iron Horse Block P2 Pinot Noir 50%				1.10	0.43	2.45	63	201	0.01	48	1.67	0.55	38	15	
8	Iron Horse Block E Pinot Noir 50%				1.65	0.48	2.14	61	44	0.01	45	1.57	0.44	42	13	
9	Iron Horse Block P6 Pinot Noir 50%				1.23	0.41	1.86	69	164	0.01	39	1.47	0.54	40	13	
10	Iron Horse Block C1 Chardonnay 50%				1.17	0.54	2.71	62	182	0.01	46	1.69	0.49	46	11	

To all sections of G block at pea stage, apply 3 gals/acre of 3-18-18

I liked Daniel Roberts' cover e-mail, “will send report when all petioles are in, just follow instructions now as indicated,” brief and to the point. Look closely at entries 4,5, & 6, a/k/a G Block, under P (phosphorus), the readings of 0.22, 0.25 and 0.23 are dangerously low, hence the instruction “to all sections of G block at pea stage, apply 3 gals/acre 3-18-18 (3% nitrogen, 18% phosphorus and 18% potassium). Apparently phosphorus deficiency can be a problem in vines planted to hillside soils, like G. According to Canadian expert Dr. Ron S. Jackson: “Phosphorus is an important component of cell-membrane lipids, nucleic aids, energy carriers such as ATP, and some proteins. It is also required for sugar metabolism.” Now I’m not sure what that all means but when I see words like ‘important’ and ‘required’ I pay attention. So we’ll do as instructed.

May 20, 2008

It has been hot, on Tuesday morning at 5:15 a.m. it was 38 F, by Thursday 5:15 p.m. 100.1 F. Of course now it's okay, the "fog" (not fog actually, just low clouds) is back. It was hot here because it was cooler in the Central Valley, which meant that the front moved west (as can be seen from what is, for us, an unusual sunset, above) which kept the "fog" from coming ashore (sorry Al, no global warning story here). So we worked with appropriate hats - most of us remembered to remove the tag….

And were properly hydrated, and took breaks in the shade…

And dealt with the fact that bloom is starting on Thomas Rd. and we haven't finished shoot thinning in P6, P7 and P7.

Tasting Wine: What I've Learned about 'Mouthfeel'

A year ago last Valentine's Day, David Munksgard and I spent a morning, learning all about sensory analysis of wine from Vinquiry's sensory scientist Sue Langstaff. A year later, we spent another morning learning defect identification, and about a month ago, I enjoyed another morning on 'mouthfeel.' As a result, after about ten hours of instruction, I now taste better, can smell bad and am better at using my tongue. More important, I actually enjoy wine (okay, good and great wine) a lot more than before and I have the tools and the training to describe what it is that I am tasting and smelling – smelling being a key component to my enhanced appreciation. Even if I happen upon a bad wine at least I can make an educated guess as to source of the problem - most of the time it's corked, but, with dangerous wine making all sorts of things can go wrong, like the mercaptan I'm pretty sure I smelled in an expensive Chardonnay (not ours) some weeks ago.

Trying to describe the wine is also helping me enjoy the various qualities that may, or may not be in the glass or flute. Imagine, thinking while tasting and before speaking, it's a struggle but I notice more. What we're trying to do is communicate verbally that which is purely sensory, mainly by way of analogy. For example, here's how David and I describe the 2002 Blanc de Blancs:

"On the nose, sourdough toast followed by ripe pear, grapefruit, tangerine and Green Valley apples; in the mouth, creamy entry, with mid-palate touches of citrus, ripe pear and farm fresh apple fruit and a crisp, long finish."

Not as imaginative as "ethereal – like drinking a cloud," but then I know what pears, grapefruits, tangerines and apples smell like, because I can and have smelled and tasted them. I've never been able to smell the ether or anything that is otherwise impalpable or unearthly, and while I can't say I've ever knowingly tasted a cloud, as I am literal minded, I assume a good tasting cloud tastes like water, while a bad one tastes like acid rain. Still descriptions of even the visual can be difficult if you don't have a picture. Take something easy like color. Describe a yellow as 'school bus yellow' and everyone knows what you are talking about, but what if you have 166 yellow paints, as does Sherwin-Williams, including "Laughing Orange" and "Forceful Orange," as well as my personal favorite, "Decisive Yellow" (which is different than "Confident Yellow"). Those are great names, except they convey very little as to what they look like. How can a yellow laugh and be orange at the same time? Imagine reading in a magazine about a house where the dining room was painted Decisive Yellow and the trim was an appropriate Forceful Orange. Without a picture, who'd know what it looked like?

The hardest thing to describe is ‘mouthfeel.’ Above we used “creamy entry” which is really directed to the mouth feel of the bubbles after ageing on the yeast, or in the case of Guinness N2 instead of CO2. ‘Creamy,’ sounds nice but isn’t really what I’m feeling. Bubbles aren’t actually creamy, some are big and coarse, others small and smooth, so perhaps we need to change our vocabulary. Perhaps ‘perceived smoothness’ would be a better descriptor, but then how do you go from the poetic ‘like drinking a cloud’ to the lumbering prose of ‘perceived smoothness?’

Moving away from bubbles and things get harder. Our tongues feel things, like viscosity or volume, astringency, tannins and dryness. We also feel heat. Yet, as Sue taught me, tongues don’t feel things the same way as our fingertips. When I smell a pear I’m using the same receptors as when I smell pear in a wine. But what silk may feel to my fingers is not the same as ‘silky’ on my tongue and licking silk isn’t pleasant. Some wines seem to have more weight, which depending on the varietals can be good or bad. To make things harder, mouthfeel is both cumulative (tannins build up) and time sensitive (saliva). For example the way to evaluate tannin intensity according to the Institut Coopératif du Vin’s mouthfeel protocols is to first to place 10 mL of wine in the mouth, take three seconds to evaluate volume, another three seconds for acidity and then:

“Hold head upright. After a delay of 2 seconds… run the tongue twice against the palate from back to front. Each effort should last 1 second. There should be a 1 second interval between movements. Evaluate the intensity of the friction generated by the second pass of the tongue on the palate…”

To evaluate astringency after expectorating the wine and waiting two seconds “run the upper lip twice against the upper incisors.” We all looked like bunnies. The hardest part was writing notes while holding one’s head upright.

In the meantime I’m glad I have an added layer of complexity to wine when I taste. At the same time I don’t want to make the enjoyment of wine be a test. The first and only question about a wine should be “did you enjoy it?” It’s just that I want to know why I like a particular wine… I am, after all a professional.

News:

We have a new chef at Iron Horse, Ruben Gomez.

We’re field grafting Pinot Noir in H…more on that next post.

May 5, 2008

Finally, it's May, and I'm hoping "frost season" is over (either cross your fingers, touch wood or do something superstitious, now). We had some losses, but nothing significant. An interesting problem is that although last April was one of the driest since they've been keeping records, where we have been frost protecting it is pretty darn wet and while it looks pretty, it's been tough for those who have allergies.

We're still busy shoot thinning, right now the guys are working on the babies in C.

While it may not look like there's much to do, shoot thinning young vines, in particular cane pruned vines is very demanding because there is almost no room for errors and one has to be focused not just on this year's canes but also next year's (and maybe in the following year's too).

Below are my notes from our session with Daniel Roberts.

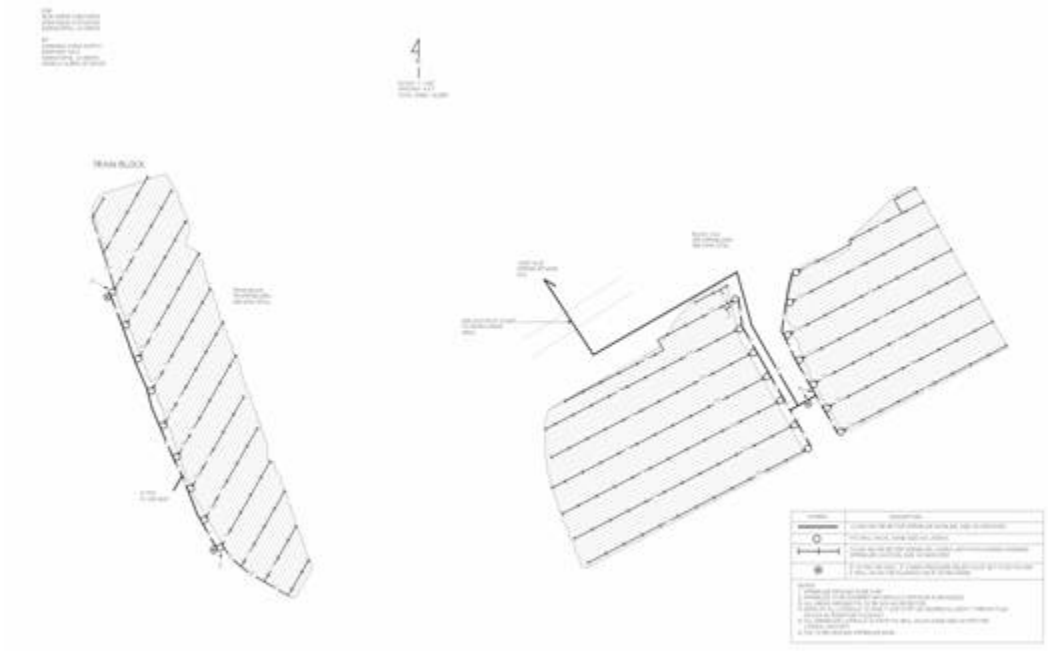
If still in the carton: Select strongest and straightest shoot, tie Remove the other shoots and replace carton. **Do not cut tape.**
If Head Trained: Select 3 to 4 shoots based on height (3" to 4" below fruit wire) and strength, leave only 2 shoots if the trunk is weak. Pick those shoots that will make the best canes and/or spurs next year. Thin remaining shoots and buds. If a field graft, cut the tape.

If Cane Trained: Check first and make sure there are buds or shoots suitable to be next year's replacement canes and/or spurs (note, spurs needed if the cane is too high), then, thin to 3 to 4 buds per cane. If a field graft, cut the tape.

Sometimes the results aren't pretty, but as long as we can get some fruit this year and have canes and/or spurs for next year I'll survive.

We are also at work putting in the frost protection lines and irrigation in Upper A, Lower A and Train House B.

Here are plans for the overhead sprinklers.



I am very pleased with the simplicity of the design (thank you Angie). Mainly I'm pleased with our decision to use overhead sprinklers and not micro-emitters. With overheads we really aren't using that much more water because of the narrower row spacing. More important, the pipes are underground, hence insulated, so while freeze back is possible it's a lot less likely. The whole point of a frost protection system is that it has to work every night, without fail, miss just one and you lose the crop.

Of course with the arrival of May, no more "Offal Monday." So below is my homage to some great lunches.

The Offal Truth: Random Ramblings About Making the Best of Mondays

The offal-ness started with a request by viticulture consultant Daniel Roberts, PhD, he wanted sweetbreads, and Lucas Martin, co-chef and co-owner of K&L Bistro in Sebastopol, CA (for two years a Michelin one star restaurant), was happy to oblige, meanwhile I was looking for both sweetbreads and other innards, and a way to have more than just a sandwich on Mondays, because if I didn't it would mean three sandwiches a week, if I kept up with my save the Earth and a buck too austerity campaign (it seems I may have started a recession, sorry). The result; starting, on January 14, 2008, were the best sweetbreads (based on the size I'd say pancreas, I've learned so much) I've ever had in my life, and the first 'Offal Monday'.

No matter what else happens – provided Barack Obama is elected president (and if he isn't I shall weep for this nation) 2008 will always be a great year (at this point my wife and children will point out that it can only be a great year if the Yankees win the championship, as if that really matters). Since that wonderful day we've had sweetbreads again (based on size this time I'd guess thymus, I've learned so much), pan seared calf's liver, beef tongue pot-au-feu, lamb kidneys, pig's feet ragout with pork belly a la orange. Also trippa alla romana (yep, tripe, and while I missed President's Day but that night I had Ox Tail Consommé, with marrow, at Cyrus in Healdsburg and if ox tail isn't offal than there's no offal), calf's liver in a red wine reduction sauce, sweetbreads provençal, lambs kidneys and lambs hearts and I've combed my library for everything I've got on offal, which, it appears, is a lot, and don't forget the Internet.

I always like to start my research with my dictionaries, starting with the Thin Paper Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Fifth Edition, Springfield Mass., 1946 (a gift to my Father for his 16th birthday, in 1945, just two months after the end of WWII, which explains thin paper, but not a 1946 date): "**Of'fal** (ŏf'ăl), *n*. [off+fall.] **1.** Waste parts, ends, bits, etc.; esp., *sing. & pl.,* the inedible parts of a butchered animal. **2.** Worthless refuse; rubbish." Okay not very appetizing, so I turn to Larousse Gastronomique, the revised 2001 English language edition (I know, it would be better in French, but then no definition of 'offal,' which in French is 'abats'): "The edible internal parts and some extremities of an animal, which are removed before the carcass is cut up. It therefore includes the head, feet and tail, and all the main internal organs." Good. Then on to The Oxford Companion to Food, by Alan Davidson, Oxford University Press, 1999: "Those parts of a meat animal which are used as food but which are not skeletal muscle. The term literally means 'off fall', or pieces which fall from a carcass when it is butchered." Leave it to the English to find the middle ground (much like the Anglican Church), although I noticed the definition in my 1993 edition of the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary includes "the parts of a slaughtered or dead animal unfit for human consumption; decomposing flesh; carrion… refuse in general; rubbish, garbage, dregs, scum." That appealing definition sent me to my trusty 1967 petit Robert, a French dictionary, to look up 'abat': "Parties accessories d'animaux tués pour la consomation." Additional parts of animals butchered for consumption. Clear, to the point and definitely non-judgmental. Curiously, or maybe not, "offal" is absent from my Grandfather's Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Encyclopedia, Vol. XIX, 1948, although there is an entry for Neat's –Foot Oil which comes from boiling ox-feet, which seems to me to be to be offal, but it's used to dress leather so not eaten.

Of course the fact is that offal is everywhere in our diet. Americans are regular consumers of offal. Anyone who's had a Dodger Dog has probably had offal and just didn't know it - okay I don't really know what goes into Dodger Dogs, or Ball Park Franks or anything served from the Oscar Meyer wiener-mobile because they don't seem to want us to know, but if they used a natural casing (somebody's small intestine), then offal is involved (the alternative is plastic or artificial collagen, yuck). My point being is that I doubt an all beef hot dog is made with sirloin steak, and if not then with what?

What we don't have is a complete acceptance, like the French, that great eating often involves some of the baser parts of an animal. A favorite example comes from Les Recettes Originales de Jaques Maximin, Couleurs, Parfums et Saveurs de ma Cuisine, Editions Robert Laffont, Paris 1984; "Cous de vollaille farcis au pieds d'agneau," or fowl necks stuffed with lamb's hooves – sheep are ungulates, hence have hooves, which isn't as off the wall as it seems. According to Larousse Gastronomique: "Stuffed neck of duck or goose is a speciality of south-west France. The bones are carefully removed from the neck, then the skin is sewn up at one end and stuffed with a mixture of chicken, and pork meat, a little foie gras, Armagnac and truffle juice. It is cooked in duck or goose fat." Maximin's version is a lot healthier, but I really want to try both of them. As a quick aside, my

favorite Maximin recipe is for Courgettes å la Fleur at aux Truffes. Basically, stuffed zucchini flowers. You need two people, one to hold the flower and another to blow it open before stuffing.

What we do know is that offal tends to spoil, hence why it is normally made into sausages, terrines and pâtés (and spreads), and why this was normally done in winter. The main theme of Stéphane Reynaud's (soon to be a culinary classic) Cochon & Fils (also available in English as, go figure, Pig & Sons), 2005, is the annual February pig slaughter at his hometown of Saint-Agréve in the Ardeche, when it's pretty cold. So I understand why people may have their reservations.
But what makes offal taste so good (yes it does naysayer)? For an important question like that there's only one savant with all the answers, Harold McGee, (he is never wrong). So I open my first Scribner revised edition, 2004, of his On Food and Cooking, The Science and Lore of the Kitchen, Completely Revised and Updated (which unlike my older dog-eared paperback is not signed by the 'Master') and I learn, some offal, like tongue have more connective tissue, which means more collagen, which means great stocks or stews - which explains why beef tongue was the perfect base for a pot-au-feu and ox tail screams out, "use me for consommé," or other parts make for delicious crispy snacks like pork rinds and the pig's ears my wife's dog loves. Then there are organs like kidneys and liver, which have very little collagen but much more flavor, because, according to Harold McGee: "The characteristic flavor of liver has been little investigated, but seems to depend importantly on sulfur compounds (thiazoles and thiazolines), and generally gets stronger with prolonged cooking."

Still we know the important part is that while there may be a class of 'offal' meats, each one needs to be prepared in a manner appropriate to its qualities. Many, many years ago, my wife and I thought we'd make kidneys. We did not own a knife sharp enough to remove the outer-membrane (a must according to Hugh Fearley-Whittingstall, The River Cottage, Meat Book, 2004, or use scissors) and clearly lacked the time and skill needed for a successful dinner. Imagine starting with this:

Then ending up with this:

Lucas Martin's Trippa all Romana had to be cooked for eight hours. For some, sweetbreads need 48 hours to get right, first soak in milk or water then press and dry (Thomas Keller suggests one may need three days - is it me or do I have too many cook books?).

So what's my point? Well, offal food is great food, when fresh and prepared by a professional, and it's the green thing to do, as Hugh Fearley-Whittingstall states:

Offal offers us a chance to pay our respects, in a full and holistic manner, to the animals we've raised for meat. The nose to tail approach to using the animals we kill for food must…be a central tenet of the contract of the domestication and good husbandry.

April 22, 2008

"April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain."

T.S. Eliot, The Wasteland.

April 2008 sure has been cruel, especially when it comes to frost nights, about 27 in 32 days, a new seasonal record (add April 15 to the mix and you can understand why I always look forward to May), and while we are getting lilacs, still not a drop of rain, which explains why we've had to frost protect so much - clear and windless nights are much colder than foggy, cloudy or rainy nights.

Manuel Briano (right) and José Puga have a lot of time to bond.

They're doing great work. I go down some nights just to see what it's like…it's dark and cold and noisy, and yet when the full moon is out and the frogs are sounding off it can be very pretty.

It’d be nice to be done with frost season (especially given the cost of diesel) but I’d prefer it didn’t rain now or in May until we have full set. But, the swallows are back (probably the only new residential development in Sonoma County this year, which could be seen by some as progress).

Notwithstanding cold nights, the days can be pretty warm, so we had good shoot growth - note below three inflorescences or clusters on a single Chardonnay shoot, good news given the small size of last year’s crop (everyone must now touch wood), but understandable as this year’s grapes started to form last June and July, and because of the smaller crop the vines were able store additional carbohydrates.

This much growth means it's time to shoot thin and sucker the vines. It's the second and a half individual visit to each and every vine (cane pruned and cordon vines still being trained, need to be tied after pruning). Basically we're eliminating all the shoots we don't want, such as suckers (from below ground), water sprouts (on the trunk), shoots or buds in the wrong place, i.e. not on the spur or growing on the bottom of the cordon, and making sure there are no more than two shoots per spur (some times the secondary bud also starts to push, and we don't want two shoots right next to each other in the same place). Below on the left is 'before,' which means 'after' is on the right – make it game, find which shoots were thinned.

For me thinning isn't as mind engaging as pruning, still it's quite satisfying, and after hours in the sun I've been told I've taken on a 'weathered look,' but in a good way. Mainly we use our hands. Shovels for suckers and occasionally pruning shears

Why do all this work? Short answer: To get grapes that taste better when made into wine. Scientific answer: from Ron S. Jackson's Wine Science, Principles, Practice, Perception. Second Edition; 'thinning' or early spring 'disbudding' have two benefits, first, "early removal economizes nutrient reserves and favors the strong growth of the remaining shoots," and second, "improve vine microclimate." (Dr. Jackson is a Canadian who taught mainly at Brandon University in Manitoba, was a technical advisor to the Manitoba Liquor Control Commission and is now "allied with the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute, Brock University in Ontario.") Long answer: At this early stage of growth the 'food' for the vine is sugar stored in the trunk and cordon from last year. Not long after thinning the growth in the remaining shoots is quite dramatic. More important by limiting shoots to two per spur, or one, depending on the vine and the spur, which is how we pruned the vines not so long ago, we'll get better canes, which encourages reproductive growth (a/k/a/ grapes), no crowding (helps to reduce botrytis issues), and better light (more on that in future entries) which affects maturity and flavors. As I've said before, and will say again, what we're doing is neither native nor natural. Vines prefer vegetative growth; shoots and leaves, but we can't sell shoots and we can't bottle shade, so we 'persuade' then to grow grapes, but, and here's the paradox, more shoots, more leaves, etc. does not mean more grapes or, and here's the important part, the quality of those grapes you would get if we didn't thin isn't what we need.

Meanwhile, another shot of the person who really should be the next President of these United States of America, taken just before he explained to a bunch of us well to do types (I take pride that we were the only one's to show up in a pick-up truck), why small town people in Pennsylvania are bitter, and it made a lot of sense at the time and was definitely not elitist - after all I'm now from a small town, and my wife was born in a small town in Pennsylvania, and we weren't offended, we didn't feel the need to run to a church and cling to our guns.

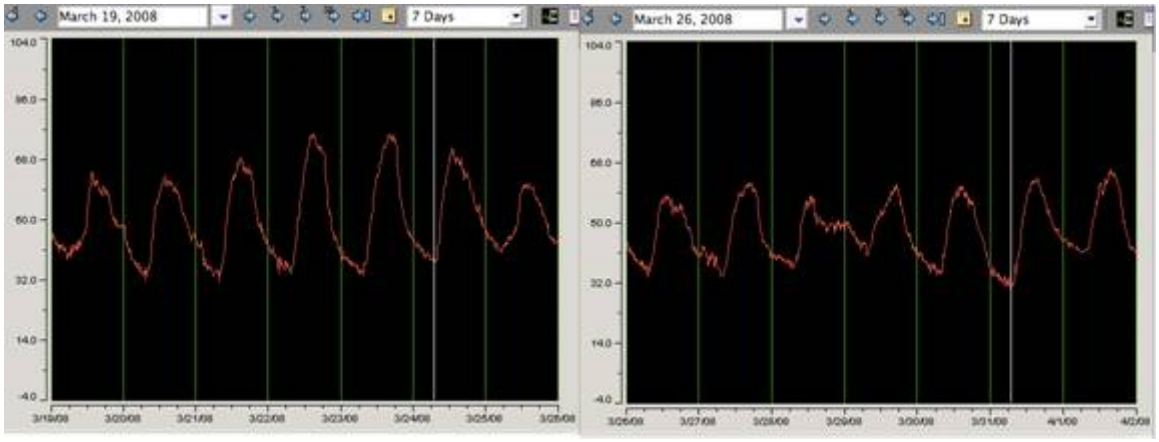
To finish, Lamb Chop (the best I've ever had) and Lamb Hearts from the 'offal' genius; Chef Lucas Martin at K&L Bistro:

April 4, 2008

We’re getting some bud break, like in P2, note the inflorescences…

Elsewhere, we're just waiting.

Mainly it's been clear and dry with very little wind. That means it is cold, at least for Californians, and cold means we need to frost protect, so far about 13 nights out of the last 15. If the low temperatures charted below are above 32 degrees, it's because the frost protection system is working.



The main reason why it's working is because of the efforts of Manuel Briano and Jose Puga (shown below). As soon as the temperature drops below 38F they're down at the reservoir warming up the engines. It's not just cold and dark, it's also noisy the frogs are really loud. Below 36F they turn the engines on, and then go out into the cold, and now wet vineyard to check various filters, water pressure, etc. If the system fails a huge chunk of the crop will be lost, which I am sad to say has happened to some of our neighbors.

Buzz Word Winemaking

Last year I learned to taste better, this year I learned to smell bad. Actually, winemaker David Munksgard and I, learned about Wine Sensory Defects, which meant smelling defective wines and learning what defects are associated with which smells. For example, if one smells vinegar or fingernail-polish, chances are the wine has VA, volatile acidity, i.e. something went wrong during fermentation or the barrels weren't properly topped.

The class got me thinking about what it is we're doing at Iron Horse, both in the vineyard and in the winery, and how it all seems so 'conventional.' We're not organic or biodynamic, we filter, use commercial yeast, etc., simply un-cool. I wondered what it would be if we were 'with it' and then set about creating a hypothetical, back label, as follows:

Buzz Word Cellars
Green Valley of Russian River Valley
2006 Pinot Noir

This dangerous Pinot Noir was grown exclusively in certified 'biodynamique' or organic vineyards, by growers who use deficit irrigation and can partition carbohydrates. The grapes are picked only after extended hang time (preferably later than anyone else), and made at our gravity fed winery (after hand sorting and table sorting), by the seat of our hemp fiber pants. 100% hot, native fermentation, unfiltered and un-fined - Our cutting edge winemaker is not afraid to get intimate with the fruit (but only during a full moon).

Contains Sulfites Produced & Bottled by Buzz Wine Co., Sebastopol, CA
Government Warning: (1) According to the Surgeon General, women should not drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects. (2) Consumption of alcoholic beverages impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery, and may cause health problems

Allow me to parse the above. I won't dwell on biodynamic, other than the only way to be certain to have a defect free wine is to have no crop at all, which is an option if biodynamic. As for organic, the problem is sulfur. Be it a sulfate, sulfite or sulfur dioxide we're talking intense and disagreeable odors. Yes we use SO2 as a preservative, and sulfur as a fungicide in the vineyard (only one application). But organic growers use it much more frequently, risking sulfur residue at harvest and during fermentation excess sulfur can become sulfur dioxide, which will give a

wine a burnt-match smell and seriously irritate the nose, while hydrogen sulfide will result in a rotten egg smell. Jump forward to 'native fermentation', and we do some, there's a risk of VA, and hydrogen sulfide and (cue the scream) mercaptans, which range from smelling like cooked cabbage or canned corn to rubber, natural gas and putrefaction, because when doing a native fermentation one is taking some serious risks, which is not the case with commercial yeasts.

What's wrong with deficit irrigation? Nothing if done right, but water-stress vines too much and they won't take up enough potassium which could lead to too much malic acid and if really stressed will smell like nail-polish remover. Partitioning carbohydrates is something we actually do, basically at a certain point we want photsynthates (water, sugar, etc.) to translocate to the grapes and not to the leaves and shoots, more on this in a later entry. Hang time is the big issue. Long hang time (ultra high brix levels in the grapes) means wines with higher pH, they may have a great mouth feel, are ready to drink real soon and are beloved by certain wine critics, however, the downside is a wine that is inherently unstable. The range of bad bacteria, and yeast that can survive in the bottle is scary, hence a risk of a wine that smells like it has been baked, i.e. oxidized (fine in sherry, not so in a Pinot) because of acetaldehyde, not to mention (cue the scream) mercaptans.

What do I have against hand sorting and sorting tables? Well, they aren't cheap, and field sorting (which is what we do) is pretty effective, with proper supervision. Hand sorting and sorting tables require the grapes to be de-stemmed, so reds only, and they slow down the 'put through' rate of a winery. Take the following scenario, Owner goes to Winemaker, demands a wine that will garner a 97, so Winemaker says we need more hang time, the grapes arrive but some of them are raisins, which winemakers don't like, so Winemaker goes to Owner, requests a sorting table, which Owner buys, and now that the winery has one insists it be used, except now the winery crushes at a much slower pace, and Winemaker still wants cool grapes and insists on night picking (real bad for one's carbon foot print), and at night there's no way to effectively field sort…and so on. I like what we are doing, pick when David says pick and start at first light without leaving bins of grapes sitting around, and raising the cost of making a bottle of wine without necessarily improving quality.

What about the rest? Real quick with rest: gravity fed? hey before the power grid a necessity, but what goes down still has to go up, eventually, so why not just learn how to use a pump; hot fermentation? for Chardonnay at least a cool fermentation means esters, i.e. exotic fruit and minerality (which I like, check out the UnOaked Chardonnay); un-fined, fine, but unfiltered? I'm not saying all wines need to be sterile filtered, but at least analyze the wine first, and filtering, in of itself isn't wrong so long is it is done properly; getting intimate with the fruit? well that's just nasty.

What is it that's making me start each paragraph with "what?" I'm trying to make a point. Which is that we are on the right track. I always wonder is the test of buzz word wines and dangerous wine making are not the wines that are released but are the ones that never see the light of day?

To finish on a positive note, calf's kidneys at K & L 'Offal Monday', starting with after…

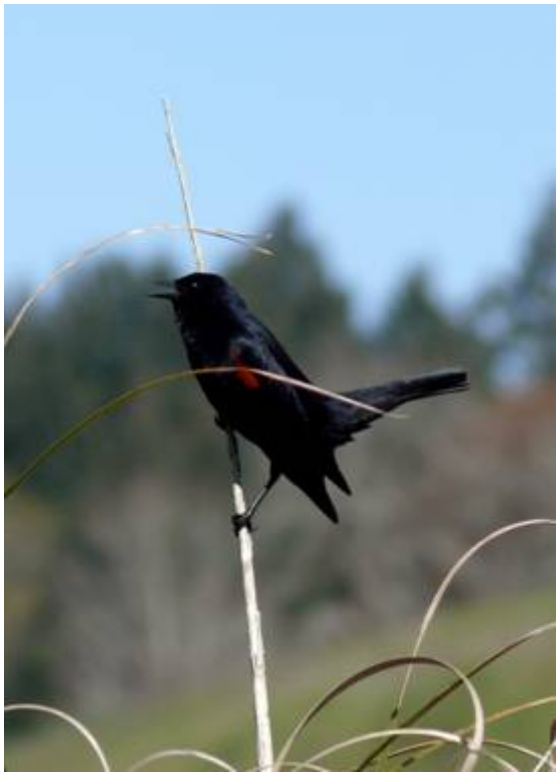
Then before.

March 24, 2007

Spring is. The buds are starting to break.

(By the way, I really love the shot above, it had just stopped raining, note the bead on the left and how I captured the sunlight, I used a special conversion lens on the Leica V-Lux1 – still, I want a Leica M8.)

Red Winged blackbirds are back at the reservoir (they have a great song but I can't figure a way to record and post it directly online, so to get an idea try http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/htmwav/h4980so.mp3, our government at work).



Spring in California means it can be 79° one moment, and hailing the next, and we have to worry about frost. Every day Meteorologist Erik Moldstad sends out a “Frost Watch,” like the one below:

CURRENT WEATHER CONDITIONS – 3:30 PM

Weather & Sky	**Clear skies.**
Temperatures	**72 to 79 degrees.**
Dewpoints	**35 to 45 degrees.**
Winds	**South to West at 5-10 mph**

TONIGHT’S WEATHER FORECAST

Weather & Sky	**Clear skies all night**
Low Temperatures	**35 to 42 degrees in most areas.**
Winds:	**SW to 10 mph this evening becoming light & northerly overnight.**
Wind Machine Inversion:	**Strong 3 to 4 deg F**

FROST FORECAST BY MICRO-CLIMATES

Micro-Climates	Tonight's Minimums	Frost Duration
Frost Pockets & sheltered areas on the Valley Floors	**32 to 35 degrees**	**< 1 hour**
Most Valley Floor Locations < 300 feet	**36 to 39 degrees**	**None**
Hillsides & Elevated Areas in the Valleys – 300 to 900 feet	**39 to 44 degrees**	**None**
Exposed higher terrain areas > 1,500 feet	**45 to 55 degrees**	**None**

We have frost pockets. Frost protecting is hard work. The temperature alarm goes off at midnight or 1:00 am, the pumps have to warm up and it's cold and dark. I don't know this first hand, but I've been told. We're even getting asparagus, leeks and spring onions from the garden.

The real proof it's spring, Sweet Breads (calf's pancreas actually, thymus are smaller, I've learnt so much at Offal Monday's at K&L) Provençal with asparagus, baby artichoke and fennel.

Cover Crops at Iron Horse Vineyards

Many years ago, we didn't know about cover crops, of course we didn't know much of anything. So any plant material other than a grapevine was a weed competing for water, etc. and needed to be eliminated. Now, particularly here at Iron Horse, cover crops are a serious part of 'Precision Viticulture', a key tool to manage variability, which explains why there is no intentional use of mustard. We have some, but as soon as we can it is mowed. At best mustard is a weed. It can be pretty in February and March, and clearly it is beloved by newspaper and magazine editors, such that I don't doubt winery marketing types order their vineyard managers to put it in the vineyards, but that's just bad farming.

The primary purpose of a cover crop is erosion control, particularly in newly planted vineyards with significant slopes, like C and H.

What we want is a quick growing, deep rooted 'grass' such as dwarf barley. What you see above in H are oats, because of the Republican's lame excuse for an energy program, which got a lot of farmers growing corn for mandated ethanol, because it seems we only know how to make ethanol out of corn, even though the Brazilians use sugar, which meant less barley and other crops were planted, but brewers need barley for beer, which meant oats for us. In steeper areas we'll add various other grasses such as fescues and ryes, to provide even more holding power. The problem with oats and barley is that over time they grow too fast, so we have to mow, and they provide too much competition with the grapes for water and nutrients, so we'll disc all the rows as soon as it is dry enough, stop the competition and increase the organic matter in the soil and then will reseed next fall.

We then have vines that need help, like vines planted on AXR rootstock that are being attacked by phylloxera, which leave wounds in the feeder roots and allows bad fungi to get in, and eventually the poor plant dies. We may have vines that are in thin soils and lack enough vigor (remember we need shoots and leaves to get grapes). In those blocks we plant a special "green manure" mix developed by Dr. Daniel Roberts: bell beans (20%), magnus peas (30%), common vetch (25%), white oats (10%), dwarf barley (10%) at a rate of 50 lbs per acre. Bell beans are the same as fava beans – so, when buying seed, buy bell beans when selling or serving, serve 'favas' (in one catalog, bell beans, *vicia faba*, start at $.64/lbs while fava beans *vicia faba*, are $2.09/lbs, apparently bell beans are smaller). Beans are legumes and legumes actually fix nitrogen, something like 70 to 150 lbs per acre, hence a natural fertilizer. As you can see below we don't mow until its time to disc the cover crop into the ground.

At this point, if you're keeping count we've already encountered three different approaches, and now we are ready for two more, permanent cover crops, i.e. we just mow and let them reseed themselves (which will happen for about six years or so). Another Daniel Roberts' recipe: zorro fescue (50%), delaware white rye (20%), chewing red fescue (30%). The goal here is not provide bad competition with the vines, but to provide erosion control, some organic matter in the soil, and most important create a 'zone' for good fungi, like mycorrhizal fungi, which help vine roots take up water and nutrients, and are pretty cute, for fungi (not my photo).

Biology is complex, but I'm getting used to it. So if there is too much vigor in a block (remember, we need the right amount of shoots and leaves) then we'll add more seed. So in P7, directly below, we seeded at 25 lbs per acre, while in P6 (next shot), 50 lbs.

I know, hard to see the difference. Where are we going? Well, to the next step, using our cover crops as a tool to manage variability. For example, in a block like G where we have crests and swales, we'll disc the cover crop on

the crests to conserve water for those vines - because bare dirt holds more water (then reseed but with ‘green manure’ this Fall), and allow the cover crop to grow taller in the swales (because longer grasses take up more water) and reseed later at 50 lbs /acre and stay at 25 lbs/acre everywhere else and mow closer. In other words not treat a block uniformly if it isn’t uniform to begin with. It is actually pretty exciting.