

October 29, 2010



I had intended to write about the remarkable resource that is our people, those that made it possible for us to survive – yes I mean survive – 2010 and do a quick harvest recap (for those curious, looks like we'll make about 25,500 cases, of which about 56% will be Sparkling and overall we're up 18% in a year the Press Democrat, our local paper described at the "worst-ever," for many, just not for us). However, it seems the wet season has begun.

On a single weekend we received (and I was in Southern California, so I missed the storm hence no photos) just short of 8.6 inches in just 45 hours (almost 20% of the rainfall we get in a normal season) which is a lot of rain in a very short period of time, and, apparently the inconvenience of the resulting 'flooding,' lasted through Monday, in effect., one of our most valuable resources, the Green Valley/Atascadero Creek overflowed, which blocked access to our tasting area (another valuable resource), the winery and the rest of the property.

It always fascinates me how we are able to complain when it rains and then bemoan droughts. And we do complain, and not without good reason, for example, while harvest may be over we're busy clearing the vines out of our Corral Vineyard (see the photo below) and – to be in compliance with local rules - before November 15 we'll need to have seeded the cover crop, spread hay and laid out the wattles, so every day lost is a problem.



Flooding can also affect our other work, such as disgorging with our new and very cool, disgorging/dosing machine.



But, we need the rain. And, unfortunately, when and if, it does rain, it seems our watershed isn't as efficient as an urban concrete storm drain system, like the L.A. River.

However, maybe we are better off with what we do have, sure we have the inconvenience of the roads being flooded (last year I got a dent in my front bumper when I was hit by a log while driving through the high water), yet the creek and watershed are getting closer to returning to their natural states. We're seeing evidence that the State's steelhead restoration project seems to be working and wild fish are slowly starting to comeback up the creek to spawn. Like it or not, we are farmers, and as such, like all farmers we are both subordinate to, and at variance of, nature (we also like using commas). Put another way, the health of the Ocean starts with the health of our creek. So maybe a little sacrifice from time to time is worth it.

Thinking of the Ocean, nothing goes better with our Ocean Reserve than chef Ruben Gomez' 'Fish Stew,' made with our tomatoes, a stock made from shrimp shells, shrimp, clams, red snapper and a touch of saffron. Not quite bouillabaisse and not quite cioppino, just something wonderful and unique.



October 11, 2010



If we're eating burritos it means that harvest is over at Iron Horse Vineyards. (A curious aside; when we begin harvest Victor Arreola assigns each picker a number and Manuel Briano then hands them clippers and safety gloves, on the last day Victor calls out their numbers, for the last time, and they each get a burrito, really good

ones, from El Colonel in Sebastopol.) It took us just over six weeks to pick about 360 tons, of which about, maybe, 50% will be sparkling. The Ranch was up about 9.3% when comparing apples to apples and Thomas Rd. was up 41.5%, in either case pretty good considering what I'm hearing from my colleagues.

If you read my earlier posts you'll know it has been a challenging year. On one day we had to take the crew from the winery, at 6:30 AM, pre-sunrise, and send them ahead of the picking crew, with flashlights, to drop the fruit we didn't want picked.



Still, we had some great days, like Monday, October 4, when we picked almost 42 tons in just one day. And some hard days, like Saturday, October 2 when the guys had to pick around (and they did) bunch rot on the North facing cordons (morning side) and sunburn on the South facing cordons (afternoon side) and then we started to feel rain drops. As Manuel Briano put it so accurately, "tiempo loco."

Throughout, we really could count on the crew. What ever we asked of them they did, although not always with a smile (as you'll see in some of the shots below). Moreover, we are lucky to have a winemaker like David Munksgard who understands the need to be flexible and his crew who were willing to stand back and let him change his mind as he dealt with what was basically "uncharted territory." The fact is, it's not easy to take these grapes,



and turn them into juice that looks as pretty as this:



Clearly this was not a year for 'Natural' winemaking, as in we couldn't. (In case you're unsure of what I'm writing about, "natural wine is really about winemaking philosophy, using handpicked organic (or biodynamic) grown

grapes that are fermented without added sugars, foreign yeasts, or adjustments for acidity, and see little to no addition of sulphur.” James Nevison, The Province, October 7, 2010.)

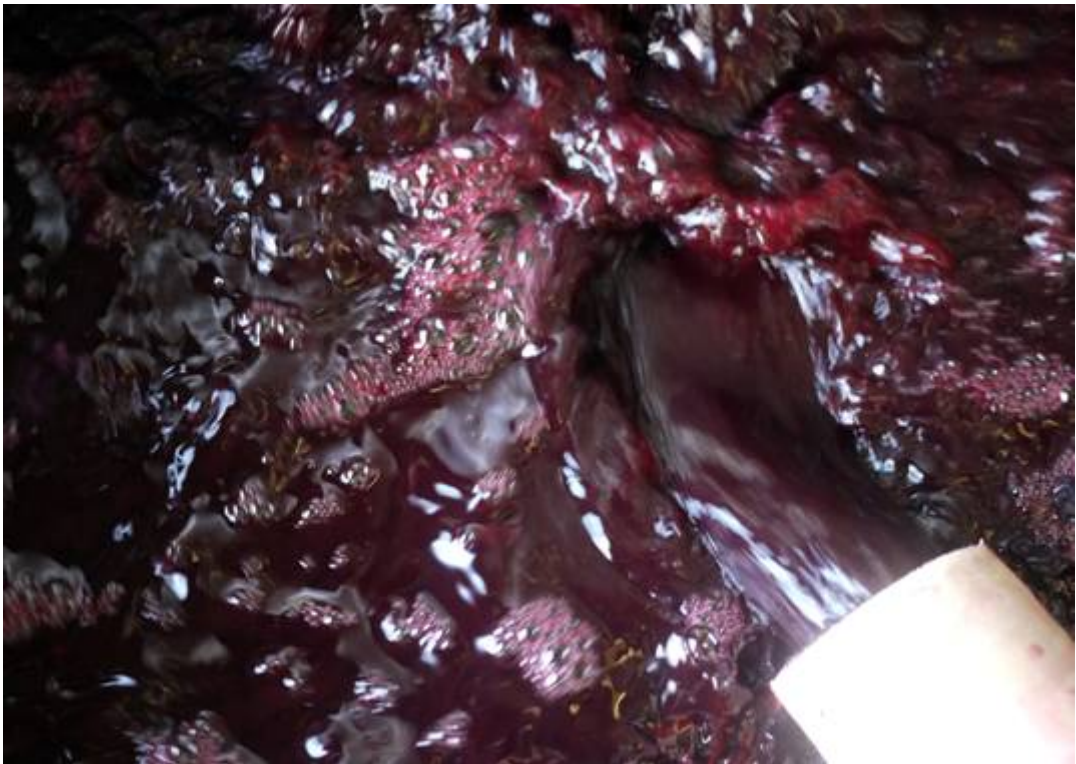
So still a bit early to be absolutely certain, but I’m confident we’re going to be just fine. If there was ever a year when ‘estate bottled’ mattered it’s this one, and, we’re ‘estate bottled.’

Below are some other pictures I took that I really like that I also think really represent the guys and the year, and I haven’t posted yet.













September 24, 2010



On September 22, 2010 we finally finished harvesting Chardonnay and Pinot Noir for Sparkling. We had thought that we were done on the 17th, but, if we've learned anything about Twenty-Ten (other than 'sort, sort and then

sort some more') it's that this is a year we need to be flexible, so we've added an additional mantra: Adapt, Improve and Improve. This is possible when you are Estate Bottled and you have the option of making Sparklings.

On the 17th and 18th it was oddly humid for Green Valley. On the 19th it was overcast most of the day and there was a light rain in the early morning (which makes sense as we were giving the annual Harvest Party for our Corral Club members in an open field). While we only recorded about .05" we knew that it was just enough that, unchecked, botrytis would all the sudden be off and running in our Corral Vineyard blocks, M, O and L, where we have divided canopies, hence, more canopy and less air flow - and this is not good ('noble rot' may be fine if making Sauternes, but for us it's plain old 'ignoble bunch rot') – so we had to do something; we adapted, improvised and improved.

I believe that sometimes, we need to move away from emphasizing the 'magic' when we talk about wine and how we make it, and instead try to explain the reality. The reality is; we work hard (when I use the word 'we' I don't necessarily mean 'me,' I'm not suited to work). Throughout the year our crew will prune, shoot thin, shoot position, pull leaves and, if necessary, drop fruit, and we spray and we mow, etc. and yet, if we get it wrong during harvest, all that work was for naught. Our winemaker, David Munksgard, needs fruit like above and below...



The better the berries, the better the wine (note the cool close up shot)...



But just a few bad bunches can spoil everything. In effect we want the opposite of “auslese” or “selected” bunches, we don’t want “very full ripeness or obvious signs of botrytis.” (I got that tidbit from the excellent and just out *Exploring Wine, Complete Revised Third Edition* by Steven Kolpan, Brian H. Smith and Michael A Weiss of the Culinary Institute of America.) Phrased another way if you see a bunch of grapes you wouldn’t want to put in your mouth we see a bunch that shouldn’t be put in the press.

In L and O Blocks, respectively, Old Wente and Rued Clones, hence best for still Chardonnay, the best course of action was to send the crew to drop any fruit we won’t want to pick, which is what we are doing. The remaining 1.1 acre that’s M Block is Stony Hill Clone, so it can go either way, still or sparkling, and as it was just at just right brix for sparkling, it was another story. Normally we pay our pickers by the ‘panela’ or box - about 30 pounds. Under normal circumstances it makes sense from the perspective of a winemaker – he/she want the grapes to be cool, if not cold, and to have the grapes arrive sooner, rather than later. From the perspective of the picker it also makes sense.



I don't know any other group to which the phrase 'time is money' is more apt. So they run. And, provided proper supervision and good sorters, the standard system works.



But sometimes the sorters can be overwhelmed, and there is little incentive for the pickers to slow down and check each bunch before putting them in their panela.

So on Tuesday we changed the system. We used only the full time vineyard crew, assisted by some of our regular pickers and part of the winery crew, including David Munksgard and cellar master Rigoberto Moreno. I even helped, which explains the lack of pictures. It took them three hours to pick 5.15 tons, because each picker was both sorting and picking at the same time. We even shared panelas. Before we started Victor Arreola (field vineyard manager) and Manuel Briano (our foreman) showed everyone what was good, and what was not.



The end result was, according to David, textbook sparkling numbers. For the free run, Brix 19.8, TA (acidity) 0.88 and pH, 3.12. The press juice came in at 19.8 brix, .74 TA and 3.38 pH. It's too early to tell but we may be looking at the 2010 Joy! (available only in magnums), something to look forward to in 2025.

Meanwhile, some food porn: Before cooking...



During...



And after...



September 10, 2010



Harvest is moving along. By Saturday, September 11, we'll have brought in all of the Pinot Noir for Sparkling. So far it's been hard work, as Tim Fish wrote in the Wine Spectator: "A plague of locusts is about the only challenge that Northern California growers and winemakers haven't faced in 2010. The growing season has delivered one headache after another and as the harvest begins in force, winemakers are already wiping their brows. As if the sluggish economy wasn't already making their lives difficult."

What he wrote maybe true, yet, I feel confident that we are going to make some really great wine this year. First, winemaker David Munksgard is on top of the situation and second, we are 'Estate Bottled,' which enables us to focus on picking only the fruit we want and make sure we pick all fruit we want. Third, our crew is truly the best you can get. They'll wait (as they were in the photo above) to pick until the light is just right so they and the sorters can see the fruit, and they will do whatever we ask, and we ask a lot.

For example: On September 9 the crew picked 16.75 tons of Chardonnay from F Block for Sparkling, in just three hours; each picker averaged over a quarter of a ton per hour! (Note; I rarely use exclamation points.)



On September 2, it took them two hours to pick 1.2 tons of Pinot Noir from H Block, also for Sparkling. We had asked them to cover 17 acres and only pick those vines that wouldn't be suitable for still Pinot Noir -very hard work. When not picking they are 'pre-sorting' (i.e. dropping fruit we won't want to pick anyway) through our various Chardonnay blocks. As one enologist told me, the only way to deal with the negative effects of sunburn is "sort, sort, sort."



As usual the yields, while up for us, over 2009 and 2008, which is a good thing, are all over the place (once again, it is just harder to grow Pinot Noir, as compared to Chardonnay), which leads to a question I'm often asked, 'is there a link between yield per acre and quality?' The short answer is no, but as I'm not given to short answers, below is a lengthy discussion.

#### **Is there a link between yield per acre and quality?**

Most of us presume that smaller yields mean better wines. We've been taught to believe fewer grapes will lead to enhanced intensity. We are also taught to presume that the higher priced the item, like Champagne, the lower the yields otherwise how can they justify the high price? But, consider the following:

According to the latest California Crop Production forecast from the Sacramento Field Office of the National Agricultural Statistics Service, "The wine grape forecast on 489,000 bearing acres is 3.5 million tons, (7.2 tons/ac) down 6 percent from last season." In the meantime Decanter Magazine recently reported, "Champagne growers and houses this week agreed on a 2010 harvest yield of 10,500 kilos per hectare [4.2 metric tons per acre or 4.63 U.S. tons per acre] - an increase on last year. This is up by 700 kg/ha on 2009, following a recovery in sales this year at home and abroad. Production in 2010 will be 301m bottles, compared to 278m in 2009." While

thedrinksbusiness.com noted that the yield limit for 2008 “was a hefty 12,400kg/ha – expandable to 13,600 kg/ha [which would be just short of six U.S. tons per acre].” Let’s just reconsider some the numbers above; for all of California, all varieties, all climates, in 2010, 7.2 tons per acre, while in 2008, just Champagne, just cool climate Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay, 6 tons per acre! (Note; another exclamation point.)

But why limit production. According to thedrinksbusiness.com: “The two consecutive years of yield limitation [i.e. 2009 and 2010] will have a positive impact on the prices, but will also result in a very tangible reduction in the number of bottles produced, especially if demand continues in the current growth trend that it is enjoying. The result of this will be an ultra premiumisation of the product created through a genuine shortage, heightening the luxury status of Champagne, consequently resulting in an even greater desire for it, in true accordance with Thorstein Veblen’s [the American sociologist and author of the 1899 classic, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*] description of a luxury product.” So, the goal isn’t better wine, it’s ultra premiumisation.

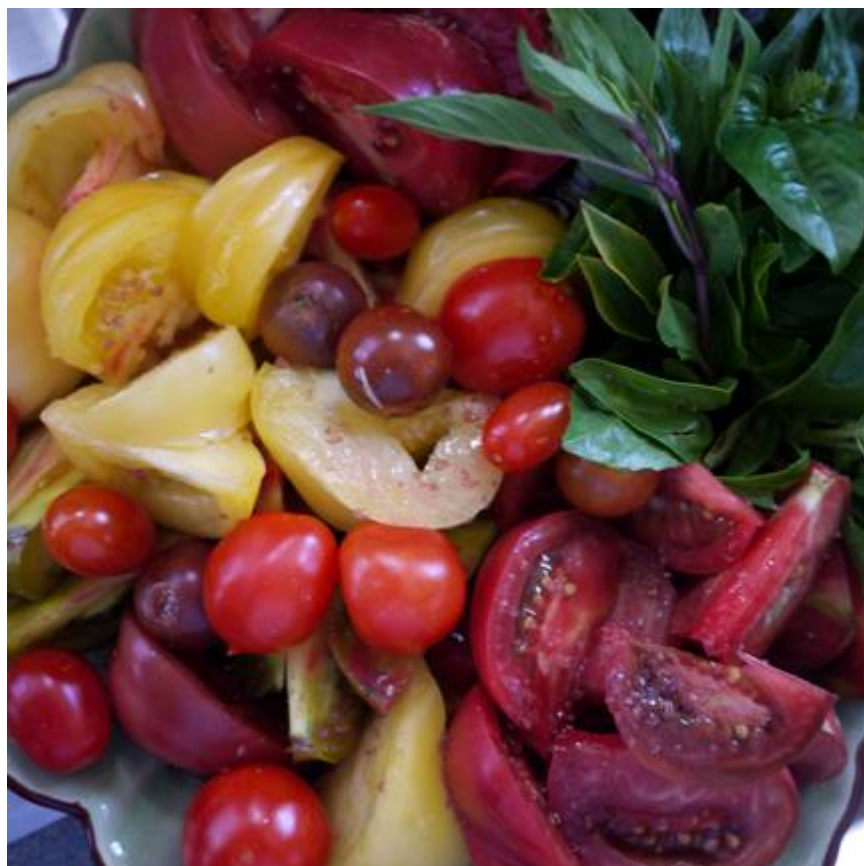
If you read my July 21 “Blog” you’ll understand that I’m highly skeptical as to the accuracy of any crop production forecasts. That the growers and houses are actually able to negotiate how many tons are going to be grown in Champagne in 2010 is quite a feat given the number of factors that affect actual yield. First there’s location and variety, warmer climes and varieties tend to be more prolific (clones can also make a difference). Next vineyard layout, more rows, or more to point more ‘bearing wood’ can also, depending on location etc., mean, increased yield. Finally there are various day-to-day farming decisions we make - for example, we can and do prune those blocks we expect to produce grapes for Sparkling to produce a heavier crop (which slows down ripening so we get better ‘maturity’ hence better Sparklings). All of the above are human-made factors. We are the ones who decide what to plant and where, how to train the vines and then farm them.

But, no matter what we do, in the end, big crop or small crop, medium, or huge or none, it all depends upon the weather. There are no formulas, there are no patterns, there is only dealing with each year as it happens. So if it happens that we need to drop fruit, it’s only the fruit we don’t want. Fact is, one of our best vintages was 2005, which was also one our biggest in terms of volume. At our homes we still drink the 2005 Estate Chardonnay from the library.

Meantime, we keep busy, every one is hard at work, in the field, in the market and in the salesroom.



We’ve even shared our tomatoes...



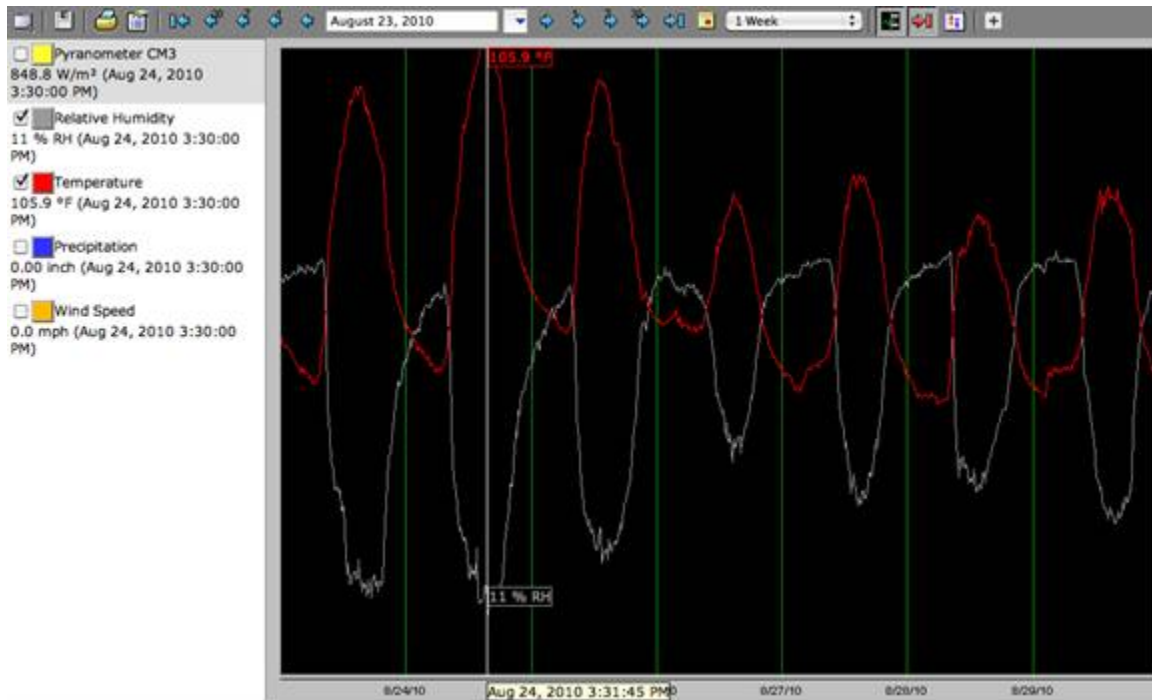
**September 1, 2010** (Harvest – Day 5)



Harvest began early – 6:25 AM to be precise – August 27, 2010. We picked 6.34 tons of Pinot Noir for our sparkling from G Block, up 5.43% over last year, which is good news, just not as good as I would have liked.

Here's the situation, it has been about 175 days since bud break, and generally a particular vintage is a culmination of the weather during those 175 days (as well as the amount and timing of rainfall before bud break). However, no matter how often we try to ignore the truth, this is farming, and even a few days, a few abnormal days can make all the difference. Those days were August 23, 24 and 25.

Imagine being a grape and starting before sunrise with a low of 48.1F and by 3:30 PM dealing with a high of 105.9F and because you're a grape you can't move, you can't even try to find shade unless that shade was already there, and while we all say a dry heat is better than heat with humidity, imagine the relative humidity is a mere 11%. That is seriously dry, dry as in all the sudden you can hear the theme to Lawrence of Arabia dry, unless you're a grape. Here's the weather graph for the week of August 23, 2010:



The funny thing is that the forecast for August was "below to near average temperatures," which will probably be the case even after the three very hot days. Now we got fair warning, about four days in advance, which is, actually, pretty darn good. We did what we could in that we did irrigate, both Monday and Wednesday. We also got lucky in that we never pull leaves or laterals on the 'afternoon' side (West or South), but, I've never seen a heat event like the kind that occurred this far into véraison, so a fair amount of clusters with soft skins were exposed just long enough to suffer serious sunburns. But are we panicking? Heck no, even our harvest 2010 T-shirts have this year's motto on the back, which we got from Daniel Roberts, "don't panic, don't fertilize..."

Certain years are grower years, like 2005. Other years we think of as 'winemaker' years, like 1999 when 100% of the Chardonnay needed to go through malo-lactic fermentation. 2010 will be the year of the picker and the sorter. Sunburned grapes do not taste good, so the key is don't pick them, and if they somehow end up in the bin, take them out.



The same holds true for Chardonnay.



The crew has been amazing. We start pretty early, and they are eager to pick, but we wait until it is light enough so we can get every grape we want and be able to sort effectively. They take the task at hand like the professionals they are. On the first day before we start, Victor Arreola (seen below in the red shirt) assigns each

one of the guys a number, then Manuel Briano (red hat) hands them clippers and safety gloves, it's almost like they were getting their wings. During the harvest Victor and Manuel they constantly police the area with their orange buckets.



The results are impressive. The fruit arriving at the press is perfect.



The juice tastes and smells better than it looks.



Note how clean the Chardonnay juice is...



So we'll make this year work, and work great, again, maybe not as many cases as we'd like to have, and maybe this isn't a year to make a Brut Rosé, but as Kurt Vonnegut would have said, "so it goes."



Meanwhile to raise our spirits, we've got corn from the garden (but very few tomatoes)...



And Chef Ruben Gomez made a killer Duck Breast Salad the other day...



And if winemaker David Munksgard looks way too serious in the first shot above (which is one of the best pictures I've ever taken), here's the real guy...



**August 19, 2010** (exactly one year from the start of harvest in 2009)

The Naked Ladies are starting to come out...



And we've got *véraison*, "the beginning of the last growth phase of grapes, when the green color begins to fade and the pulp starts to soften." Ron S. Jackson, Wine Science. Meaning harvest is in sight. This year the grapes are moving along at a slower pace than the last three years, but they are moving. Below Pinot Noir in I Block on August 2, 2010.



As things are 'different' than the last three years, many are, of course complaining.

For example here is what reporter Nathan Halverson wrote in The Press Democrat, August 6, 2010:

"If you see a grape grower, give him a hug. He probably needs it. Growers are enduring one of the most stressful seasons in recent memory due to tough economic conditions and the European grapevine moth invasion. And now a new threat, known as green rot, has emerged in Sonoma County vineyards because of persistently damp, cool weather."

The website, Affairs of the Vine, describes 2010 as possibly "the most challenging vintage of the last 50 years," no doubt harkening back the disaster that befell many in 1989 because of a combination of a later harvest with early rains.

Of course every year we growers find a reason to complain, in 2009 the main gripe, and it was a good one, was the economy, which distracted us from the relatively low Pinot Noir yields we had to deal with. 2008 was worse, first people complained about the number of nights we had to frost protect, then griped about the drought, followed by fears of 'smoke taint' (which was an unfortunate problem for some), and finally nasty heat spikes. At moments like these I can't help but wonder; should we rename 'Wine Country' 'Whine Country?' After all, in Dallas, when Justine Sterling represented Iron Horse at TexSom, it was 106F, with humidity to match. In Russia the drought and fires are so bad they are forbidding grain exports and Prime Minister Putin took to the skies and personally put out two fires. In Pakistan thousands have died and maybe 20,000,000 people have been displaced by excessive Monsoon rains. And we're complaining that at 11:45 AM it's only 58F and still cloudy or that we can't enjoy a barbeque dinner outdoors because it's too damn cool. Instead of complaining we should be advertising like crazy the fact that there's no better place to be in the entire U.S. this August than Sonoma County.

What is worse is that it seems we've totally forgotten that 'early harvests are also difficult as August can often be too warm, as was the case in '04 '07, 08, and '09 (which also dealt with just fine): "High temperatures during the growing season -- particularly during grape ripening -- can have negative effects on grape quality, such as lower

levels of acids, pigments, tannins and phenolics.” Wines & Vines, August 12, 2010. Meanwhile on the East Coast they are roasting away and they are not happy, with good reason: “Drought conditions are causing some wine grape varieties in Virginia to ripen early, and that concerns growers. Virginia Tech viticulturist Tony Wolf says prolonged dry conditions can reduce yields and change grape composition. Wines produced from grapes stressed by drought may be unbalanced and may not age well.” Bloomberg Businessweek, August 12, 2010.

So let me put you all at ease. The relatively cool weather we've been having is actually okay. Perhaps not without issues, such as powdery mildew and 'green rot,' but we know how to deal with those particular problems. In many respects, 2010 is very much like 2005, which started early, August 16, but didn't end until October 15, and was quite bountiful and tasted great. At our homes we're still drinking, and loving, the 2005 Estate Chardonnay. Moreover, while the earliest we ever started harvest was August 7, 1997 and the latest was September 13, 1999, over the last 14 years (i.e. since David Munksgard has been our winemaker) the average start date is August 28.

So while plenty of bad things can still happen, I feel cautiously optimistic, this year could be one of our best, i.e., no hugs. The fruit is looking beautiful even though weeks before they are ready to pick, such as the Old Wente Clone Chardonnay in L Block...



And the Pomard 5 Clone Pinot Noir in H5, just two years after being field grafted.



Below is the 2009 Wedding Cuvée being aerated before second fermentation in the bottle.



July 21, 2010



Above, N Block, all ripped and beautiful... We actually got it right this year in that we were able to rip into the cover crop, meaning a lot less dust and overall, a better rip.



This time of year many people ask me what's the crop look like? And I respond with a quotation from Carl Sandburg, "a tree is best measured when it is down - - and so it is with people." (And I wonder why I don't get invited to parties anymore?) But people really do want to know, so I give them to the latest California Crop Production forecast from the Sacramento Field Office of the National Agricultural Statistics Service:

"The wine grape forecast on 489,000 bearing acres is 3.5 million tons, down 6 percent from last season. The 2010 California grape crop is nearly two weeks behind normal due to the cool and wet spring. Bunch counts were reported higher than last year although development has been slow. Mildew has been a problem for many growers due to the cooler weather. The European grapevine moth remains a concern mainly due to quarantine."

I do this because one thing we don't do are crop projections - except to respond to the Fruit & Nut Survey conducted by the Sacramento Field Office of the National Agricultural Statistics Service - mainly because we are always wrong, and not just wrong, but inconsistently wrong, and even when we are right it's for the wrong reasons.

As to why that happens we have to consult work of the recently dead Vladimir I. Arnold - who, when stuck on a problem would cross country ski 25 kilometers in a swim suit and was famed in mathematic circles for creating Arnold's Cat Map in which this,



becomes this,

$$\Gamma \left( \begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \end{bmatrix} \right) = \begin{bmatrix} 2 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \end{bmatrix} \bmod 1 = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \end{bmatrix} \bmod 1.$$

His main contribution is the Singularity Theory, which, according to his obituary in the New York Times, “predicts that under certain circumstances slow, smooth changes in a system can lead to an abrupt major change, in the way that the slipping of a few small rocks can set off an avalanche i.e. infinitesimal gaps or errors in information cause forecasts to diverge completely from reality.” Which is what happens to us all the time.

The method by which most growers figure their projections is fairly simple; select a certain number of rows in a block, walk down the row and select a certain number of vines and count the clusters on those vines, take the average number of clusters counted and multiply by the number of vines per acre, which gives you an rough idea of the total number of clusters per acre in a particular block. To figure out how many tons per acre simply multiply the total number of clusters by the estimated cluster weight at harvest. That’s where the ‘few small rocks slipping’ come into play. The number of variables is impressive when trying to come up cluster weights. The most obvious is clonal variation. For example, below is Clone 14 Chardonnay from C4 (Thomas Rd.).



Next, Z (Rued) Clone Chardonnay from Z Block...



The first is already bigger than the second. Further the size and weights of the clusters can vary within a block. Another variable, hard to see in the picture above, is Oidium, a/k/a the Powdery Mildew, which also affects yield and is more of a

problem this year than in the past because, as the Sacramento Field Office of the National Agricultural Statistics Service noted, we've had cooler weather.

Here's a closer look at the onset of Powdery Mildew, this is Clone 4 Chardonnay from C1.



In Z Block we actually had to hand spray the grapes and the canopy, to 'wash' off the mildew. The tractors are operating both a day and a night shift to try and get ahead of the problem.



Fact is growing grapes is never easy, especially Chardonnay in cool and foggy Green Valley (when it's cool and foggy). As Eric Bloc writes in his incredibly good book Garlic and Other Alliums, "domesticated plants are artificially selected primarily to suit human needs and not necessarily for survival." He is also a major source of useful information and tips, such as, "onions hung in the legs of old pantyhose, with excellent circulation, can be stored for months." I'll bet Martha Stewart didn't know that. Although my guess is that she does know how beautiful flowering artichokes can be.



June 23, 2010



Where has the year gone? All the sudden it is summer, note the algae above, a sign of warmer water), and I've survived – if you define survival as getting through bloom and set without having a nervous breakdown. Which leads to a necessary digression, do people still have nervous breakdowns or are they no longer included on the list of psychological disorders? The answer, according to a very pretty clinical psychologist visiting our sales room (move over Dr. Ruth, okay she, Dr. Ruth, isn't pretty, but the one I spoke to is, and she bought Wedding Cuvée, he bought a Chardonnay, he paid with cash, she, a credit card, hmmm), no such thing as 'nervous breakdowns' any more; one may be depressed or suicidal or even delusional, not necessarily in that order. Well, I do not approve of the elimination of a fine mental disease, apparently taking to one's bed, or at least spending most of the day in pajamas, for about six months to a year, while the rest of the family copes on your behalf, is no longer an option (which is a 'damn' moment as I've been holding out the possibility of a 'nervous breakdown' in reserve as a way to deal with the Great Recession, because I'd have to buy many pairs of pajamas which, would, of course, stimulate the economy), it seems psychology is insisting on being a science. Interestingly, the pretty psychologist's significant other (the 'he' referred to above) is a bartender, which means there are still viable options to 'treatment' that involve wine.

Bloom started out so pretty (no word better in June, except bloom started in May).



Not just the grapes, the blackberries were also pretty (still June, or May).



However, Pinot Noir can really be a downer, as in not 'pretty.' For the most part it's not too bad, many of the vines had set like the cluster below in H Block.



Is that not 'pretty?' But in a good number of blocks we encountered "light to occasionally moderate shatter...with somewhat looser clusters." Looser clusters mean not a lot of grapes, i.e. lower yield. Maybe, depending on the number and size of the seeds.



And of course, as seems to be a regular piece of bad news, we had "putrecine issues."



The Chardonnay has been much better as is obvious from the Hyde/Old Wente Clone in Ca.



So, so, so...so I have no idea what is going to happen this year, just like I, and no one else knows what happens any year, at least until harvest is over. Which may be a good thing. We aren't asking any deity, fairies, accountants, or gnomes to help us, because, like it or not, we are hostage to the weather in any given year. That said, or written, I feel confident we will make some great wines, except how much and which ones, I have no idea.

As a visitor put it the other day, 'if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.' My response, 'if you want him rolling in the aisles, plant Pinot Noir.' Still, I seek out good omens. For years I have tried to get a shot of a woodpecker. Recently I actually got one.



Also, the Mussels at Nick's Cove are beyond pretty, and they tasted great.



**May 25, 2010**

I am aware that I actually posted an update to this "blog" on the 17th. But (and to show how serious I am about the following, I have begun a sentence with a conjunction, in fact, more than once in this post), the purpose of this 'blog' is to keep both me, and anyone who happens to read it, fully up to date as to what is happening in the vineyard, which is why at times I refer to this 'blog' as "In the Vineyard."

So, here is what's happening...



It's called 'leaf curl.'

It can look worse, like this shoot in E Block.



So far I've seen it in most, but not all of our Pinot Noir blocks. We're not the only ones to have this problem. All of Green Valley and the Russian River Valley have been affected. It's worse in the Carneros. Needless to say, my stomach aches. I rue the day we planted any Pinot Noir anywhere (I wrote that as I was sipping our 2008 Rosé of Pinot Noir, man it is tasty). So what's happening? Simple answer: We do not know.

How can that be, you may wonder, how can we not know, after millennia of growing grapes and making wine, and given that scientists are now able create artificial life using synthetic DNA which is capable of replicating its self? Which is a good question but first, a digression on 'artificial life' and does it raise ethical issues. The main argument seems to be that somehow scientists, and particular Dr. Craig Venter are "playing God." Personally I doubt that's the case here, at most they have proven that DNA can be made from inorganic materials, which means that 'life' is capable of coming about in spite of or at least in the absence of any divine creator. In other words, you don't need a divine spark, just \$40,000,000. The second issue is, is it dangerous, and there I do have certain fears for the future, in particular, if it becomes possible to create synthetic human DNA, the male of the species will become superfluous and, hence, doomed.

So back to the main topic, it's not really that we don't know, it's just we don't know for sure and there's little to no information available to most of us. Here's what Daniel Roberts, PhD wrote in a recent e-mail:

"The curling and eventual death of young Pinot leaves is due to the backup of the nitrogen cycle and the accumulation of putrescine. The cool rainy days are responsible. Only warm days will stop the problem. Pinot is very sensitive, if this cool weather persists we will see issues in Chardonnay and Syrah. I have seen this before, do not panic or apply fertilizer. Rhonda Smith and I have discussed and agree that the problem is the cool weather. Andy Walker (UCD) agrees."

So no need to panic or apply fertilizer (I assume what Daniel means is, 'don't make a mess in your pants'), but to be sure it's going to be okay first check out meteorologist Erik Molstad's forecast:

"Good Morning.... A weather system just off the Coast will move inland today bringing wet weather to the North Bay Area - *aw spit*. Showers should taper off quickly this evening with some clearing overnight. After a break tomorrow another system should bring scattered showers to the area on Thursday. *Now I'm thinking why not panic and apply fertilizer?* It looks like the upper level trough along the Coast will move inland on Friday allowing a drier Northwesterly flow to develop over the region. Indications are the weather will be dry over the weekend and all of next week as a ridge of high pressure builds along the West Coast and remains in place for a while...." *Phew.*

Next, look up putrescine. Yuck, imagine something related to cadaverine in your vines. Apparently the vines are taking up nitrogen, which is a rather complex process involving first ammonia (NH<sub>4</sub>) created by nitrogen fixing bacteria, in the soil, which is then oxidized to a nitrate (NO<sub>3</sub>) by nitrifying bacteria, again, in the soil. The nitrate (NO<sub>3</sub>) is then normally converted in the vine into a photosynthetic enzyme, RuBP carboxylase. But, if it's not warm enough, instead we get putrescine, which as noted above, is toxic, and so the leaf dies and falls off.



All of that is happening above, but there is still a chance all will be well, provided the weather returns to normal. Notice the touch of green above the dying leaf? Grape vines are, like most plants, very good at surviving. We may have lost a number of leaves, however we're getting replacement laterals instead, which, if the forecasts are right will be just fine, so that hopefully we'll make it through flowering and set and I will be able to sleep better at night, until harvest.

Also, the sales room is a lot more fun in the sun.



Squirrels are happier too.



May 17, 2010 (Twenty-Ten as decreed by Microsoft)



I have a new camera. A Panasonic Lumix GF1. It is great, so not so many words with this post. It loves flowers.



It can take close-ups...

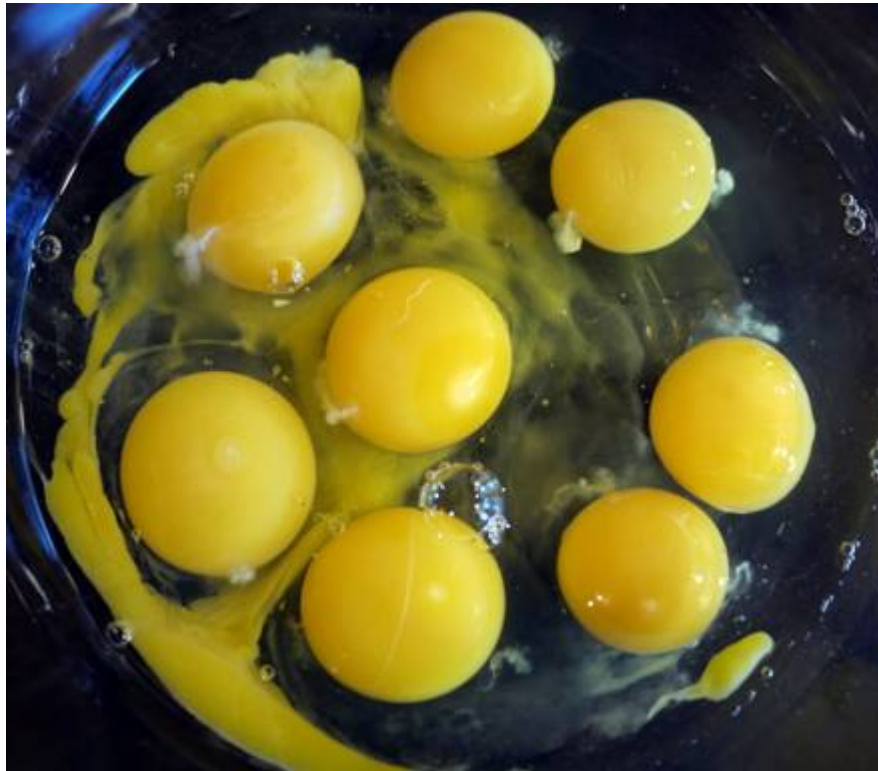


Mosquito fish caught in our filters in the reservoir. (It's okay to say or think yuck),

Distance shots are no problem as you can change the lenses even though it is not an SLR (cormorants)....



Even food shots are great, particularly with the 20mm aspherical lens. Below, Joe Matos cheese and before that eggs from a friend's hens; as an aside friends' hens eggs are always better than any other eggs, including eggs from your own hens, I say this even though I have no hens, because I have no hens, but I have friends who have hens and I want more eggs.





Chef Ruben Gomez carving duck, below, and above grilled early Fava Beans and Green Onions. Ruben can pull great flavors out of any ingredient, which is a great skill in a Great Recession.



Thinking of duck, below is a coot, which isn't a duck...



Below planting rootstock in Q...



By the best in the business, Jaime Robledo.



Just in case the shot of Mosquito Fish above has put you off of fish, here is a pair of Branzini just before grilling.



**April 21, 2010**

Looking across the Iron Horse Estate through a flute of 2006 Wedding Cuvée.



I realize I haven't been blogging much this year, maybe once a month. It's not that we're not active, it's just we're doing things I've already blogged about, such as pruning, tying and suckering. When I first started to compose this particular post, I ended up writing almost exactly what I had written in 2008, so I've used the old, only the photo is new:

"For the record, I don't tie. First you have to be gentle (I'm not), we don't want to force the wood, next you have to be able to tie knots (I'm lucky when I tie my shoelaces correctly each morning) and finally, not cut yourself with the knife-ring-twine-cutting-thing the guys wear, as shown below (I tend to talk with my hands, I'd be a danger to myself and all around me)."



Please don't misunderstand me and think that we've fallen into a routine. The tasks may be the same year to year, but the execution and timing of those tasks vary to reflect the needs of the vines. Heraclitus, the 'Weeping Philosopher,' was on the right track when he said, "you cannot step twice into the same river" – think about it, different water and different you. The whole point of 'Precision Viticulture' is to accept and deal with variability from whatever cause. Grapevines, like all plants, are remarkably sensitive to changes in the environment and climate. My guess is unlike us, if say it is raining, or cold and windy, or hot and dry, they can't move to find cover so they adapt. Other factors, not obvious at any given moment, also seem to affect vine growth. For example, the bud below, Pinot Noir in H Block (grafted 2008) was a lot further along than the ones below it, also Pinot Noir, but from I Block (planted 2000), only 50 or so yards apart, and on the same day.



Why such a significant difference? I have no idea. Overall Pinot Noir is slower this year than Chardonnay, which I hope will be a good thing (i.e. better as in warmer, conditions during flowering and set). But, we don't want it too slow either, so, because it is still too wet to fertilize (it would simply run out of the soil and into the creek), we'll shoot thin in I sooner than we usually would, so as to eliminate competing shoots and encourage the shoots we do

want to grow a bit faster. The key is to pay attention to the vines as they are developing, while hopefully also watching the road ahead.



It's also a good idea to look out for the small stuff, like this cute little Arboreal Salamander.



I'd be remiss if I didn't finish with my favorite new hobby, food porn...



Farmed California White Sturgeon from the California Caviar Company.

**March 18, 2010**



Above, another typical unpredictable March day in Green Valley: Some mornings it can be as low as 30 F then that afternoon, a high of 75 F.



Then some more rain...



Only April is crueler.

Spring has definitely arrived, perhaps a little earlier than I'd like, as it doesn't take much for buds to go from 'Q-tip'...



To bud-break. Bud-break means it's time to be done pruning (we are close maybe another week or so) and worry about frost, just one of the many things that can make farming un-fun.



### **Of Frost and the River**

Thinking of frost, a number of weeks ago I attended a "Grower Meeting" to get an update on the Mendocino/Sonoma County Frost Program for 2010. There were a lot of people, including representatives from the National Marine Fisheries Service, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, California Department of Fish and Game and the State Water Resources Control Board and many growers. Now I try to show that I've got, what I call, 'field cred,' whenever congregating with my fellow vineyard types. For example I arrived in a mud-splattered pick-up, only it's a Honda Ridgeline, and I sported the obligatory, faded and sweat-stained cap, unfortunately it is sky blue and is from my son's school's lacrosse program. So I hung out in the back of the room and didn't stay for lunch.

I didn't learn anything particularly new, other than our officials are terrible communicators, which is probably okay, because farmers are terrible listeners. Of course in California when the topic is water no one listens and only

passions and self interest rule. The supreme irony is that during the meeting it was pouring (if my truck was mud-splattered it was because I had been driving in some serious mud, with limited success).



To compound the problem we're not just dealing with farms versus fisheries, we're dealing with a seriously endangered species, Coho Salmon, and a threatened one, Steelhead Trout. Both are delicious – which leads to the dilemma, if a fish is endangered do you run out and eat it before it goes extinct, or not (think Blue Fin Tuna)? The answer is, sadly, not, as discussed below. Obviously a combination of recession and drought just make matters worse.

Most growers feel that they are innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire. Some suggested the real culprits were sea lions and/or pot growers. But 'fault' or intent, or lack thereof, is irrelevant when dealing with an endangered species because any 'taking' whether for food, or by stranding the poor thing because the level of the river is too low because everyone is pumping water out of the river to protect their grapes is against the law, and even if you mean well (like one grower who thought the best solution was to pick the fish up and move it – don't do that), it does not matter, because one is 'strictly liable.' We farmers and growers may not be the proximate cause for the dramatic decline in population, but blaming sea lions does not and will not absolve anyone from liability. That we are more likely to need water to frost protect during a drought just makes things even harder because that's when the salmon also need water.

So here's a quick restatement of the problem: Fish need the water in the Russian River and its tributaries, like Green Valley Creek, at a certain level to survive, except we don't know the necessary water level or bypass, which varies from site to site and day to day, which means we need gauges and science and all sorts of data that no one has because cooperating with the authorities doesn't excuse a taking, remember, strict liability, and (take a breath) even if they, the authorities, wanted to cut a deal, they can't as their job is to save the fish anyway, so the enforcement types would rather use a stick and, well, the science types, even though they want to help don't have any carrots anyway (take another breath), and so while everyone in government talks about how much they want cooperation they'll never get it because, after all, who wants to drive with a traffic cop in the front seat, even if you are insured by Safeco?

So is there anyone willing to go out on a limb and follow the non-dark side? Heck yes, we here at Iron Horse. We have a gauge at our bridge over Green Valley Creek (which is has great potential for Coho and Steelhead restoration, and as I mentioned, they are delicious) and we've granted complete access to all sorts of people from both the State and the Federal governments. Has it worked? Heck no, the flow meter was vandalized. Still, will we be okay? Yes, because we have a reservoir and multiple water sources and do not divert water from the creek unless there is enough flow, we hope. As for everyone else, as long as there's enough rain then the problem goes away and then the strongest power of all kicks in, inertia, until the next drought.

Sorry for all the words. Here is one of the best wine shots I've ever taken; it's our 1996 Joy! Brut Rosé, admit you want it, and although we made only 180 bottles, some are left. Contact [Kevin@ironhorsevineyards.com](mailto:Kevin@ironhorsevineyards.com).



#### **February 12, 2010 (Twenty-Ten)**

I have much to write about as in I have many gripes, like; I am not enjoying this recession that is no longer a recession, yet still feels like a recession; and, we need health care reform now as uncertainty can be crippling and doing nothing is not an option (although I still have faith in President Obama, I think he has a plan); and, I've had to deal with other people's health issues and even had a check-up myself, which meant I had to spend time surrounded by sick people, and I don't approve of sick people; and, I am tired of rain storms, over 31 inches so far (almost 19 inches of came in 2010), which is more than all of the 08' – '09 season... yes, we need it, but that doesn't mean I have to enjoy it . So instead of writing a bilious blog, I present an almost caption-less photo essay.

Looking West.



Looking East.



We've been forced to adapt a garage to keep the sales room open.





With all that rain and flowing water, certain unfortunate things happened...





At times, it wasn't raining, like then or, for that matter, now.



Below, Santa Monica Pier as sometimes you just have to get away.



Also, happy Valentine's Day, go to Justine's blog, <http://bigcityironhorse.wordpress.com> to get ideas on how to best enjoy it.



January 8, 2010 (Twenty ten)



I was actually close to being happy. It looks like we're going to get some form of health care reform soon, as to whether it's perfect, who knows, but it's a start, and we've started pruning. While pruning may appear to be, and can be work, there isn't anything that is more gratifying than looking back over a well-pruned row, and no better way to beat the recession blues than being the one who pruned the row. The guys love to prune and they are very good at it, which is good, as pruning has to be the most important annual vineyard task. According to Prof. Ron S. Jackson: "It [pruning] permits the grape grower to establish a particular training system and regulate individual vine yield. Pruning can permit the selection of bearing wood (spurs and canes), and thereby influence the location and development of canopy growth. This can affect grape yields, health and maturation, as well as pruning and harvest costs."

Note carefully the underlined word, 'affect.' Recently an accountant was surprised how we can't seem to program our blocks to consistently yield five tons per acre. Please understand accountants are not bad, often they are good, this one accountant, meh, he clearly fails to grasp the challenges of growing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the cool, cool, Green Valley of Russian River Valley.

How we 'affect' yield depends first on the initial layout and training of a vineyard, the more bearing wood, the more potential fruit. Then, when pruning, the more buds left, the more potential shoots, which means more potential fruit. When pruning a cordon trained vine we usually cut the shoots down to two buds (one if the vine or position is weak), which means we'll only get two shoots per spur, which, to some, means that we are reducing our potential yield per acre.



What the accountant doesn't understand is that simply leaving more buds out won't always result in more grapes, or, and more to the point, even if we have more grapes, those grapes may not ripen or taste good (and forget about taste great). Most likely we'll just have more wood, leaves and shade. That said, in certain blocks, where we prefer using the fruit for sparkling, we are experimenting with a 'modified cane' pruning system. Basically we leave, where possible and appropriate, more buds, in the form of a cane, on the cordon, so we'll get more shoots and thus hopefully more grapes, which, because we don't need for them to get as ripe, are more likely to make excellent sparkling wines.



However, we can't use the system everywhere and in the end there are simply too many variables, like the weather, pests, competition, inadequate light, vigor, etc. also 'affect' yield. For example the vine below has some kind of fungal issues so a whole position (maybe two shoots and four clusters) was lost.



Like it or not, the accountant is going to have to accept that what we are doing is complex. What we are trying to do is to find that balance point between yield, vine health and flavors all the while trying to cope with nature and a very finicky crop. As was noted in a recent contribution to American Journal of Enology and Viticulture, "[The Flowering Process of \*Vitis vinifera\*: A Review](#)," M. Carmo Vasconcelos, corresponding author:

Seasonal variation contributes to enormous variations in yield and quality, *in particular in cool-climate viticulture*. Compared with 16 crops analyzed over a 58-year period, grapevine was found to have by far the highest seasonal variation in yield (32.5%), nearly twice that of next closest crop...

Further:

The flowering of *Vitis vinifera* spreads over two seasons. The numerous variables affecting each step of the flowering process throughout the 12-month period between induction and anthesis result in a high variability within the bunch, the vine, and therefore the vineyard block.

See, I'm not making up excuses for poor performance. Personally, I think when we look at our recent press and reviews, the number of visitors to the winery and club members I get the feeling we are succeeding. Here's what Michael Broadbent had to say in Decanter Magazine about Iron Horse wines: "The wines were a revelation: an excellent 1996 sparkler was refined as was one of his [Barry Sterling's] best-ever Chardonnays, the Rued Clone 2006: unusually pale, dry, above all, elegant." I mean, please, if there's something wrong with the wines let me know, I'm easy to find. Just call the winery, or send me an e-mail, [LGSterling@ironhorsevineyards.com](mailto:LGSterling@ironhorsevineyards.com).

To finish on a up note, here's an artsy shot of my wife's new kitten, she's a Savannah and very cool.



December 14, 2009



I shall skip any seasonal greetings because for me 2010 has already begun - even if it's still 2009 and there doesn't appear to be consensus as to how we should speak 2010, is it two thousand ten, or twenty ten? personally, as one who until 2000 referred to every year as 'nineteen' I prefer 'twenty ten' - as we've started pre-pruning.

It's been pretty cold and when dry, and relatively warmer when wet, in short the usual not normal, so, all sorts of weird mushrooms have cropped up. If you know what this one is could you send me an e-mail c/o [Info@ironhorsevineyards.com](mailto:Info@ironhorsevineyards.com). I've been told it's a Satan's Boletus, but I don't think so because the stem isn't red and the cap is.



Focusing back on the vineyard, winemaker David Munksgard and I attended a talk by Andy Walker organized by Daniel Roberts, specifically on flowering and set. Dr. M. Andrew Walker (seen below with the pointer) is the

Professor and Geneticist Louis P. Martini Endowed Chair in Viticulture Department of Viticulture and Enology Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at U.C. Davis. He knows stuff and can explain stuff as well and is really adept with a pointer.



Understanding flowering and set is important as it gives us a better understanding as to why our crop yields can vary so dramatically in some years and not in others. For example, C1, a Chardonnay block (the source of both Sparkling and UnOaked Chardonnay) and part of our Thomas Rd. vineyard, the five-year average yield per acre is a respectable 4.4 tons, but the actual yields have been (starting 2005) 6.51, 6.19, 3.36, 2.98, and 2.96. For P7, Pinot Noir, the average was 2.79 the actual yields; 2.87, 4.00, 3.22, 2.34, and 1.53. If you graph the numbers (and I have) no clear pattern emerges, which just proves, yet again, that 'past performance is no indication of future results.'

Now during the talk I took a lot of notes, but there were a lot of concepts that were new to me (as well as new words, like 'ramify' ("to split up into branches or constituent parts" or "to send forth branches or extensions")), and trust me there's no way I can compress three hours of material delivered by an experienced and distinguished professor in a simple 'blog' like this, but the gist, as I understand things now, is that the process, so to speak, all starts with the now dormant or 'latent' compound buds, like the one below, which is earlier than I had thought and which means even now, in December, temperature is important.



What we have here is not just a single bud. Inside, waiting to 'break,' is a primary bud, two secondary buds (much less fruitful) and next to it, a lateral bud (which is, I believe, non-fruitful). What is fascinating is that a complete compressed shoot is in the process of being formed. By complete I mean before bud break, within the primary bud, there will be (granted very, very small) buds and nodes (about 6 to 12), leaves, tendrils and clusters and within the mini buds the material for next year's clusters, etc.

But, even if all goes well in terms of the bud development and bud break, things can still fall apart, or go well, during flowering and set. According to Prof. Walker the key to a decent crop is "heat, heat, heat, heat and more heat – and everything else," both at formation, flowering and set. So while in December we may want it to be cold (although not as cold as it has been, 19F) and we may want it to stay cold so the vines will 'rest longer,' we'll want a warm Spring, then a not too hot Summer and so on. Which means that it's really hard to come up with a weather wish list. The fact is everything about growing grapes is a lot more complex than I'd like. To quote my favorite cool climate viticulturist, Prof. Ron S. Jackson: "The shoot system of the grapevine has an unusually complex development program." (*But not without good reason.*) "This complexity provides the vine with a remarkable ability to adjust its development throughout much of the growing season." In short, while we try to influence grape production through pruning, shoot thinning, removing laterals, irrigating, fertilizing and providing nutrients and protection against frost and pests, the vines will adapt to a given year's weather and other environmental factors.

Separately, and unrelated to the vineyard, we had a great Thanksgiving in New York City. I got to see super heroes like Spiderman...



And supersized sandwiches such as this Brisket and Pastrami monster at the Carnegie Deli...



And the meatpacking district is the place to be, take it from one who's never been cool, hip or even remotely with it.

