November 20, 2009

All of the vines in N Block (mainly Pinot Noir for Sparkling) and all but one acres worth of M Block (Stony Hill Clone Chardonnay, a portion of which, I think, in 2009, will make for the best Blanc de Blancs we'll have ever made at Iron Horse) have been pulled and moved to burn piles (always away from where we plan to replant as the burn spots are, effectively, alkali deserts). The ground has been smoothed out, the cover crop (dwarf barley – it grows real fast) has been seeded, and everything was covered with straw.

In P and Q Blocks (which will now be called Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4 and Q5 as we already have a P2 up at Thomas Rd.) almost all of the infrastructure - end posts, highway posts, pencil rods, irrigation and frost protection lines - are in place (we only have about ten frost protection lines left to dig, which we'll do next year). Note how dark and rich the soil looks, totally unlike the light beige usually see with Goldridge, what a difference the rain makes.

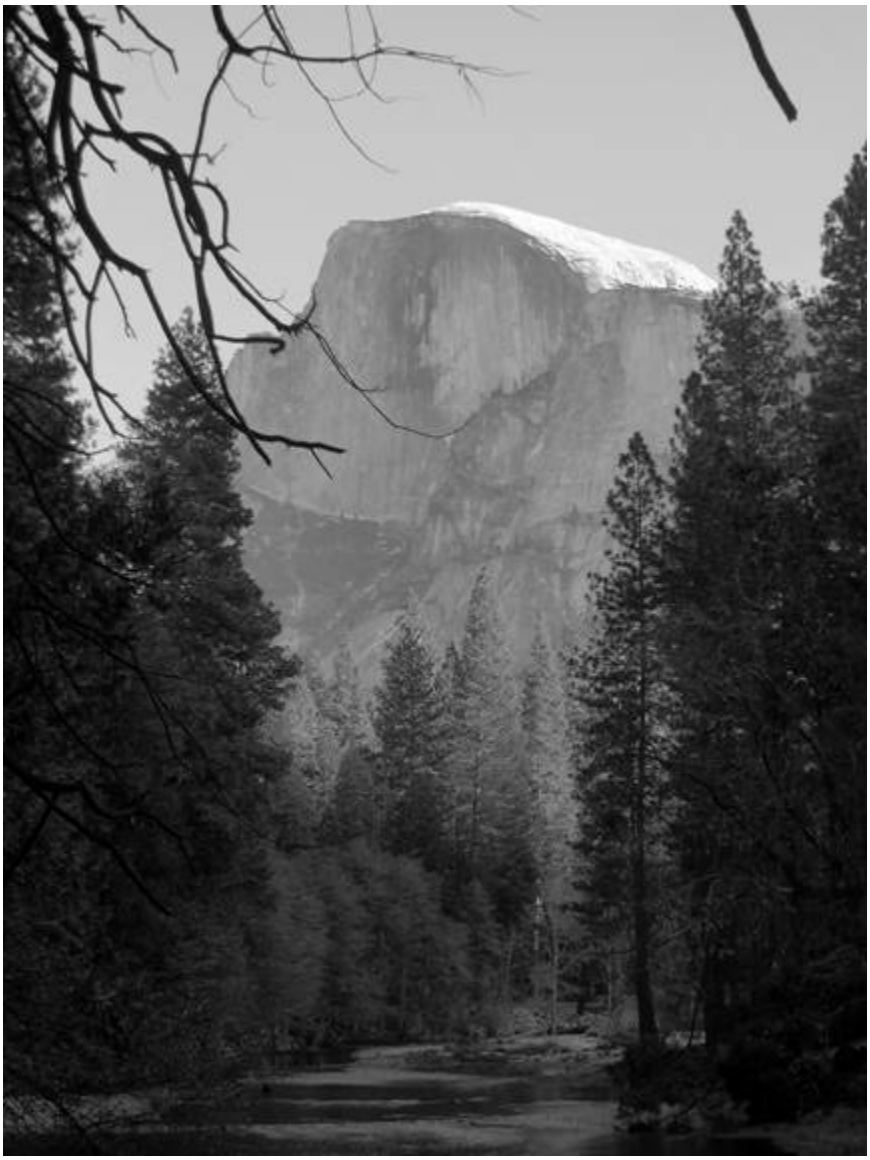
The only thing left was to burn the old vines. Below; Thursday, 10:00 a.m.

Next; Thursday, 2:00 p.m.

Which leaves me with a perfect segue to a topic I've been thinking about a lot (so as not to have to think about serious stuff like the economy and will we get healthcare reform or not, and by the way, who the heck does Joe Lieberman think he is making the 'public option' out to be a 'moral issue' of such gravity that he thinks it would be better that we don't get any health care reform at all, man he makes me mad), our CO2 emissions in particular, when fermenting wine.

A common misconception held by the likes of Martha Stewart (still, after all those months in prison with to improve herself) and almost everyone else, hence 'common,' (myself included, until David Munksgard set me straight), is that in the course of fermentation the yeast eats the sugar and excretes alcohol. That is not what happens. Nor is there an "alchemic transmutation" as propounded by the biodynamic types to whom apparently Louis Pasteur is wrong. Instead, through a very complex operation, the yeast 'metabolizes' the sugar in the juice and/or must, resulting in alcohol (or ethanol) and CO2. (A quick disclaimer, all the following chemistry was given to me by David Munksgard, please, do not expect me to understand it.) The formula is Sugar, $C_6H_{12}O_6$ (100%), which after fermentation, becomes Ethanol, $2C_2H_5OH$ (51.1%) plus $2CO_2$ (48.9%), C being Carbon, H is Hydrogen and O is oxygen (but you knew that). The resulting CO2 is vented off in the atmosphere (unless we are doing a second fermentation in the bottle and we don't vent it off, hence the bubbles in the sparkling. In effect, we emit about 1.1 pounds of CO2 for every gallon we ferment, which means in 2009 we emitted about 60,000 pounds or 30 tons of CO2 from the 320 tons of grapes we brought in.
Now 30 tons sounds like a lot of CO2, but it really isn't. The average human emits about two pounds a day, which means each one of us will emit an equal amount, provided we live over 82 years. According to the New York Times per passenger emissions on a typical London-New York round trip are 1.1 tons in economy class, 2.1 in business class and 2.8 in first class! Add up and multiply the numbers and a mere 11 first class passengers flying round trip London-New York will be responsible for just as much CO2 being released in the atmosphere. What's equally upsetting is the idea that in the back of the plane, where I fly, I'm only getting 40% of the space a first class passenger gets, which, considering how much they are paying, just doesn't seem fair to those poor people in first class.
Another important factor is that the CO2 released from fermentation was CO2 captured or absorbed by the vines during the growing season, a good amount of which was turned into, roots, shoots and leaves or is in the alcohol in the wines and the pumace which is slowly rereleased over time. A portion is also 'sequestered' in the trunks and cordons and also not released until burnt or composted following chipping or chopping. So I'm not concerned about our CO2 emissions from fermenting or, for that matter farming, after all we have plenty of other plants such as the native vegetation and cover crops that are doing the necessary work of plants. On the other hand, we do fly (in my case economy class), drive cars and trucks, use bottles, etc., all of which for the most part are powered by fossil fuels, oops, so much for being carbon neutral.

So I realize this has been a pretty long posting, but it's my last one for 2009. Soon we'll be starting pruning, or at least pre-pruning, which means it's already twenty-ten. To conclude some shots I recently took in Yosemite. I admit, I'm no Ansel Adams, but the rules clearly state, Half Dome must be shot in black and white.



October 29, 2009

There is an old, but apt, Chinese curse, “may you live in interesting times.” These are obviously interesting times, in an obviously cursed kind of way. By which I mean for every day we get a rainbow, expect a storm cloud too.

Yet, to keep it all bearable, once in awhile, some good news comes along, like the recent offer that came in the mail for “free pre-paid cremation,” and even a beautiful, productive and interesting day can happen, just as it did on October 28, 2009; productive and interesting in the sense that, at least in the field, it all had to do with the future.

In Q Block (formerly P & Q) all the highway posts (the ones that carry the wire) and pencil rods (one per vine) are in place, so other than irrigation, rootstock, grafts and wires, only the end posts need to be set in place.

The tires are filled with water and the angles are carefully checked.

We take pride in our work and as always, safety first.

Meanwhile we're removing the vines in N and M. I'm feeling conflicted. I always do when pulling out a block, but it has to be done, that and we've got the financing and if I have one piece of advice for the young people that might accidentally stumble onto this paragraph, once you have a loan commitment from a bank don't waste it.

And if all of the above wasn't enough, soil scientist Paul Anamosa and his crew came to dig pits and jump into them, in L and O Blocks. From left to right: Doug, Hank, Cory and Paul (to avoid any confusion, Hank is the one without a hat).

This it what it looks like about three feet down in O Block…

Note the gopher tunnel.

Note: Unfortunately, no gophers were harmed in the making of this blog post.

Everything we are doing: soil pits, making sure all of the end posts are exactly at the correct angle, highway posts the right height, pencil rods in the exact right place, pulling up vines, taking pictures, quasi blogging – it's all for a purpose, make great wines that taste great and are fun to drink (the fun part is a new idea, but one I think necessary in these 'interesting times').

October 14, 2009

It’s not only starting to look like autumn, with changing leaves and bizarre gourds from the garden…

It’s starting to feel and smell like Autumn, meaning, after a few frosts and the first real rain of the season, time to bring and put up the tomatoes.

When I mean first real rain, I mean really wet rain. We got 4.22 inches in less than 24 hours…

With seriously high winds, resulting in a downed power line in the vineyard…

And delays to my 1/3 of a mile morning commute.

Another sign of autumn, the annual health insurance renewal along with the unveiling of the premiums. For those who have read the 'blog' this year, 2009 has not been fun all of the time. Between the Great Recession and what turns out to have been a bad 'set,' I often felt like I was being beaten on the back of the head with a wet sock filled with sand, which means I've got it a lot better than most. However the latest whap to an already sore neck was the proposal for next year's health coverage, both for myself, my family and our employees.

Perhaps we are eccentric, but we cover 100% of our employees' premiums and 80% of dependants. Family and senior management have the same coverage (actually a bit less) than the others. Our rational is simple, the quality of our wines depend on the skills and dedication of our employees as well as their physical well being and the physical well being of their families. Trust me, a badly pruned vine will not make for great wine, and in this market not only do the wines we make have to taste great, we also have to do so in a cost effective manner. We may talk about growing wine grapes and winemaking as a mix of both art and science, but, at least in our case – by which I mean we have more brains than money, and not because we are so smart – it's all business.

So, when a proposal arrives that increase our annual premiums by about 15.5%, in an economy where raising prices is not an option, it hurts. After all, that extra 15.5% won't make the wine taste better. What hurts the most is not only are we supposed to pay more, we are paying more for less. The co-pays are up, choices reduced and worse the 'stop-loss' is raised to a level that is absurd. In 2009 the stop-loss was capped at $2,000, which for many is already too much. But, the current proposal is to raise it to $10,000. A production or vineyard worker earning between $25,000 and $50,000 a year can't afford $10,000 out of pocket if he or she or a dependant gets sick, which means they can't afford to get sick even after we may have paid over $10,000 in annual premiums for that worker and his or her family. Such numbers do not put me in a happy place.

What is worse is the excuses given for such a steep increase: Dramatic rise in prescription drug costs; consolidation of insurance companies – so much for the touted increased efficiencies; and expansion of providers – so much for the benefits of increased competition.

So let me recap: Our business is supposed to pay a large sum to the insurer to insure our employees, and ourselves, for the most part, to cover only catastrophic illnesses, with, at best, limited preventative care, and the only ancillary benefit of having an insurer is that keeps costs down by telling doctors they need to use generic drugs (okay, no problem there) or the carrier's particular 'formulary' (and all the sudden 'big government' is a problem?) and because they are better at beating down the hospitals, doctors etc. The system may not be broken, but it sure as heck isn't working. We need reform now. We need a public option, but maybe not now and we need to accept that we'll have to pay for it, just as we now pay for Social Security, Medicare, and Worker's Compensation Insurance.

Luckily we have some sound leaders such as Rep. Barney Frank who paid us a visit last weekend along with our Congresswoman, Lynn Woolsey.

So I have some hope for the future, that and at least in California, we have one viable alternative, but it isn't a perfect alternative so at least for the next year most of our people won't be covered under a 'phantom plan.'

September 29, 2009

In my last post I stated that I had “every confidence that the grapes we picked are going to make some truly great wines.” A key basis of my confidence is our ‘vinificateur,’ or winemaker, David Munksgard and his crew (shown below, without David, running both presses simultaneously and without any drama).

And, I might add, that although picking wasn't easy this year - at times I felt like even I was working - and while we weren't always perfect, I feel overall, we did a pretty good job. In a low yield year and vineyard you don't want to leave any grapes on the vine or on the ground. But, we can't afford bad grapes either, such as those that are under-ripe or tainted with bunch rot. For example, the grapes below were picked on September 10 from L block, look closely and some bunch rot can be seen. Sorry about that.

But before I continue on about '09, the moment is ripe for a rant. Bad enough I have to deal with people telling me we have to be 'organic,' biodynamic,' or even 'sustainable.' All they are really telling me is what I can't do, and, sadly, not how to make better wine. Now, to make matters worse, a new movement is rearing its ugly head, 'Natural Wine' and 'Natural Winemaking.' For starters all of our grapes are hand picked, and I admit native fermentations (one of the key tenets of Natural Winemaking) can be great. About 30 barrels or 600 cases or so of the 2009 Chardonnay are undergoing native fermentations. However, they need constant monitoring and stuck fermentations can be scary and taste pretty nasty.

In addition to hand picking and native fermentations, natural wines are made without added sugars, adjustments for acidity, and are, preferably, unfiltered, un-fined and un-sulfured. There are those who have concluded that it's best to ferment wine in buried amphorae, as oak is too new an innovation.

Back to '09 and Iron Horse. My guess is that most growers and winemakers will agree that if the goal is an ultra-premium wine, then we need to pick at the exact moment when the grapes are at 'optimal physiological ripeness' (or OPR). We may not agree as when we have OPR, but, if the grapes have been properly cultivated, and picked at the right time (and properly picked, see above), then only minimal intervention on the part of the winemaker will be needed to make a great wine. Look at the quality of the juice below. That is Chardonnay, Hyde –Old Wente Clone, from Cb, Cc, Cd and Ce.

Clearly, David won't need to intervene much to make a great Chardonnay. On the other hand, when we ready to harvest M Block (Stony Hill clone Chardonnay) we had a problem. As M is going to be replanted, I had, it turns out, over-cropped the block and a significant portion of the grapes were stuck at 20 degrees brix, meaning no chance of reaching OPM for Chardonnay. Luckily, we have another option, pick for sparkling. However, there are few wines that involve more winemaker intervention than Sparklings and Champagnes.

As I see it, the history of wine is one in which we are constantly trying to find ways to make better wines and cope with differing conditions. For example, in a relatively cool region like Champagne it is hard to get the same degree of ripeness as in Burgundy to the South. Second fermentation in the bottle is a way to deal with the situation, just as it solved our problem in M Block. If "natural Winemaking' is the only permitted way of making wine then there would be little or no Sparklings, Ports, Cognacs, Sherries, etc. It's as if a hunting party at the start of the bronze-age came back to the settlement after a successful hunt, and the rest of the band refused to eat the meat because the spears and arrows had bronze tips. "No sorry, won't eat anything not killed with stone – bronze just isn't natural."

September 16, 2009

No. 10

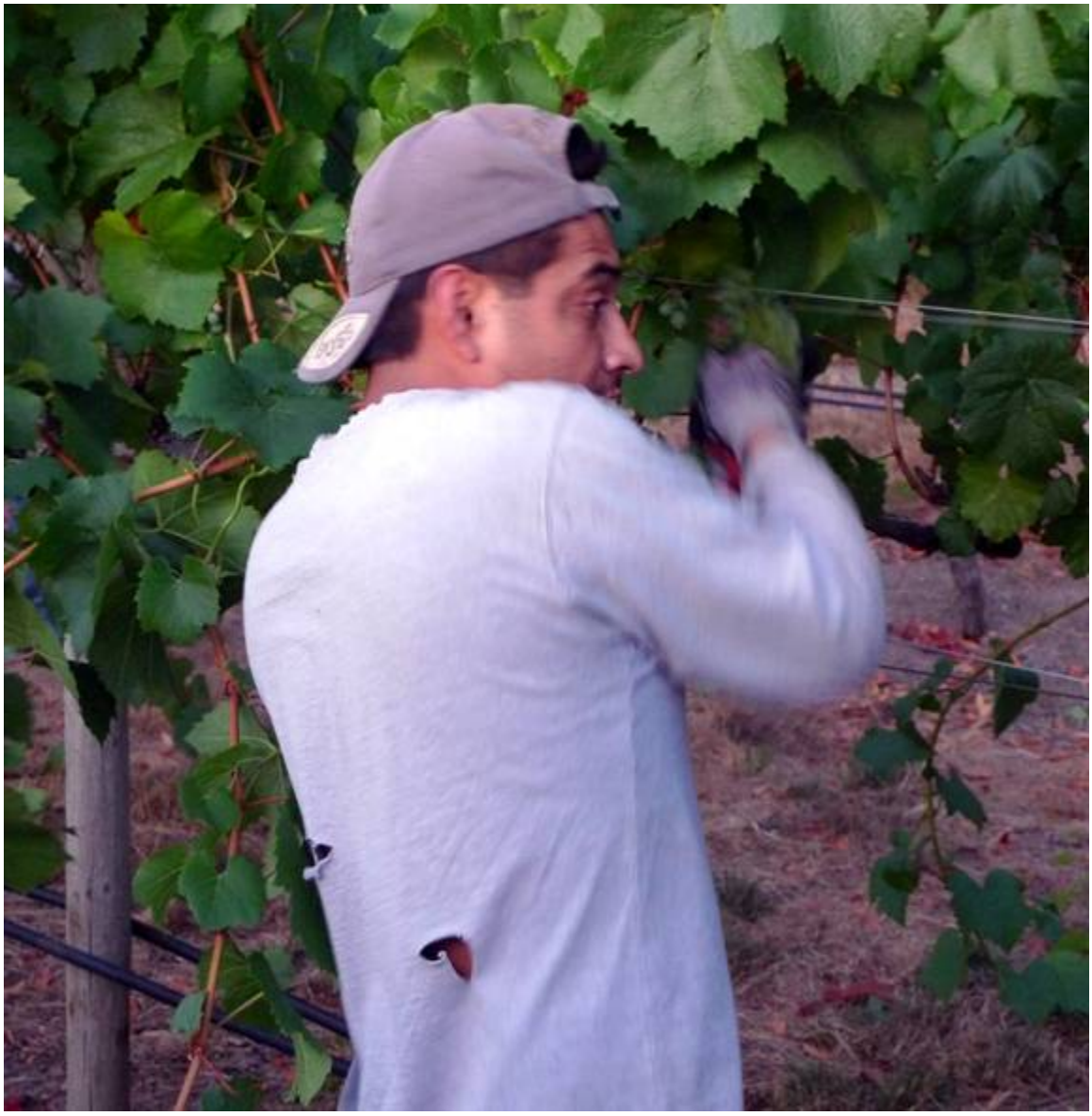
Harvest ended on September 14, 2009 at about 1:20 p.m. Of the 26 days between start and finish, we picked on 25 of them. I got to sleep in on Labor Day. Total haul was over 310 tons, just under 185 tons for sparkling, 112 for Chardonnay and 13.83 for Pinot Noir –hence the new pronunciation of Pinot as Pi-**NOT -** and tad better than last year, which isn't saying much.

Now I have every confidence that the grapes we picked are going to make some truly great wines, and I'll explain why I feel so confident in my next post about two weeks from now. But why was there such a small Pinot Noir crop, particularly from the Thomas Road Vineyard? It seems it all has to do with the weather, too warm too early, leading to early bud break and then too cool at set. As our meteorologist Erik Moldstad has noted when making his weather forecasts: Sometimes the temperature is above average, sometime below average, and sometimes average. So two problems, the first is timing, there's a right time to be cool and a right time to be warm and it seems 2009 got it wrong in some places and not others.

The other problem is the extremes, in that they happen. After 30 years we may think we know what's going on. We may spout off about how Green Valley is the coolest and foggiest AVA, but when dealing with climate, 30 years is not anywhere close to a representative sampling. Let's take last weekend as an example. Now I felt pretty sure that Sunday, September 13, 2009 was going to be a trial. Not only were we harvesting grapes, but also, maybe some six or more months ago, we had scheduled a Harvest Dance Party, with a live band, in a field next to the vegetable garden. Not exactly an easy venue to set up a kitchen, bandstand and a dance floor. I had bet that it was going to be horribly hot. I was wrong. Here's how the weekend transpired weather-wise: Friday, September 11, 6:30 a.m., 44.7 F, 2:06 p.m. 99.3F; Saturday, the 12th, maybe around 4:00 a.m., and definitely at 6:00 when I was awake and in the vineyard, thunder and lightening; on the 13th, the high was 66.2F and we got .07" of rain, almost exclusively between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m., when the party was on. Out of nowhere came "sub-tropical moisture." By Monday everything was back to semi-normal, meaning cool then warm, but none of the fog that seems to form our identity.

So here is what I have learned, whether Thomas Rd. or Wall St. we may think we can manage risk, be it weather or default, but, as any good risk manager knows, even if you have a handle on 90% of the probable outcomes, on either side there is that 5% labeled on the chart as T.B.D., which doesn't mean 'to be determined.' It means 'there be dragons.' Also, never make farming plans or decisions based on marketing materials.

Meantime, I can't say enough about the crew led by Victor Arreola and Manuel Briano along with the 'tally men' Place and Rafa. Sometimes it was too hot; sometimes too much ground had to be covered for too few grapes; and then at the end they had to deal with bunch rot, working through the rows in the early dawn with flashlights just ahead of the pickers. The only one, who ever griped, was I. What follows are some of my favorite harvest shots of the crew at work, and trust me, it's work.

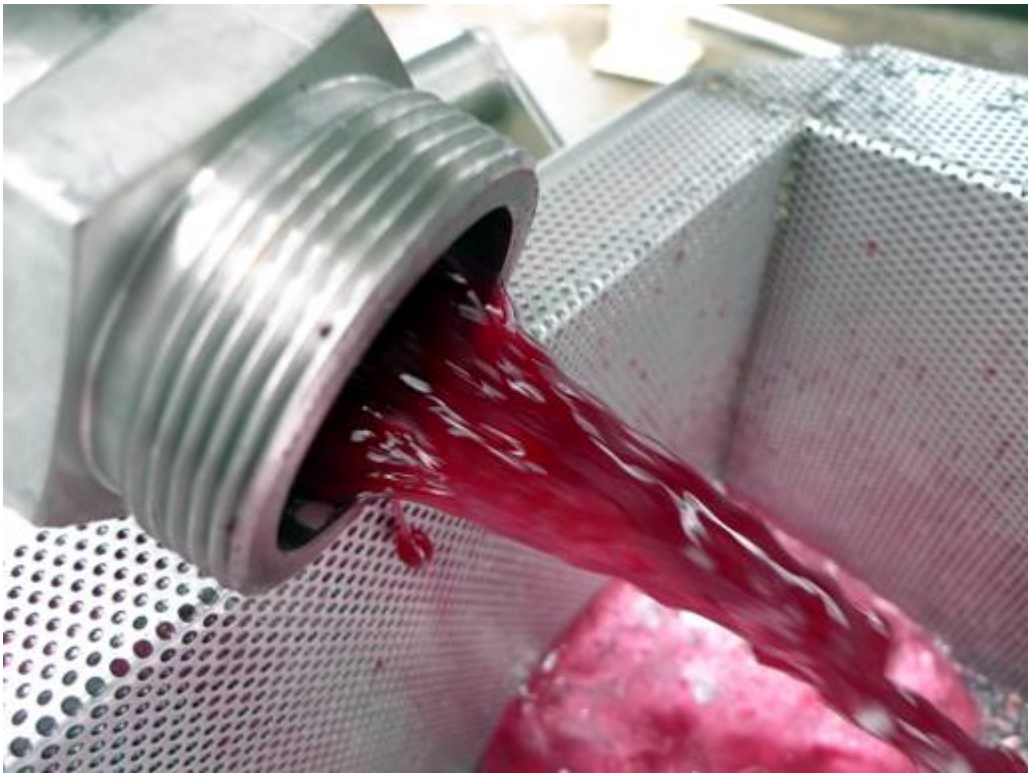



KUBO
LAMPSON

August 27, 2009

Almost done with the Pinot Noir for sparkling harvest. Picking conditions have been great, cool and foggy, thanks to our vinificateur, David Munksgard (not pictured below), and his shorts, i.e. no matter how cool he's wearing shorts. We can wait until it is light enough to see the grapes we want to pick and it's still cool. Cool is better for the guys, they don't get hot, and, more to the point, nor do the grapes, and David's legs are still pasty, which is why he isn't pictured below.

The juice is beautiful and it tastes great. Below is the 2009 Brut Rosé after just six days of cold soak. Admit, you want to drink it…



The problem is very, very few grapes. Clusters yes, lots of stems too, but with such small berries, not much wine. After three small harvests in a row I'm starting to take it personally.

So David has been pressing with rice hulls. He can explain it best, but he's busy, no intern this year, so just accept that it involves more 'channels' for the juice to flow, which means we can get an extra 5 to 10 gallons of juice per ton to put in the Rosé of Pinot Noir.

In the meantime, some praise for David Munksgard; I don't know any other winemaker, anywhere, who can adapt, improvise and improve like he can. We may be short on fruit, but I know the wines will be great. Thank you David. Note how I've hidden this near the end of the post.

Meanwhile, the 2007 and 2008 policy of 'No Grape Left Behind" has been renewed. I follow behind the pickers in the morning with my 'recycled' yellow bucket and even picked the Pinot Noir accidentally growing in Ca, a Chardonnay block (it's okay to mix Chardonnay with Pinot, but not Pinot with Chardonnay), for an extra .005 of a ton.

August 19, 2009

Surprise…Harvest 2009 has begun. We picked 10.25 Tons of Pinot Noir, which will, eventually, be 2009 Brut Rosé. Not as much as last year and that was then a record low, but damn tasty (I know because as I am typing this I'm having the greatest sparkling cocktail anyone can have, Ultra Brut with the new juice), still, farming is a bitch. Lucky for us, a predicted heat wave failed to materialize, mainly because winemaker David Munksgard is wearing shorts.

Moving on… Perhaps the biggest challenge of a quasi-blogger is being entertaining, unlike my fellow panelist and me at a 'seminar' for the Russian River Valley Pinot Noir Valley Forum (I felt their ennui…just didn't do anything to alleviate it).

And while we have a sense of humor, or at least club manager Kevin Vanderhoff, sort of, has one…

Sometimes we need to be serious, which explains all the words that follow.

Trying to Explain What's Happening with Chardonnay at Iron Horse Vineyards

A quick explanation of the explanation: Below I shall try to explain what's happening with Chardonnay at Iron Horse Vineyards. Because I am not a winemaker, or, if I was in France, a 'vinificateur' (meaning that such creatures now exist in France), and we want to be correct and accurate, I hope our winemaker, David Munksgard, will eventually write a companion glossary of some of the technical terms and winemaking techniques he is using, along with his explanation of the impact they have on the wines.

Some time ago, Stephen Brook, a contributing editor at Decanter, came by as part of his research for a new book he's writing. So David and I presented our 2007 Chardonnays (after a glass of 2003 Blanc de Blancs, which is another way to make Chardonnay and shouldn't be ignored, it's just a different vintage). We poured the 2007 UnOaked, Estate, Heritage Clone (Stony Hill clone from P Block), Corral Vineyard (Old Wente clone) and Rued Clone. At one point during the tasting he looked up at us and asked how are the wines being received in the market? Stephen is too much of a professional to let us even get a sense of whether he does or doesn't like a wine, however he had recognized that we were making a totally different style Chardonnay than he was used to, not quite French and not your standard California style either. For example, try to imagine a Chardonnay that was picked on September 4, the alcohol is 13.9%, no ML, total acidity is .82 g/100ml and the pH is a mere 2.96, which are the numbers for our 2007 Rued Clone.

Not long after that visit, a respected colleague and true blogger, Craig Camp, came to lunch, and after wrote the following about the 2007 UnOaked:

"Firm and bright with a lovely, lively freshness throughout you can tell as you drink this wine that the Sterling family cut their teeth on French wines. While having a lot in common with a fine Chablis or Pouilly Fuisse, the California personality of this wine shows through in the fresh hints of ripe tropical fruit that rides on a firm backbone of acidity and minerality. What a wonderful thing to do with chardonnay grown in the cool Green Valley."

Later wine writer Dan Berger described the 2007 Rued Clone as follows: "A wild spice character adds interest to a stone fruit and racy lime aroma. A lot going on in this crisp, lean, and focused cold-climate Chardonnay, one of California's finest."

Until 2005, Chardonnay at Iron Horse was basically a 'work horse.' It paid the bills, and we didn't really pay much attention to either the vines or the winemaking, unless we absolutely had to. In fact before David arrived, no matter what the grapes tasted like, every year we stuck to the same story; 100% *whole fruit pressed*, 0% *malo-lactic fermentation* and 100% *barrel fermented*. The problem was that we failed to recognize that there are clonal variations in Chardonnay; we also forgot that if one is going to barrel ferment, then the quality and compatibility of the barrels used is crucial; and some years 0% ML just isn't appropriate. Luckily, after David arrived in 1996, and, not without some resistance on our part, he started to change our 'one size fits all' mentality. First he tasted and graded all of the barrels. The old approach was to buy a mix of French and American oak simply to have a mix. By keeping track of those that worked and those that didn't he was able to identify the best barrels for our Chardonnays and then began the slow process of culling the bad and replacing with the good. To avoid having to continue using the bad, some lots were *tank fermented*. David introduced more frequent '*batonage*' and started experimenting with different *yeasts*. In 1999 we actually did 100% ML. However, except for an occasional Corral Chardonnay and a Thomas Road Chardonnay (not nearly as exciting as the Pinot Noir from the same site), our Chardonnay was good, most of the time very good, possibly even very, very good, but not great. In 2003 we even had to bottle some of it under the Tin Pony label, which sounds like fun, but isn't. Then in 2004 22 acres of Chardonnay, C Block, just shut down. We only harvested 12.85 tons, as compared to 72.67 tons in 2000. J also shut down, yielding a mere 2.5 tons, or 0.8 tons per acre and the worst was Lower A, just .36 tons to the acre, not even worth the time and fuel needed to pick the grapes. In short, blocks that in 2000 represented about 5,000 cases only produced about 900 cases worth of Chardonnay, none of which was particularly exciting (which explains why I'm not impressed when I see 'old vine' on a label).

When faced with such a dramatic drop in both quantity and quality there is only one course of action: rip out and replant. The difference was that this time we decided it wouldn't hurt to get some outside expertise, which is why Daniel Roberts and his team at Integrated Winegrowing arrived at Iron Horse. The initial task was to advise us on the replant, and they have done an extraordinary job. However Daniel also brought more than a replanting plan. He also taught us about 'precision viticulture.' We actually started to care for the vines depending upon their needs and the quality of the fruit and more important, the flavors, improved dramatically.

An apt example is what happened in O Block, originally planted in 1985 using bud wood from the Rued Vineyard on Graton Road. The block was trained as a quad-cordon system (imagine a sideways H coming out of a single trunk with, hopefully, 12 feet of bearing wood - as opposed to six feet for a traditional bi-lateral cordon). However, a training method that worked in other blocks, such as L Block, didn't work in O. In effect we were over-cropping, which affected the quality and the flavors. The soils were too poor and the root system too weak to handle that much bearing wood, so attempts to extend the cordons out along the fruit wire just weakened the vines. In addition, there were too many bends in the cordons, pretty to look at, but also weakening the vines. Where we did have four cordons we had problems with bunch rot and other problems due to excess moisture and crossed clusters. So Daniel had us remove failing extensions and promise not to attempt any others. When the vines needed water and fertilizer they got water and fertilizer, and the result, after just one year, the 2005 Rued Clone Chardonnay was one of the SF Chronicle's top 100 in 2007. According to Narsai David of KCBS Radio, the "2005 Rued Clone Chardonnay Rich straw color with a complex, rich, luscious aroma... can't wait to get a mouthful! A creamy richness on the palate with a nice touch of oak for complexity. Wow... the lingering flavors! The balance of fruit and oak and enough acid to round it out make this exceptional. Talk about lingering?! Wow, long after swallowing. The great Alexis Lichine used to say if you could count to 10 and still taste the flavors, you had an exceptional wine. This is surely a 9! It wants a rich, creamy lobster or scallop, or maybe even a glazed, baked ham. $35.00. Wow." According to Dan Berger, the best California Chardonnay he's ever tasted. Also, we earned 94 Points in the Wine Enthusiast and 92 in Wine & Spirits.

Now I'd love to take all the credit, but I can't. First, one really had to work hard to make a bad Chardonnay in 2005. I'm still drinking, and loving the 2005 Estate Chardonnay. Second, David started to have fun, so, in addition to the Rued Clone Chardonnay, we also released a Corral Vineyard Chardonnay and a Native Fermentation Chardonnay (I wanted to call it 'Feral Fermentation'). Then there was a fortunate accident. First, we ran out of barrels, that's how big the crop was in 2005. Second the membrane on our 10-ton capacity press broke, and the only little, old, Italian lady who could sew a new one was on holiday. We still has our older press which we normally use to press our reds, but it only holds four tons if pressing whole fruit, and, as I mentioned above, the crop was huge (over 6.7 tons/acre from the Thomas Road vineyard Chardonnay), so we had to *de-stem* the grapes, which, in effect, means *skin contact,* and then, because no barrels, tank ferment. Eight or so months later David and I tasted the Chardonnays, first we loved what we now call UnOaked on its own, and other wineries were starting to make and sell 'oak free' wines, so we too jumped on the bandwagon, we just never mention it wasn't on purpose.

Starting in 2006 we made the UnOaked was on purpose and by 2007 David had finally culled out all of the 'bad' barrels and we no longer needed to blend in tank fermented Chardonnay into the Estate Chardonnay (25% in 2005, 15% in 2006). P Block also started to show some exceptional flavors and it too was bottled separately as our Heritage Clone Chardonnay ('P' just didn't seem right), as mentioned above.

As for the future, we only got 5.07 tons from C and Z blocks, but it was some of prettiest and most uniform fruit we have ever seen, and it tastes great. So perhaps I may be biased, but I think our Chardonnays are now great. The question is why? In part we've been lucky, which is always needed when dealing with an agricultural product. However I think the big difference is how we make our decisions. We don't start with a market analysis of what people want, or think they want in a Chardonnay. Nor do we analyze what certain wine writers like, or tell us they like. Not that we don't care, but it is very hard to adapt a wine that is 'Estate Bottled' to fluctuating tastes and opinions. We also don't let formulas, recipes and 'buzz' words dictate how we grow our grapes and make our wines. In the past we made the best with what we got, now we work to make what we got better. More important however, is that we now have multiple programs to maximize the differences and advantages between clones and blocks. We have the option to pick for sparkling, UnOaked and Estate or vineyard or clone designated Chardonnays, such that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole.

Going forward I can see a significant change in our approach. Instead of making an 'Estate Chardonnay' we'll have the UnOaked Chardonnay, a Heritage Clone Chardonnay (mainly Hyde-Old Wente Clone from C) and a Rued Clone Chardonnay (I had thought we'd call it Z, but Joy at lunch one day wondered why we couldn't still call it Rued, and she is right).