c.a.v.e.

courtship and vigilant enology

spring 2015

Drought Update

Here we are in April of 2015 and the drought is dragging into its fourth year state-wide (all of the western U. S. actually). Fortunately for us we had two gusher storms this past winter that filled all of the local reservoirs so at least our drinking water supply is assured for another year. Meanwhile we are still diligently conserving water knowing that this could last a very long time and that we must extend the water we have for as long as possible.

Vintage 2015 - Here we come!

Speaking of the drought we are starting to see what we think are real effects of it in the vineyard. This year the grapevines have leafed out earlier than in recent memory or even long-past memory – at least three weeks early just about everywhere. The real hazard is the danger of a frost damaging the tender young shoots that are out so early. Damaged shoots means damaged clusters, and that means lower yields.

So why did this happen? Current thinking is that with less cold water in the ground from winter rains coupled with unseasonably warm temps in February and March the ground has warmed up earlier than usual causing the vines to start to grow; the proverbial sap is flowing! As of this writing on March 30 it is still warmer than usual and the nights have been very mild so it looks like frost may not happen. Frost is a tricky thing because it can come when you least expect it. Cloudless nights means heat in the ground from daytime sun is radiated into space, then the air temperature at ground level cools very quickly and can get down below 32°F rapidly and unexpectedly, especially in low lying areas. Farmers have to be ever on guard for frost.

Common conversions used in winemaking

How do I, the winemaker, know how to estimate the tonnage needed each vintage to match production goals of a given variety, usually expressed in gallons or cases? Or how many barrels do I order once the tonnage is decided? The easy answer is: conversion factors or estimators. But since each grape is different some of the conversions differ slightly. Zinfandel is definitely juicier than Cabernet Sauvignon so a ton of Zin will yield a larger volume of wine. Barrel fermented white grapes tend to yield more still since they are pressed in advance and then fermented versus being fermented on the skins in a tank. At pressing the reds are not squeezed as hard as whites so some liquid goes out with the pomace. Below are some common conversions that I use for estimating:

1 Ton = 150 gallons at the press
1 Ton = 2.5 barrels
1 Barrel = 60 gallons
1 Barrel = 24 cases of finished wine
1 Ton = 58 cases of finished wine

continued on reverse...

Common conversions used in winemaking *(cont.)*

One has to remember that there are losses continually throughout the winemaking process, from racking off yeast lees to evaporation during barrel aging to filtration losses during bottling prep. But at least we have some guideposts to help us with estimating over the duration.

This leads me to another thought...

You may be wondering how the Pech Merle wines in your cellar are tasting. Me too! Therefore I have been tasting prior vintages lately and can give you a little advice on this subject. Here are some notes on which wines to drink and what to hold on to for a little while longer. My personal preference is to drink wine on the young side to experience the youthful ripe fruit of the wine; I love them in their youth. Your preference may be different so you decide!

Cheers!

John Pepe, Winemaker