

Lindsay's Vineyard Chronicles

What's been going on in the vineyard this week?

Friday September 15

Pre-Harvest Jitters

All season long we've been hurrying to get the work done; pruning and tying the vines, pulling out weeds, shoot thinning, then leaf pulling, then combing the canopies, not to mention the big push to get the new production space ready for its first vintage. Now, we find ourselves playing the waiting game. Anxiously checking brix each week to see if we can start planning for the big day: harvest.



Figure 1: Itasca getting closer by the day

We're still not quite there yet. Last chronicle discussed taking brix measurements to determine ripeness levels, and how the slow accumulation of sugar correlates to the alcohol content of our finished wine. This week, as samples are coming back with brix readings nearing 20°, I'm looking more closely at acid levels to decide when we might plan for our first pick day.

Acid and sugar are two main components a winemaker looks at to determine balance in their fruit. Finding that point is a challenge every year -- especially for growers working with hybrid grapes in cool regions. Traditional vinifera varieties tend to have acid levels measuring 6-8 g/l, where many hybrid varieties naturally reach their sugar ripeness at double that amount. Both acid and sugar levels are directly related to the amount of heat and sun that the grapes are exposed to during ripening, so cool cloudy weather tends to slow things down. This can be a positive or negative, depending on where you're growing, the season you're in, and the condition of your fruit.

Acid can be assessed in a few ways. First, we use the pH meter, which can give us an indication of where the acid ratio lies. We expect our hybrid grapes on average to lie somewhere in the 3.0 – 3.4 range, depending on the variety.

Next, when the pH starts to get closer to that range, we'll perform TA (titratable acidity) titrations. Titrations give us the acid content of the sample in g/l, and is generally a closer view of the true acidity we can expect in our fruit.

Lastly, we taste berries, and we taste them often. Winemaking is not a series of numbers lining up perfectly on a spreadsheet, with an equation telling us exactly when and what to do. We work in partnership with Mother Nature, and ultimately, we make our decisions by taking into view all that we can and can't put into numbers. We note when the berries start to lose that bite of acid that makes the back of your jaw ache. We feel the crunch of the seeds and remember how last week the green tissue gave them a little more squish, while today the brown seeds readily crack between your teeth. We move the pulp around on the tongue, feeling the pectin like a little bubble of jelly, or maybe it's starting to break down into looser strings, telling us that the berry is inching closer to ripeness.



It's the best time in the vineyard, the short window of the year when you can walk through the vines and taste the fruits of your labor. It's a tense time in the winery, each day going through checklists, evaluating fermentation protocols, and disassembling-cleaning-reassembling all the equipment on an endless loop while we wait for fruit to begin to arrive.

We hope to start our first picks next week. Stay tuned.