

QUARTERLY EXTRA

EXTRA POUR*Virginia Wine Time*

WINTER IN THE VINEYARDS

by Warren Richard

It is no secret that summer and fall seasons are busy times in area vineyards with the bustle of harvesting grapes, crushing them and then storing the juice in tanks and barrels. It may, therefore, be easy to assume that winter must be a time of rest for vineyard managers and winemakers. However, there is no rest time for them; in fact, winter is quite busy as this is the time for important vineyard maintenance, and winemakers are active in the barrel room as they monitor the progress of developing wines.

In the Vineyard

Grape vines come alive in the spring as buds begin to break and the fruit set for continued growth and maturation during the summer. Grapes are harvested when they exhibit their peak flavor and the desired pH and sugar levels. During the winter, though, vines become dormant, and it is during this time that vineyard management prepares the vines for the next growing cycle.

The chief preparation for the springtime renaissance is vine pruning. Beginning in late November, grape-producing canes are pruned back so that managed growth is ensured for the next season. There are a number of vineyard systems for vineyard managers to employ in order to train vines for optimal growth; however, winemaker Doug Fabboli of Fabboli Cellars uses the term “balance” to describe the ultimate goal for all vineyard managers regardless of the system used.

Fabboli favors a system known as smart dyson that trains certain shoots downward to balance the vines. However, Fabboli begins his winter routine in much the same way as other managers, and his foci are on the cordon and shoots. Shoots are pruned (or snipped) back from positions that may exceed the growing zone during the growing season, but the primary focus must be the life-bearing cordons.

With this in mind, Fabboli trims to make certain that his vines generate no more than four to five shoots per foot on the cordon. The cordon is the critical life force for these grape-producing shoots, and these are trained on adjustable cordon wires with either green colored tape or twine.



Al and Cheryl Kellert of Gray Ghost Vineyards favor a management system known as cordoned-trained, spur-pruned. Though a different system than Fabboli's, the basic procedure of pruning and cordon training is much the same. For the Kellerts, their goal is to secure two buds per spur. (Buds grow on shoots and become fruit.) Cheryl Kellert is the pruner-in-chief at Gray Ghost Vineyards, and it is a task that she looks forward to each season. Cheryl enjoys the "zen" experience---being alone yet mindful in vineyard. Fabboli likewise relishes the task and likens himself to a skilled surgeon who brings life back to the vineyard. Our conclusion? The vines brought as much energy to vineyard managers as the managers brought to the vines.

Of course, all of this "zen" talk seems rather cerebral but deadlines must loom for the vineyard managers; indeed, this is the case. Late February is when pruning should be done, and then the watchful waiting for bud break begins. So what are the concerns then? The chief concern for our winemakers was late winter temperature swings. While the winter-weary may welcome a warm spell in March, winemakers fear early bud breaks as vines become vitalized with warmer temperatures. A swing back to normal, colder weather can kill off these delicate grape-producing buds. However, none of our winemakers expressed concern over the current record-breaking cold and snow. Only extreme temperatures reaching below zero degrees can damage the vines, and the record-breaking snow can actually nourish the vines once it melts. The snowmelt can be very helpful to vines that were stressed due to hot, dry summers.

In the Barrel Room

Winter is an active time in the barrel room, too. While January is generally a rest time for developing wines, winemakers are no less engaged in their progress. Winter is the time when



some wines are finishing their malolactic fermentation; during winter, red wines may be topped off to prevent oxidation. Winter may also be a time for racking wines. It's also not too early for some winemakers to bottle and release certain wines. For example, the Kellerts anticipate a February release for their 2009 Riesling followed by the 2009 Vidal Blanc. Of course, this schedule will vary from winery to winery. Fabboli will bottle earliest releases in April, and he will be blending wines in March.

So when do vineyard managers and winemakers get a break? The answer appears to be never. Even in the winter, much needs to be done. For vines to be energized in the spring, winter management is

vital. For quality wines to be released, progress in the tanks and barrels must be monitored. Therefore, the labor to produce wine from the vineyard to the bottle is ongoing and year-round. And note that the vineyard managers interviewed for this article were also the winemakers; yet, they all presented an enthusiastic spirit that suggested a love of labor. The wines that are produced are the evidence of this passion.