

WINE GRAPE INFORMATION FOR PENNSYLVANIA AND THE REGION

From Penn State Cooperative Extension

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2006 Vintage

Boy, what a year! They aren't kidding when they say every vintage is different. For me this one fell in between 2005 as a dry and sunny one with Tammy as a spoiler and 2003 which was pretty much rotten from start to end. After a cool and dry spring through May and early June there was a rainy and warm weather in July that created an opening for powdery mildew that dogged growers throughout the season. I was desperately hoping for the streak of sun and warmth at the critical few weeks around harvest but it never came. Instead we got 2 days of sun, 2 rain, back and forth. It was a canopy management and spray program kind of season. Which, if done well, actually returned some pretty nice looking and tasting fruit as the season has concluded. It was cool and wet with just enough sunny days mixed in to move the reds towards acceptable flavors. Still, a year like this can make very nice white wines and some good reds but we just did not get the heat necessary to build significant red wines. Making sound wines in a year like this is a real achievement and can only be the result of good viticulture and creative wine making. I am learning the critical importance of both in what can only be described as a marginal climate for wine production. Under these conditions almost everything has to be perfect in both the vineyard and the cellar to have any hope for a really fine wine to pop out. There is such a fine and delicate balance that exists in the fruit and this extends into the cellar where the balance of acid, alcohol, flavors and phenolics seems to be on such a fine fulcrum - tip it any which way and the wine is not right. For any hope of a nice wine the grapes have to make the grade yet varieties like Pinot Noir and Merlot can go from looking and tasting really good to, well, disappointing in the seeming blink of an eye. A frost like the one we had on October 14 and 15 forces the issue and the grapes, no matter where they are, have to come in. Yields were down and expenses up this year - that is the bitter irony of wine growing, it costs more to make good wines in a hard year than those few and magical ones when everything is so easy. In a year like this patience was rewarded but good judgment, too. When to pick is such a hard decision to make because of all the variables - labor, weather, birds, disease, fruit maturity, winery logistics, etc. I hope that we were able to get most of our fruit pretty ripe so it has a chance to make some good wines that will sell well. I still think this will be a good vintage for us. Here are the keys for me:

- Canopy management - managing vine vigor, shoot thinning and positioning is so important to disease control and fruit ripening. Berry temperature in a cool season is so critical to flavor, phenolic and color quality.
- Crop management, especially on Chambourcin and vinifera reds, keeping the yields modest
- Disease and pest management - wow, powdery mildew this year. June and July were critical. If you took losses, examine the spray program with a microscope this winter with others who have experience. JB's were awful. Yes, spray but do so correctly to best effect with minimal non-target impact. Bird, critters, etc were bad this year for many growers (read Alice Wise below).
- Picking ripe and at the right time after a rain.
- Sorting grapes in the field and on the crush pad. Sorting is rewarded in dramatic improvements in wine quality

These are the basics. You must be able to do these things to have any hope of good wine grapes by the end. The degree of diligence to which you perform these critical tasks will determine the subtle but important qualitative improvements in your fruit. Also, in a vintage like this less is usually more in terms of quality but not necessarily profitability. This is a philosophical question that every grower needs to wrestle with before the harvest. We certainly had some success stories this season with some growers reporting both bountiful crops and high quality. These growers were on their game this year. We will know about the wines this spring. I suggest comments outside of the industry be very positive and optimistic regarding the quality of the vintage.

At this point, if you still have fruit hanging for ice wine, red wine or whatever it is just a balance of quality vs. disease, predation and physiological breakdown of the berry. Your patience and endurance is admirable. If we get a streak of indian summer it will be rewarded (well, not the ice wine). As far as things to do in the vineyard you may want to consider weed control. A fall application of Roundup under the vines can help set you up for an easier spring. Thankfully, I think the spray season is over. It is a good time to review in your mind while it is still clear what worked and didn't work so next year will be better. Hilling up is a good suggestion for now before it gets too wet. I'll have more suggestions for post-harvest vineyard management in my next e-newsletter.

It wasn't easy on Long Island, either. Here are notes from **Alice Wise, extension viticulturist for Cornell University at the Long Island Horticulture Research and Extension Center**... Alice has a keen eye in her research vineyard that helps her to understand the growing season. LI has 3000+ acres of vinifera so they are the barometer for that species in the East.

2006 Season – Lessons Learned: 2006 emerged as yet another challenging season in the vineyard. Humbling would be another way to describe it. Here are a few lessons we learned as managers of the research vineyard and observers of the industry.

- When it comes to bird/deer/critter damage, plan for the worst: Every creature in Riverhead Town decided to convene at the research vineyard this year. Soon after budbreak, deer were feasting on young shoots. When veraison was just starting – just –

the birds, deer and raccoons began their onslaught. We have easily lost 1/3 of our crop, despite an electric fence, heavy duty netting across the ends of rows, various types of bird netting and trapping. While pressure in commercial fields ranged from none to significant, overall it seems that this was a difficult year for critter control.

- Boron toxicity: It is true what ‘they’ say, boron applications, whether ground or foliar, are tricky. We applied a light application (exact rate remains elusive but we only had a partial bag) and ended up with toxicity symptoms not long after budbreak. Fruit set was disrupted as well. Petiole analysis revealed levels as high as 116 (25-70 ppm being the normal range). Merlot was profoundly affected, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay somewhat. We were advised to spray calcium as calcium and boron are purported to be antagonistic. The Ca:N foliar material that we applied three times did seem to help the vines recover. Then again, we did not leave a check so this is pure speculation. Bottom line: we need to be a lot more careful when applying boron. Petiole levels are now hovering around 70 ppm and we anticipate no problems for next year.

- Early postbloom – the single most important time in the growing season: While the research vineyard emerged unscathed, some blocks were again inundated with powdery mildew on fruit. Why is this a continual problem in the eastern U.S.? Reasons vary from site to site/region to region but there are some common issues. On Long Island, after a cool May with sluggish shoot growth, June was very warm and very wet. This led to explosive shoot growth. Keeping up with the demands of pest and canopy management becomes chaotic under these conditions. Inevitably, some key piece of equipment also breaks at this point. Thus, leaf pulling of the cluster zone, that most critical canopy management practice, is delayed. Complicating things further, it is difficult to run some of the leaf pulling machines early in fruit set as delicate clusters with newly set berries are vulnerable to breakage and slicing off. This commits many to hand leafing, a very labor intensive practice.

The chaotic June/July schedule has another consequence – vineyard managers often don’t have a minute to scout their vineyards. This means those early PM cluster infections go undetected. It is really easy to miss early PM on clusters, it often takes a very thorough scouting to find it. Those who are not in the vineyard can criticize and second guess, but this is the reality of winegrape vineyard management. The downside – a dense cluster zone provides ideal conditions for powdery mildew infections. It has happened in the past, it happened to an unfortunate few this year.

This rant is not to excuse a manager that clearly neglects to address disease management at this time of year. But mitigating factors do exist and when analyzing a situation like this, one must consider all angles. Choice of material, rate, timing, water, pressure etc. would be another obvious area to examine for potential holes.

- End of season disease control is important: Keeping the canopy functional is of utmost importance to proper ripening. We ended the season with a sulfur/PA application in late August. Bird netting (tenting out of nets) precluded further tractor work. At this point, the canopy was squeaky clean. But with lots of inoculum around and periodic rain, downy mildew soon became established. Powdery also appeared on the canopy but was less severe and not as ubiquitous. The downy came in on leaves of all ages thus blowing the ‘leaves are susceptible for a week after they unfold’ mantra out of the water. This may be true earlier in the season but it is clearly not the case in late summer and fall. Thus, while clusters lose their susceptibility to the mildews around veraison, it is imperative to still

address mildew management on the canopy in late summer and early fall. It does not have to be pristine clean at harvest but it shouldn't be defoliated either. (AW)

Composting Pomace and Planting Cover Crops

These are two things that can be done right now if it's not too late. We get a lot of great information from our colleagues north of the border. Ken Slingerland, the tender fruits specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs puts out a wonderful newsletter and maintains an outstanding web site chock full of useful viticulture information. In this Vol 11, no. 1 issue he has articles by Jean Bonhotal at Cornell University and Fritz Westover at VA Tech on how to make compost from grape pomace, something wineries get a lot of each year and are never quite sure what to do with it.

Cover crops are essential in our wet climate for a variety of reasons from field access to vine devigoration. But getting a cover crop established can often be a difficult process. We are getting to the end of the season for planting a winter cover crop but this information from OMAFRA should be helpful to anyone who plans to use a cover crop.

Please visit the Tender Fruit Newsletter web site at http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/hort/news/news_grapevine.html Sept/Oct 2006 issue.

Support the Lancaster Farm and Home Center

Since before recorded history began the Lancaster FHC has been the meeting place for farmers in Lancaster County and the wine industry in the southern tier of Pennsylvania. Since I was placed here in 1999 it has continued to serve as an important venue for meetings of every kind from one-on-one meetings with growers to large workshops and seminars to board meetings for various industry associations. Because of its relatively central location in the southeast and central area it has been a good place to meet. The FHC was built in 1968 and houses much of the government funded agricultural services including Penn State Cooperative Extension, Lancaster County Conservation District, Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. While much of these agencies' work is devoted to farming in Lancaster County, the wine grape program is state-wide and seeks to assist wine growers in all parts of Pennsylvania. The facility was recently expanded and remodeled, including the extension facilities and a capital campaign has been launched to raise \$3M to pay for the work. I am asking all wine grape growers, not just in Pennsylvania but those who have attended meetings at FHC or receive any benefit from the wine grape program to make a donation to the remodeling of our offices. It can be \$1 or \$100,000. For a mere \$15K you can name the wine grape office! I think it is important for the vineyard community to demonstrate its support of the wine grape program which, hopefully, will be housed in this building until the next time it needs to be improved and expanded, perhaps 40+ years from now.

Please send contributions to: Lancaster Farm and Home Center Foundation, c/o Linda

Armstrong, 1383 Arcadia Road, Lancaster, PA 17601. Please put "wine industry donation" in the check memo.

Thank you for supporting FHC. It will be here to support the wine industry for many, many years.

Upcoming meetings:

New and beginner grape growers!!! Here is your chance to learn about the process and business of growing commercial wine grapes. Two workshop are coming up.

Thursday, November 2, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Zorvino Vineyard in Sandown, NH. <http://www.zorvino.com>. Contact Ms. Sonia Schloemann for information and registration. 413-545-4347.

AND

Thursday, December 7 at the Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Winchester, VA. <http://arecs.vaes.vt.edu/arec.cfm?webname=winchester>. Information and registration will come out shortly.

These workshops are designed to give growers a comprehensive overview of what is involved with starting a commercial wine grape vineyard. It is so critical in this business to get off to a good start. You can only do that with knowledge. Everyone in the wine industry has a stake in everyone else's wine quality. This workshop cannot provide the total depth of knowledge you need but it will give you a clear sense of what you need to know. It covers topics ranging from marketing grapes, local considerations, vineyard economics, site selections, vineyard development, equipment, supplies, trellis, varieties and rootstocks, early vine care, disease and pest control canopy management and much more. It is a full-day packed with information.

Multicolored Asian Lady Beetle Workshop in Northeast, PA. MALB has not been too evident this year but it is still lurking out there and will be a problem for the harvest in the future. This meeting brings together some of the very best minds working on the lady beetle problem from the vineyard into the cellar and processing plant. It is targeted at both juice and wine growers and processors. It has been organized in response to requests to Secretary of Agriculture Dennis Wolff by growers and processors in the Lake Erie region. The meeting is free and includes lunch. Registration is mandatory (no reg, no lunch). Please call the Erie County Extension Office to register at 814-825-0900.

When: Wednesday, November 29, 2006

Where: American Legion Post 105, Northeast, PA

Time: 8:30 a.m. registration. Program from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Cost: Meeting is FREE but registration is required to receive a lunch

Speakers include: Kevin Ker and Gary Pickering from Brock University in Ontario, Roger Williams from Ohio State Univ, Jay Hardenburg from the National Grape Cooperative. Tentative are researchers Tom Baker and David Biddinger from Penn State. Dr. Michael Saunders from the Department of Entomology will moderate the meeting and discussions. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Cheryl Cook will be present.

Please mark your calendars. For information and registration please contact the Erie County Cooperative Extension office at 814-825-0900.

Grapes for Sale

Approximately 3 tons of Cabernet Sauvignon from 8 year old vines are available from Folly Hill Vineyards near Kennett Square (Chester County), PA. The plan is to pick it this weekend but if the weather holds they may delay further for more ripeness. The fruit is in very good condition with very little disease and some bird damage (vines are netted). Color is uniform and a very random refractometer sampling indicated brix between 20 and 22. Please contact Glenn Sowers if you are interested at 610-745-8738.

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