

Just Getting Started: One Year Later

Written by Terry Connor
Tuesday, 06 March 2018 13:12

In a previous article, I talked about a friend who was just getting started with a wine collection, recommending various wines that both he and his guests would enjoy. Well, whatever course of action our friend chose, it worked. As a matter of fact, it worked so well that now he has now been bitten by the wine bug, and it is a condition that has no cure.

Let's give our friend a name. We'll call him Cooper.

Cooper has survived his rookie year in the world of wine, and now he wants to know more. But where does he start his quest for more knowledge? It is an almost impossible question to answer because wine has been on earth for as long as human beings have been able to concoct a brew. But Cooper is not one to be easily discouraged, and so he decided to look past the grape and get right to the SOIL. This is where I started, and short of attending a formal class, I found myself in the middle of a vineyard at the Robert Mondavi winery. While there, Cooper will listen to a lecture on one year in the life of a grape vine. (This lecture is in no way a substitute for a formal class at The University of California, but it will suffice for the casual learner.) The lecture will cover the many environmental conditions that pertain to Napa Valley, such as the type of soil (Alluvial), the climate, water, wind, and stress. This type of lecture could take place in any vineyard in the world. Just apply the main ideas to the local environmental conditions.

While still in the vineyard we shift to a discussion about the grapes. I usually consider that the start of the new year in the life of the vine begins when the harvest from last year is over. The vines go into a well-deserved rest period for two months. In January the vineyards are treated to a trim, and most important, if trellises are required, they are repaired or replaced as necessary. It is now April, and as we walk in the vineyard we are able to see new shoots emerge from the dormant buds on the vine. This is called Bud break. The new shoots will develop, pollinate themselves (because the grape vines are hermaphroditic) and grow into tiny berries. The berries are very hard, however they will gradually soften around midsummer. Moving along into July we see that the berries are softening, swelling and changing color. This is called veraison. The white grapes will turn a greenish color and the red grapes will turn purple.

Cooper now turns to the Harvest, sometimes called the Crush. The important thing to remember here is TIMING. For weeks, the winemaker has been closely watching the fruit develop in the vineyard. One thing he is checking for is the right time to harvest. When that time arrives, all hands turn to and focus on getting the crop in ASAP. Once the grapes are in, they are crushed, and the resulting juice is stored in stainless steel tanks or barrels depending upon the wishes of

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the winemaker. Cooper has learned that this is a critical juncture. The many thousands of winemakers all over planet earth now have their crops in, and many decisions are going to be made regarding storage, fermentation, blending, etc. The list goes on and on because the winemaker knows exactly what he wants to achieve with this crop. He knows the potential of the crop because he has been evaluating the crop since bud break. He is aware that he will be able to bring a product to market that reflects his style. That is how he competes – by style, not price.

Cooper has been advised to visit as many wineries as possible to develop a sense of comparison as to how they operate. No two are the same. It is also an opportunity to get information first-hand and, of course, to purchase direct from the winery. As of right now Cooper is on his way too being an amateur wine collector. I wish him well and may all of his purchases be wallet-friendly.

WINESPEAK

Hermaphroditic is a word meaning the reproductive organs of both sexes are simultaneously present. As the word is used here it refers to Cultivated Vines; come spring the grapevines pollinate themselves.

Once again I must mention Karen MacNeil, author of the *Wine Bible*, as a source for some of the ideas in this article. The ideas came from her second edition.

There is a whole world of wine out there waiting for Cooper to come out and explore. He is as fortunate as I was in that he took a west coast trip to Napa early in his collecting career. When I got to California, I was like a kid in a candy store. I can only hope that Cooper feels the same way.