



Out in the Vineyard - September

With spring comes warming weather, longer daylight hours and the first emerging shoots that will provide the canopy and fruit for the coming vintage. Pruning is coming to an end and the final checks being made to ensure that trellis and vines are secure for the coming season. Cane pruned vines are having the canes secured to the wire using string, tie wire or plastic cable ties to prevent canes moving in the wind, causing damage to the newly forming shoots.

The vines are experiencing “budburst” and at this stage the buds retained at pruning swell and develop into the new shoots bearing leaves, tendrils and bunches. The plant tissue at this stage is very soft and the leaves are white tinted light green in colour and develop very quickly. As the shoot tip produces new leaves and extension of the shoot, the rate of growth will determine the spacing of leaves and the internodal space along the cane. The development of bunches is already predetermined from within the bud and by about 10 days into budbreak bunches can be seen and some appreciation of the potential fruitfulness for the year can be determined. In some vineyards it will be necessary to remove some crop to create a balance between canopy and crop level, or in circumstances where there is insufficient crop, the strategy maybe to reduce inputs such as fertiliser and moisture to reduce canopy growth, to create the desired balance.

It is important at this time to assess growth and to begin the canopy management regime. Shoot thinning of the vines to balance the amount of fruit with leaf area is done as early as possible. Strategic selection of shoots to provide even spacing within the vine also helps with bunch distribution and the goal of fastidious growers is to create bunches that are spread so as not to come into contact with each other and to provide good ventilation and sunlight distribution (as this aids in disease prevention and promotes more even ripening).

The spring weather will influence strongly the future quality and quantity of the crop. Warm temperatures and rainfall will influence disease and pest pressure and it is quite usual to apply Sulphur and Copper sprays to help provide protection against disease. Flowering will be influenced by weather, and the best flowering conditions require warmer day and night time temperatures free from rainfall and wind. It is interesting to note the influence that cold night time temperatures can also have on fruitfulness, warm clear days result in cool clear nights. Chardonnay is particularly susceptible to cold flowering temperatures and often results in “Hen and Chicken” berries on a bunch, the “Chickens” being small infertile berries and lacking seeds. Berry size post flowering will be influenced by temperature, moisture and available plant nutrition, imposing mild moisture stress on the vine post flowering will effectively reduce berry size. Smaller berry size provides more skin to pulp ratio. Most of the flavour in the berry is found in a layer just beneath the skin surface and most of the red colour (red grapes) and desirable tannins are found in the skins, more skin and less pulp makes for more colour and flavour, a handy bit of knowledge to produce grapes bound for high quality wines.

Further into spring and the leaves begin to darken in color. Vineyard health is carefully monitored and techniques such as leaf blade and petiole testing are done to establish the effect seasonal variation may have on vine nutrition requirements. A combination of analytical and visual assessment is used to provide certainty to vine health and performance and it is possible to amend deficiencies by applying foliar nutrition. Many growers now use organic type formulations, including compost tea, applied to the leaves to help with vine health and many see benefits in less disease and better fruit quality and yield. I need to mention that there are also biodynamic vineyards producing fruit using techniques that take in philosophy, astronomy and practices that provide for holistic and environmentally sustainable approach to producing grapes, the outcome from wines produced from these vineyards is proving very positive and vine quality attributes appear to occur naturally.

Spring is a very busy time in the vineyard and the viticulturist is out and about checking vines, a wise mentor explained to me “the best manure in the vineyard is the viticulturists footprint”..... I guess there is something in that for all of us.

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