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The Crush Diaries



Monday, March 27, 2006 by Bruce Jack, www.flagstonewines.com

Vintage is designed to bleed the romance out of winemaking, to buff your nerves and to probe your perseverance. Besides, it shouldn't be easy to craft great wine. If it was, everyone would be doing it, writes Bruce Jack.

Crush Diary 1

The quality is great. We have just unloaded our first batch of gorgeous Shannon Vineyard Pinot Noir from cool climate Elgin. The grower of these magnificent globes, James Downes, is a perfectionist. His vines look like they have been trimmed with nail clippers and the cover-crop between the vines looks like it was cut and combed by Bianca, my wife's hairdresser.

As his truck pulls off the crush pad another two 8 ton truck loads of cool climate Sauvignon Blanc from the southern most wine area, Elim, are pulling in. It is almost 10pm and that's a lot of small yellow lug boxes to shift onto pallets and into the cold room. It's going to be a long night, but the Reggae is blasting in the cellar and the coffee machine is cranking out the wakey-wakey juice.

The trucks are late. One blew out the front right tire flying down Sir Lowry's Pass. Trust me; you never want to have to change a front tire on a fully laden 8 ton truck. The other one blew a gasket over the mountain in the Overberg. We were forced to re-pack all of the 740 crates onto a replacement truck at the side of the road, in the failing light.

In the winery, we ruptured a wine hose sending a fountain of Pinot Blanc juice 10 metres into the air. Yesterday we punctured the bag in the press and bent the stainless steel pump feeder-screw. But this is normal; in fact it's better than normal. Vintage is designed to bleed the romance out of winemaking, to buff your nerves and to probe your perseverance. Besides it shouldn't be easy to craft great wine. If it was, everyone would be doing it.

Logistically, the power outages have added a forth dimension to everyone's planning. Winemakers have simultaneously to consider a myriad of very different winery operations 24 hours a day. Perhaps this is why women often make more complete winemakers than men. And when you have to factor in the availability of power, as well, the schedule gets hectic. You don't want to fill the press with 7 tons of perfect Chardonnay grapes if the power shuts off and you can't pump away the juice.

There's no doubt that 2006 is both the best quality and the most exciting vintage I've ever experienced.

Crush Diary 2



It's going to be a long night...



James Downes from Shannon Vineyards, Elgin

GO BACK

The sharp end of fatigue is puncturing all of us. It leaves little holes that let the energy leak out.

We are into our seventh gruelling week of the harvest. The tanks are full. Outside, in the heat, a further 100 tons of grapes destined for home in a Flagstone bottle hang impatiently onto their vines. We are continuously moving juice and wine around the cellar, creating openings for the incoming fruit. Every single grape in the Western Cape is suddenly and simultaneously ripe. The next two weeks of picking stretch into the future like those movie credits that continue to roll even when the lights have come on and everyone has left the cinema

Cracked hands are stained purple, leaving deep little cuts that sting when you clench a fist. To most people, these broken, black nails might say you are a self-righteous diesel mechanic. And the coffee-stain rings under your eyes mark you an insomniac, or perhaps (because of that wild look in your eyes) a revolutionary. Backs are stiff, tendons strained, patience frayed. When people ask you what you do, you describe the physical work like it will save the world. And another 16 hour day sends you into fathomless sleep, still covered in grape skins and sticky juice.

The fever-pitch buzz is fuelled by stratospheric levels of adrenalin. 2006 feels like we are on the edge of winemaking greatness. The colour, the analysis, the balance, the aromas, the flavours ? they are amazing.

The old timers talk of 1974 with biblical sweeps of the hand. I've had the privilege of drinking a few wines from that year. The Nederberg Cabernet 1974 in particular lights up the dark cave of winemaking self-doubt with fireworks. Your imagination starts salivating and your confidence goes on an all-night belly-dancing binge. The class of that vintage floods the nerve delta of your brain, regenerating the alluvial spark of dreams.

Perhaps it's the fatigue warping reality, but if any year can come close to '74, perhaps 2006 can.


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TODAYS NEWS

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-  Party on at Cape Wine 2008
-  The Big Debate at Cape Wine 2008
-  The White Savage sets new record for a white wine at CWG Auction 2008
-  Dombeya Shiraz - Best in Class - 2008 International Wine Spirits Competition
-  Jobless but not forgotten
-  Opening of the House of Golden Kaan
-  Time and temptation make a delightful blend at Rhebokskloof
-  Stellenbosch gets a "town vineyard"

COMMENTS

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 [Wineries and fetal alcohol syndrome](#) - Douglas P. Walker - Monday, March 27, 2006

Earlier this morning I listened to a BBC report on a relatively unknown but widespread tragedy among South Africans living in the country's wine producing region. Field workers in vineyards were traditionally paid in wine and alcoholism became endemic to the local culture. The impact on the fetus is irreversible. The impact on society is endless. While the story reported that grape producers and wineries insist they no longer practice this form of in-kind payment, evidence remains that free to cheap wine is still widely available. The South African wine industry should take this issue head on and work to reverse any lingering wine payments among vineyards or vinters and underwrite clinics and active educational programs to reverse this trend. South African enjoys international acclaim for good reason and it could add to this reputation by stepping up and addressing this

problem: guilty or not. My fear is that bad news travels fast and the wine industry there may find itself in a defense posture when it now has the option of going on the offensive. While I recognize that free advice is worth what you pay for it, I believe there is an opportunity that should be given serious consideration. DPWalker, New Canaan CT, USA



Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder - Pebbles Project - Monday, March 27, 2006

There have been many recent media reports about the issue of South Africa and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, which have served to highlight the severity of the problem here.

While there is a long way to go in addressing this problem, there are several organisations (NGOs) and Government departments who are passionate about and dedicated to providing support, prevention and intervention programmes for affected children, their families and educators, as well as carrying out some of the most extensive research in the world. (www.farr.org.za).

The Pebbles Project (www.pebblesproject.co.za) and The Dopstop Association (www.dopstop.org.za) are two such organisations that work with farm worker communities to break the cycle of alcohol abuse and foetal alcohol syndrome through training programmes, awareness campaigns, and provision of educational resources for affected children.

A portion of the funding for both of these organisations does indeed come directly from the wine industry - from individuals, companies, wine farms, wine.co.za, Wines of South Africa (WOSA) and The South African Wine Industry Trust (SAWIT).

Many people in the South African wine industry are deeply concerned about the reputation of South Africa and it's wine and are financially backing active education programmes, and we sincerely hope your comments, Mr D.P.Walker, are taken on board by others within the industry who feel their role is to ignore or avoid the issue, rather than tackling it with a positive forward-looking attitude.

Only by the complete backing of the wine industry can the situation regarding foetal alcohol spectrum disorder be improved in South Africa - and the whole world will be watching.

S. Warner, Pebbles Project



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