

Budbreak Conference in the Napa Valley

Wednesday morning, *WBM* attended the Budbreak Conference put on by the Napa Valley Grapegrowers. Growers and vineyard managers from around the Napa Valley gathered at Vine Hill Ranch in Oakville to give an update regarding the current state of their vineyards.

Under a towering oak tree, home to a barn owl and her chicks, NVG executive director Jennifer Putnam introduced host Bruce Phillips of Vine Hill Ranch, whose family are long-time winegrape growers in Oakville, followed by vineyard experts Matt Ashby with Robert Mondavi Winery, Paul Goldberg with Bettinelli Vineyards, Matt Lamborn of Lamborn Family Vineyards, Jennifer Lamb of HL Vineyards and Mike Wolf, vineyard manager for Vine Hill Ranch and owner of Michael Wolf Vineyard Services.

As we enjoyed a picnic lunch, Bruce Phillips (*below, left*) talked about his family's long-time love of the land, beginning with his grandfather and followed by his parents, who invested in their vineyards and spent years dedicating themselves to the local wine and agricultural industries and community. After 60 years of growing grapes for others, Bruce announced the release of their inaugural VHR Cabernet Sauvignon — what he referred to as "the essence of Vine Hill Ranch." He introduced the winemaker, Françoise Peschon and also gave credit to vineyard manager Mike Wolf.

"Moving into winemaking closes the loop," Bruce said, enabling VHR to continually learn how to better the winegrape quality for all of their vintners on an annual basis.

Jennifer Putnam filled our glasses with VHR Cab as we joined Mike Wolf (*below, right*) in the vineyard.

Mike talked about cover crops and their role in balancing vine nutrition and harboring beneficial insects; he pointed out the different trellis systems, while seeming to pay attention to every single shoot. Now is when everything in the vineyard gets evaluated, he said. He spoke of the importance of creating an environment for the vines, noting, "We're not growing table grapes. We're growing winegrapes. What's important is what they taste like, and we are not overly concerned about appearance." He said winegrapes are a relatively easy crop to farm sustainably, with weed control done mechanically and no synthetic herbicides used at VHR.

He summarized his philosophy: "If you take good care of the soil, a lot of the other things fall in place."

Everything that's done in the vineyard has an effect down the road, he noted. "Seasons spill into the next one, and the next one." And although he pays a great deal of attention to detail, he pointed out the really good vineyards are those that don't need a whole lot of care. Obviously, however, he — and the other vineyard managers and growers present on Wednesday -- are spending as much time as necessary in their vineyards now.

As Matt Ashby, director of Vineyard Operations for Robert Mondavi Winery said, "Springtime is the most stressful time of year for vineyard managers and grapegrowers."



The conference was followed by lunch in the vineyard and a walk-through Vine Hill Ranch. Pictured (above, l-r) are Bruce Phillips of Vine Hill Ranch and Mike Wolf, VHR's vineyard manager; below (l-r)

Nancy Duckhorn, co-founder of Pine Ridge and Archery Summit wineries, an NVG director and owner of [The Duck Blind](#), and Mike Wolf.



Below is a video interview by ABC7 news with growers during the conference, covering technology used in the vineyards.