

David Armstrong on Travel

Grapegrowers Preview 2011 Wines in Napa Valley

Fighting a new invasive pest, pulling less-popular wine grapes and planting more-popular ones, investing in technology, sweating climate change and water supplies, and hoping for a fine 2011 harvest is preoccupying growers in lovely, manicured Napa Valley. If it all comes together, northern California wine country will remain an especially pleasant place to visit. And the wines will be especially pleasant, too.

That's a lot to pull together, and success is never assured. So say members of Napa Valley Grapegrowers, a 37-year-old trade association (www.napagrowers.org) with some 550 members who held a "bud-break" press conference the other day to preview the year ahead - and consequences for California wine tourism.

In spite of the very real and serious issues at hand, it was the most serene setting of any press conference I have attended - and I've attended hundreds all over the world, mostly in windowless hotel ballrooms. Not here. Tables were spread beneath old oak trees, just steps from terraced vineyards. Flowers adorned the table. A soft, cooperative breeze blew, and wine was, of course, served with lunch.

The press conference was held at Napa Valley's Vine Hill Ranch, a 70-acre spread near Oakville, farmed for the past half-century by the Phillips family. Family scion Bruce Phillips says his family grows wine grapes under contract for a number of established wineries. Wine grapes only. "There are no table grapes grown anywhere in Napa Valley," he told me.

"Napa Valley is an exceptional place to grow wine grapes," says Jennifer Putnam, the association's executive director.

Chiming in, Matt Ashby of Constellation Wine, remarks "People think harvest is the most stressful time for grape growers, but it's not. Springtime is very, very stressful - everything is waking up in the vineyards. But with weather, you can never be sure what is coming next. With frost, within a couple of hours you could lose the entire crop."

Travelers and locals cruising Highway 29, which threads north and south through the heart of California's - and America's - prime premium wine region, feast their eyes on budding grapevines. A rainy winter saved the region from drought. But, Phillips says, cool weather has caused the buds to open two weeks later than usual - with still-uncertain prospects for the 2011 harvest.

Growers acknowledged over their glasses of Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon that U.S. wine sales are still down - a consequence of the recession that began in 2008 and the slow recovery of the United States economy. They are using this relative downtime to pull slow-selling grapes such as Zinfandel and Merlot and plant grapes for the big, lusty reds, most notably Cabs, that Napa is known for worldwide.

Growers are also investing in technology used to measure water supplies, wind speed and other variables, and calibrated to alert growers when trouble is brewing. Trouble like last season's invasion of the European Grapevine Moth, which burrows into grapes, destroying the fruit.

Jennifer Lamb, of Herb Lamb Vineyards, says that cooperation between grape growers, scientists at the University of California-Davis and the U.S. Department of Agriculture disrupted the mating season for the moths, killing most of them. Now, growers are trying to tweak methods of pest control so they won't inadvertently harm what Lamb calls "beneficials" - insects that prey upon pests.

Money, as well as pride, are at stake. A lot of money. The wine trade is a \$40 billion USD business in California and a prime tourist lure in the scenic hills and valleys of Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, Livermore and Monterey in the north and Santa Barbara and others in the south. Wine-tasting, lunch on the grounds, dinner at nearby upscale restaurants, and finding lodging near pretty wineries draw visitors to the Golden State. Any major lapse could tarnish California's glow.

Of course, California's grape growers and wine-makers compete with each other, as well as with rivals around the planet. Which is why Napa Valley tries to distinguish itself from all other places.

Says Bruce Phillips: "Napa Valley concentrates on luxury, premium wine grapes. That's not true of all the appellations in the state and the country."