



BUD BREAK IN THE NAPA VALLEY: ANOTHER GROWING SEASON BEGINS

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As winter draws to a close, grapegrowers work tirelessly to prepare their vineyards for the 2011 growing season – pruning, tying, mowing, and managing winter rainfall to limit erosion. And now, as we turn the corner toward spring, mustard can be seen flourishing amongst the vines as Napa Valley’s vineyards come to life following their winter dormancy. With the emergence of tender green shoots on vines across the valley, the arrival of spring conditions brings with it the promise of another great vintage. It is an exciting time for us in the vineyard.

The growth cycle of the grapevine begins with bud break in the month of March, when the soil begins to dry and warm, awakening the vine to begin to push water up from its root system. Tiny buds on the vine, formed the prior summer, start to swell, eventually growing to become delicate shoots. With clear days and cold nights, however, there is also the threat of frost damage for these new shoots.

Growing premium winegrapes is an unpredictable business and every harvest year has its own unique set of challenges and opportunities for improvement. 2010 presented a cool summer growing season, punctuated by late summer heat that resulted in some crop damage due to sunburn of exposed fruit on the vine. This, on top of the extremely difficult market environment for wine grapes in 2010, places a great deal of importance on the quality and profitability of the 2011 harvest for Napa Valley grapegrowers and all of the Napa businesses that depend on a thriving wine industry.

The unseasonably warm weather experienced in January, with its relatively high temperatures and lack of rainfall, has aroused some concern on the part of grapegrowers that our vineyards might emerge from their winter slumber prematurely, increasing the likelihood of damage to tender new growth from frost. In temperate growing regions like the Napa Valley, some early-budding grape varieties can be at risk for premature bud break, making the young shoots vulnerable to frost damage when they are exposed to below freezing temperatures on cold spring mornings.

In order to protect vineyards from frost damage, growers are actively preparing by ensuring frost protection systems are operational and by mowing cover crops to allow

for necessary air flow to prevent damage from frost. Frost systems employed in the vineyard to protect our vines from damage include sprinklers or wind machines, both of which prevent cold air from settling on the vines. The objective of these systems is to protect the delicate shoots and allow them to grow, flower, and fruit in the late spring, ultimately ripening through the summer months for the fall harvest.

During frost season, which lasts from roughly early March to early May, there can be sleepless nights. The risk of losing one's entire crop from a few freezing nights can be stressful! As grapegrowers, we understand that frost machines can be noisy for neighbors, and most growers strive to be good neighbors. Growers near the urban zones make extra efforts to communicate with neighbors about frost season and what best practices they are implementing on their property. Machines should be well-serviced and operated only during the hours necessary to protect their crop against frost. As a community that values our agriculture and open space, patience and understanding by all is appreciated as vital frost protection tools are enlisted to protect vineyards and Napa's precious crop.

The return of cold and rainy weather is a welcome sign of return to a more normal winter pattern for Napa Valley grapegrowers. The cool temperatures and moisture will help ensure that the vineyards don't emerge prematurely from their winter dormancy. But we know that soon, the buds will break and we'll be on our way towards another Napa Valley harvest. The vineyard floors will be carpeted in cover crops, planted to invigorate the soil, balance the nutrition of the vines, provide habitat for beneficial pests, and make the landscape even more beautiful. We all hope for a good year this year, and to raising a glass together come October when the grapes are picked. Here's to a fruitful 2011 harvest season, and to our local treasure, the Napa County Ag Preserve!