



## Harvest So Far

*(Sasha – please title however you see fit)*

*By Paul Goldberg, vineyard manager at Bettinelli Vineyards in Napa and active member of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers*

The art of growing winegrapes is a story that is heavily influenced by Mother Nature. Although Napa Valley is blessed with one of the world's best combinations of climate and soils to produce premium wine grapes, it's also the knowhow and innovation of the valley's grapegrowers that truly sets our vineyards apart. Every year Mother Nature throws a few curve balls and 2011 is no exception. Grape growers throughout Napa Valley are responding proactively to ensure superior quality that is expected of Napa Valley vineyards every year.

When early June rains soaked the Napa Valley, some forecasted that it was going to be a difficult growing season. The rains hit at a time when some grape varieties in certain areas were undergoing the bloom process, a short window when the grapes self-fertilize. This process is now wrapping up and growers are getting their first glimpse at potential crop yields for the year. Some grape varieties and areas of the valley seemed to prevail while others are showing signs of "shatter", a condition that can reduce the number of grapes in each cluster and the overall yield. While shatter doesn't usually excite growers, in moderation it can improve airflow and sunlight exposure on the clusters which can translate into higher wine quality.

In a wet and vigorous season like this one, the name of the game is canopy management. Late spring rains followed by warm weather have facilitated aggressive vine growth and dense canopies that trap moisture and prevent sunlight penetration. Napa growers are taking a proactive approach by hedging the vines and removing selected leaves and laterals at the base of the grapevine shoots to improve airflow and sunlight around the clusters. This practice has been done for decades to varying degrees and can greatly improve the flavors of the grapes, which leads to better wines. It's a difficult dance though: removing too many leaves can increase the risk of sunburn, while not enough leaf removal can set the stage for potential mildew and rot later in the season. Last year many growers experienced this outcome when cool June gloom weather prompted them to remove leaves to avoid mildew, but it left the fruit exposed to extreme heat and low humidity in late August.

This year we have been fortunate to have earlier heat. Multiple days of 90-100 degree temperatures a week ago and heat that is expected later this week will help to acclimate the grapes to warmer weather that we will see later in the season and hopefully prevent the chance of sunburn on the fruit. When

compared to last year's degree days (a summation of the heating and cooling throughout the season) we are on par, but still nipping at the heels of what growers would consider a "normal" year.

Every season has its unexpected weather-related events that can potentially wreak havoc on the grapes: too much heat, not enough heat, too much rain, not enough rain, etc. That's part of what makes grapegrowing such a challenging and innovative art. One always has to be thinking proactively and bringing past experiences to bear on the situation. What separates the good from the great is the ability to determine how to mitigate certain risks and not worry about others. Growers in Napa have a long standing history of maximizing the quality of Napa's grapes which produce some of the best wines in the world, and 2011 should be no exception.