

Winemaking and Summer Vacations

During the summer months at Umpqua Community College we work four, ten hour days so that we can spend more time with our families and enjoy the wonderful outdoor activities of Southern Oregon. Since I'm often out at the park or shopping with my kids on Fridays I'm occasionally asked, "So, do winemakers get to take the summer off?" This is a kinder version of the question I'm asked year-round, which is: "So you're a winemaker... do you just drink wine all day?" The answer to both questions is no. Winemakers don't drink wine all day or get to take extended summer vacations.

But what do winemakers do in the summer months when we're waiting for the current crop of grapes to ripen? Primarily we're preparing to bottle the red wines from last year, or the year before, so that we can make room for this year's crop. Wines need to be fully blended and stable before bottling, which can involve several weeks of cellar work. Bottling day also requires a lot of planning to ensure all the packaging components have been shipped to the winery (bottles, corks, capsules, labels) and to assemble a team to perform the intense manual labor required on a bottling line.

You may have also noticed that there are many wine tasting and sales events in the summer. Winemakers are often conscripted to pour wine and discuss the wines and their winemaking philosophy at these events in an effort to attract future customers. Just the other Friday I met the assistant winemaker from a large Willamette Valley winery at our local Costco. While he obviously enjoyed interacting with the folks who buy his wine, I think he probably would have been happier if he were shuffling around Costco in shorts and a t-shirt on his day off, like me.

There are also several wine industry-related events during the summer such as: the Steamboat Pinot Noir Conference at the lovely Steamboat Inn on the North Umpqua River, the International Pinot Noir Celebration (IPNC) in McMinnville, and the Tempranillo Advocates Producers and Amigos Society (TAPAS) annual tasting in San Francisco, CA. These events help winemakers network with other industry professionals, sharpen their tasting skills or learn a new technique, and give them insight into what other wineries and regions are producing.

Summer is also a time for planning for the next harvest. Harvest supplies such as yeast and additives, as well as winemaking hardware like tanks and barrels need to be purchased far in advance in order to arrive when they are needed during harvest. Summer is also a time for maintaining and servicing equipment so that everything works flawlessly during the crush. Winemakers also need to keep an eye on the size and timing of harvest, which changes a bit each year based on the growing season and the weather. Winemakers are usually responsible for hiring temporary harvest help, and therefore need to plan accordingly so that they have the help when they need it most. In addition, winemakers rarely have enough tank space for all the wine they produce because much of this wine will only be in tanks temporarily before being placed in barrels. Therefore it is important to try and determine whether the harvest will be slow and steady or all the fruit will be coming to the winery at the same time, and to try to plan accordingly.

Winemakers also like to give a lot of advice to vineyard managers about how to grow their fruit. If winemakers are purchasing the same fruit from a vineyard they know well, they will often monitor vine

growth during the summer to assess potential ripeness and crop levels and to discuss ways of improving the crop with the vineyard manager. If winemakers are shopping for new fruit sources they may be scouting out vineyards and developing purchasing contracts with growers.

So unfortunately winemakers don't get much of a break in summer. And because we have many smaller family-owned wineries in our region, our local winemaker may also be the vineyard manager and tasting room manager, in which case they never get to take a vacation! No wonder they like to enjoy a glass of wine at the end of the day.