

Celebrating 55 years of grape growing in Russian River Valley



Grandma Helen working the first harvest, 1956

The 2011 vintage, a roller coaster of highs and lows will be remembered as one of the most climatically challenging vintages in recent memory. Our 55th harvest started out in the very early hours of the morning on Monday, September 19th, almost 3 weeks later than average after weeks of cool weather delayed ripening of the crop already thinned by mid-summer rains. Those rains knocked the flowers off the vines producing “hens and chicks” which are very small berries and very large berries on the same bunch. This caused the overall yield to be down 30% however the cooler weather allows for longer hang time than usual, which contributes greater depth and more complexity to the wine. Mid-way through harvest another hurdle to jump is the early fall rain combined with warm days, a perfect environment to encourage botrytis or bunch rot in the clusters. More thinning in the vineyards and hands in the bins during picking will ensure only the best grapes in the bottle.

We have and always will pick all our grapes by hand and at night. The cooler temperatures at night gives the fruit brighter flavors, higher acidity and lower sugars. During the daytime, the sugars increase meaning more alcohol after fermentation. We want to ensure the fruit and acids are complemented by lower alcohols, which make for a more food-friendly wine. Ensuring that the clusters arrive at the winery in the best state is only possible by the traditional age old method of hand harvesting. Although more expensive, hand harvesting is the most delicate way to harvest the grapes from the vines.

To celebrate this milestone and take a look back I asked my Grandma Helen what are the biggest changes she has seen in the wine industry. "The amount of wineries and vineyards in the area. Back then there were just a few; the Foppiano's, Pedroncelli's and the Seghesio's. Even in Napa only maybe half a dozen. Gallo was here in the 50's but he was buying bulk wine from the wineries." She explained how the business of selling grapes has also progressed. "Gallo sometimes wouldn't even tell you what they would pay until you harvested the grapes. Rod Strong was one of the first to start making contracts with payment dates and prices. We liked that change a lot." Our family has come along way from our first harvest in 1956. Wood prune picking boxes are distant memories, but will remain a part of our history.

Written by Katey Bacigalupi & Quotes from Helen Bacigalupi.

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