

Dear friends,

10.27.03

What wild and strange weather we have had this year!

This past spring was especially wet and cool. At the end of May we assessed how much heat we had accumulated and discovered it was next to none. Was this year to be a repeat of 1984 when the ripest fruit came in at 20 percent sugar?

My first vintage in Oregon was 1986 so I was lucky to have missed that unlucky year.

The first week of June changed everything. We had four straight days in the 90's and all of the pent up energy the vines possessed was let loose. Our shoot and vegetation developed at an all out pace. It was everything we could do to keep up with the growth by the lifting of catch wires and hand positioning of the shoots.

The torrid weather continued unabated through the heart of our growing season, enough so, that our harvest started earlier than any other in our experience, save 1992 (August 31st). This incredible turnaround spurred my interest in how the year compared with historical weather data. What I found surprised me.

Since 1928 the year with the highest average maximum temperature is 1936 at 68.8°. 2003 is currently on pace to have the second highest average at 68.4°. If you look at the core months of June, July, August and September, 2003 has the highest average maximum temperature other than one year, 1967.

As dismal as the end of May appeared, we made up that ground and more. A vintage saved by the Bell "Curve".

These record levels of heat produced sugar levels that soared ahead of flavor. This is a common issue for Pinot noir in the warmer climates of California but unusual for our area. The first week of September was screamingly hot, four days registered in the mid-90's. We had five vineyards at this early point which were already testing over 25 percent sugar. The flavors however lacked depth and richness. Our dilemma was that if we waited for the development of flavor it might not come until the sugar was at a ridiculously high level that would result in an over the top wine that lacked finesse or balance.

This problem was solved by Mother Nature once again when a cooling trend arrived on the 6th of September and included .75 inches of rain on the 8th and 9th. It was perfectly timed. We received enough rain to slow the vines down but not enough to cause any disease issues. Harvest began on the 15th with young vines at Savoya.

The resulting wines are heady, deeply perfumed and dark as a moonless night. They have high alcohol, yes, but they also have the richness, concentration and extract to create balance.

On to closures. Nothing vexes our industry more than cork affectation. A commonly held opinion within the industry is that 5% of all wine is ruined by cork, or 1 in 20 bottles. This level of taint would be unacceptable in any other food industry. If one of every 20 cans of Campbells Chicken soup was inedible they would not be in business long.

What keeps the cork in existence is its historical ties with the beverage, the fact that it, like wine is a natural substance and the ritual we enjoy of opening a bottle among friends with a lovingly prepared meal. For all of those reasons we continued to use cork with the understanding that there would be a percentage of returned bottles.

Our own testing of corks from major suppliers in neutral “bag in the box” white wine showed a much higher rate of affection. While 5% of the corks did show some outright “corkiness” we found that another 5% to 15% (!) were changed by the cork though not in a way that would be described as corkiness. Many of the corks simply dulled the aromatics and flavors which would leave a consumer wondering what all the fuss about the wine was without realizing the cork was to blame.

In the end, we are not okay with the negative influence of cork and believe our customers deserve a better experience.

When searching for an alternative closure we were disappointed with the “plasticky” appearance of synthetic closures and the “crack” of a screw-cap bottle being opened felt more like you had let the air out of the celebration balloon instead of inflating it.

Then Annie Scott, who along with Jane Davis, runs our office, brought in a synthetic closure from a Chilean wine that we had not seen before. It looked and felt much more like cork than any other synthetic closure we had seen. It pulled from the bottle like a perfect cork every time. I called the company, Nomaticorc (www.nomacorc.com) and spoke with the developers at length about the material and its performance. I was impressed. As a result, all of our 2002 wine was bottled with this closure. As we open bottles of the 2002 vintage we have yet to find a wine that isn’t true to its nature and fully expressive.

There is a certain amount of risk with this new closure. What is poured in the glass is what we made, no excuses.

Best, Ken