

.....Wine



ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

STORY
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The art of grapevine pruning



n a cold morning in January, one of the coldest mornings in a season of very cold mornings, it might not look like much is happening in the vineyards of Sonoma, but this is when the growing season truly begins.

We're standing in a chardonnay vineyard on Carriger Road just a few miles from the Sonoma Plaza, waiting for Steve Matthiasson—who planted the vineyard in 2006—to teach us about balance. About how what he does now, when the vines are dormant and tourism has migrated from Wine Country to Puerto Vallarta, will affect the balance in next year's wine.

It's been a wet year. The cover crop is thigh high and coated with a fine frost. Canes, relieved of fruit, have long since shrugged off their leaves and are shivering, as are we, in the cold morning breeze.

If there is one thing that all winemakers can agree upon, particularly the dozen or so vintners who fight over the grapes from Matthiasson's vineyard every year, it's that they would like to



terroir and vintage—drowns out the other. A balanced wine should reveal itself in layers, every element integrated and not competing with the others.

Steve Matthiasson doesn't consider himself a winemaker. In spite of the fact that he was recently named one of *Food & Wine* magazine's Winemakers of the Year and that he makes about 12 different wines every year with Matthiasson clearly printed on the label (which he started in 2003), he will always think of himself first as a farmer. And it is this farming-first approach that has not only made him one of the most sought-after viticultural consultants around, but is also responsible, arguably, for the quality and specifically the balance of his own wines.

Matthiasson arrives in a heavy jacket, armed with a pair of Felco pruning shears. His dog, Koda, a true German shepherd, follows him around the vineyard picking up large rocks and putting them down elsewhere. Matthiasson claims to feel perfectly

he explains, begins long before fermentation starts, long before grapes are even picked, long before a single cluster ever flowers on the vine. Balance begins now, in the winter, when vines are dormant and growers like him practice the art of pruning: selecting which and how many buds to leave on a vine for the coming season. (As a testament to the importance he places on the matter, a pair of pruning shears adorns his labels, and he displays an impressive antique set at tastings.)

"You have to ask yourself," says Matthiasson, "What is this vine? How did it grow last year and how do I anticipate that it is going to grow this year? I'm going to leave the correct amount of buds so that each shoot grows the proper amount. That is the fundamental principle." Matthiasson has a boyish excitement about him all the time, but here in the vineyard he seems even more alive, even more eager. Asked to pause mid-prune for a photograph, his hand gripping the shears trembles visibly.



Steve Matthiasson and Koda at Michael Mara Vineyard in Sonoma.

"THIS IS GREAT IF YOU'RE A NEAT FREAK," HE SAYS. "YOU GET TO MAKE ORDER OUT OF CHAOS."



inside each tiny dormant bud is a cane, leaves and, if the previous summer had been warm, two cluster primordia just waiting for the vine to wake up from its long winter nap.

Matthiasson is eager to get to work. He has been pruning this vineyard for six years and seems to know with just a glance what each vine needs. He points out which vines are weak and which are stronger. “This is great if you’re a neat freak,” he says. “You get to make order out of chaos.” Farming grapes, like farming anything, means surrendering to elements you can’t control. Will a late spring frost kill just-opening buds? Will an early fall rain decimate an entire harvest with mold and rot? But prun-

a little while. “It’s true,” says Matthiasson. “We try to control all these things with fruit thinning, with irrigation . . . but pruning—timing of pruning, severity of pruning—is the biggie.”

Matthiasson, while outfitted in Carhartt and Levis, is carrying on a tradition that started thousands of years ago: Ancient Greeks pioneered it and the Romans considered the cultivation of the vine a hallmark of civilization (barbarians, of course, drank beer). The relationship between the grower and the grapevine is a complicated one. Left on its own, a vine will climb as high as it can. Vines don’t need to make fruit to survive—they just need to climb higher than their neighbors to compete for

do something else—to focus its energy not on climbing high and making wood and leaves, but instead on growing and ripening grapes.

The leaves, or “canopy,” are responsible, through photosynthesis, for ripening the fruit. A balanced vine is one that has the right vegetative growth to fruit ratio. “It really does carry right into the wine,” says Matthiasson. “Too much canopy,” he explains, results in bell-pepper-like flavors in the fruit, lack of color in red grapes, and thinness and simplicity in the finished wine. Too little canopy translates as “lack of generosity, hardness, bitterness and chalky tannins.” Grapes ripen in two ways: They accumulate sugar (which converts to alco-

THE WINES OF MARA VINEYARD

The Michael Mara vineyard, named for the owner's children, has a reputation for creating chardonnay of great character and complexity. The impossibly rocky soil, combined with a cool wind channeled from San Pablo Bay, contribute to the intensity and distinctiveness of the fruit, and ultimately, the wine. Nearly a dozen producers fight over the fruit of Matthiasson's labors every year. Here, five of them (including Matthiasson who saves some for himself) describe the wines they make from the Michael Mara vineyard. — CH

much about wine. If there is not enough fruit on a healthy, hardworking vine with a canopy that is photosynthesizing like crazy, grapes may accumulate too much sugar before they get ripe in the ways that matter most—something Matthiasson takes great pains to avoid.

Using his shears, he inflicts the necessary wounds on the plants, removing canes and wrestling them deftly out of the trellising wire. He is surprised to see how much the vine “bleeds”—sap, sweet to the taste, is already rising in the plant and spring is on the way.

What does “balance” in a vineyard look like? If Steve and his crew do a good job today, what will it look like come August when the wires are full of leaves and chardonnay grapes drip from the vines? Unlike in wine, where “balance” is very subjective, a balanced vineyard is quantifiable. The ultimate goal is to achieve uniformity across the vineyard: While each vine, according to its vigor, may be capable of having more or fewer shoots, Matthiasson would like each shoot to grow uniformly. “With a good pruning job, every vine is a different size, but every shoot is exactly the same.”

Besides shoot growth, I ask Matthiasson, what does a perfect year look like? He doesn't hesitate: “Home run is every shoot grows the right amount (four feet), has two medium-sized clusters; we don't pull one leaf and we don't cut off one cluster; we don't irrigate and we don't fertilize and it gets perfectly ripe at 22.5 Brix and we pick it. That is my dream.”

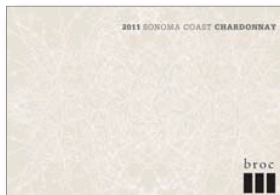
A dream that is only possible with a good pruning job and, of course, a little cooperation from Mother Nature. **5**



Arnot-Roberts, Michael Mara Chardonnay

Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts (*San Francisco Chronicle's* “Winemakers of the Year,”), of Arnot-Roberts, say they pick their grapes “on the early side” to capture freshness in the wine. Meyers believes the rocky soil plus the cool breezes from San Pablo Bay results in “good structure with a distinctive salinity on the finish.”

arnotroberts.com \$40



Broc Cellars, Michael Mara Chardonnay

Chris Brockway says he looks to chablis for inspiration with this wine. “I'm trying to have a wine that tastes like the grape and vineyard, not what I do to it.” He describes it as a mineral-driven wine that is brisk, focused and tastes of “just-harvested green apples.”

broccellars.com or Arlequin Wine Merchant \$32



Kesner, Rockbreak Chardonnay

Jason Kesner, who makes his Rockbreak chardonnay from the vineyard, finds “a distinct, fresh-sliced apple, sprinkled with lemon juice, in both the fruit and the finished wine” every year and thinks the slightly greener and “tauter” character provides contrast to the semi-rich body of the wine. He also finds minerality that he describes as “fresh-struck flint.”

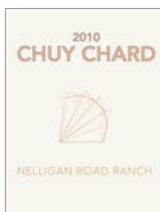
kesnerwines.com \$55



Matthiasson, Michael Mara Vineyard Chardonnay

Matthiasson finds typical chardonnay aromas of white peach, pear, toasted almond, as well as plenty of weight, length, and richness in his wine, but he describes this opulence as “aristocratic, not contrived.” It also has a distinct core of rock dust or ground oyster shell, which is the distinguishing characteristic of the vineyard.

Matthiasson.com \$40



The Scholium Project, Michael Faraday

Abe Schoener describes each vintage of this single-vineyard wine as “beautiful but radically different,” ranging from “noble and disciplined but extravagant,” more chablis than meursault (2009), to a “rich but piquant” emissary of the Jura (2010).

scholiumwines.com \$75