

# A Grape Guru's Magic Touch

Winemaker and vineyard consultant Steve Matthiasson shares a day in his life during harvest. *By Elin McCoy*  
*Photographs by Cayce Clifford*

Known for his classically balanced wines and long commitment to organic production, Steve Matthiasson is a man in high demand. For his eponymous label, he farms a dozen small vineyards, including one at his winery in Napa's Oak Knoll district. He consults on 15 more that belong to his eight high-profile clients—the largest sprawls across 400 acres.

His 27th harvest season stretches over seven weeks, and each day is a master class in multitasking. The key decision, he says, is always when to pick. That, more than anything else, determines the style of wine you can make.

Last year's harvest in Napa was a horror show of wildfires; this year Matthiasson is all smiles. "The quality is the best I can remember," he says.

Here's what his day looked like on Sept. 2, about halfway through his harvest.

**7:33 a.m.**

## COFFEE, THEN PLANNING

Matthiasson begins at 6 a.m. with coffee. His crew has been picking every day since Aug. 5. Today they're on the cabernet franc grapes in his home Matthiasson plot. With fog hanging over Napa's hills, he consults with his vineyard manager, Caleb Mosley, to plan the day. How much fruit is coming into the winery? Will they have to clean an extra tank?



**10:28 a.m.**



**8:29 a.m.**

## ROAMING THE VINES

He spends much of the day going from vineyard to vineyard to check how close the grapes are to ripening and to detect potential problems such as mealybugs or mildew. He'll visit seven today: The first is Papa's Perch on Mt. Veeder where the cabernet sauvignon goes into his own wine. Ripening cues such as the color of the leaves and the firmness of the grapes help him figure out if he'll have to pick some sections first or can harvest all at once.



**9:20 a.m.**

## A TASTE TEST

At Bengier's Dry Creek Vineyard in the cool, foggy southern part of Napa Valley, he nibbles on ribolla gialla, a rare white Italian grape he uses for one of his own wines. He's tasting for many things, including whether some are tart and others sweet and juicy.

**10:03 a.m.****MEASURING SUGAR**

He heads back to the winery with grape samples to confirm his impressions. His hand-held refractometer measures the grapes' sugar content in degrees Brix, which increases as the grapes ripen. During fermentation the yeast converts the sugars to alcohol; higher Brix means higher potential alcohol. To get brighter wines with complex aromas at 12% alcohol, Matthiasson picks at a lower Brix level—18 to 22 for chardonnay—than most Napa producers, who opt for more potent wines.

**10:28 a.m.****FERMENTATION CHECK-INS**

At the winery he checks on pinot noir grape skins fermenting in tanks, doing punch downs

**1:31 p.m.****4:04 p.m.**

with a tool to keep the juice in contact with the skins to extract more color, flavor, and tannin. Matthiasson doesn't usually produce a pinot noir, but this year a former intern offered him some extra fruit from an organic vineyard in Sonoma, and he couldn't resist.

**10:43 a.m.****TASTING AGAIN**

Matthiasson and the team try a sample of the fermenting pinot. Is it good? The answer is written in the smile on his face. Although it's not yet wine, he's excited by the density, along with minerality and freshness—his "holy grail" of balance. The small amount means it will be only for Matthiasson wine club members, for \$59 a bottle. (Members usually pay from \$334 to \$631 per 6- or 12-bottle shipment.)

**1:31 p.m.****CLIENT CALLS**

After a quick taco-truck-and-Coke lunch, he hits the road to visit his clients' vineyards. Everyone worries at harvest time. Matthiasson advises on strategic vine care, identifying issues that could reduce valuable yields and offering organic solutions. At Dalla Valle he discusses with

owner Naoko Dalla Valle, her daughter and winemaker Maya, and vineyard manager Edgar Alfaro whether some vines have a virus that they must deal with before it spreads. The next stop is Eisele Vineyard, which belongs to François Pinault, owner of Bordeaux's Château Latour.

**4:04 p.m.****DESTEMMING TECHNIQUE**

Back at his winery he coaches Gabriela Pilar Fontanesi, one of his four interns, on using the destemming machine on the just-picked cabernet franc grapes. Doing this before crushing and fermentation minimizes the astringent tannins the stems can add to a wine.

**4:51 p.m.****AT THE DESK**

The end of the day is always at the computer. Sitting in his messy attic-loft office above the winery, Matthiasson records the latest sugar levels on a huge spreadsheet. Tracking this way shows him trends—the rate of ripening, how fast flavor is developing—that help him predict what's coming next. He wraps up at 7 p.m. after walking one more vineyard near the winery.