

Winter 2009

So how was the harvest this year? It's question number one during the fall months for anybody who grows grapes, as I do. And my initial quick answer for 2008 – and maybe every year - being “well, it's over ... and all the grapes are safely in the winery.” Yes, we celebrate the harvest and the promise of great wines to come, but we also breathe a sigh of relief.

The number one concern in Virginia, you see, is the weather – and in particular how much rain we get. And the answer may surprise you: unlike most crops, for winegrowing we want *less* rain, not more. We're after photosynthesis and sugar buildup in the grapes – and when it rains the sun isn't shining (in case you didn't know). Without rain the vines can usually take care of themselves – the morning dew and ongoing humidity is normally enough, really. After all, it doesn't rain *a drop* all summer in California, and they do okay.

In particular we do elaborate dances to try to steer hurricanes away from our area. After working the vines all spring and summer, the tropical rains of September pose a triple whammy: They dilute sugar content and delay maturation of the fruit – meaning we have to wait longer to harvest and are more exposed to future potential storms, and ever cooler fall weather. They swell the berries and cause them to split, making attractive, easy meals for bees, birds and other insects. And they promote mildews and rots, which can wipe out the entire crop.

This year's hurricanes? Fay and Gustav mostly petered out before they got up here, but were deluges in southwest Virginia vineyards. And Hannah provided a glancing blow, dropping six inches of rain on various Piedmont locations but moving quickly through our area while delivering the brunt of its wrath on our colleagues in northern Virginia. Ike and the others took a left turn in Florida and skipped us entirely – I think October was almost completely dry actually.

Sometimes there is a silver lining though. In 2008 the Japanese beetles that can be so destructive in early July never showed up; we didn't use any insecticides at all this year. It turns out that last year's severe drought apparently disrupted their mating cycle, with inadequate water to successfully lay their eggs and breed for the coming year. Whether they'll be back next year or not is anyone's guess.

Overall, the 2008 crop was pretty good, all things considered. In the end we harvest what Mother Nature has allowed, and count on the great skill and increasing experience of local Piedmont winemakers to produce Viognier, Cabernet Franc and other signature wines that please you, the consumer. I'm sure they will.

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