

Summer 2008

It's late spring here in Madison County, and a winegrower's thoughts turn to ... weather. Actually, they are almost always focused on weather. You may remember from my earlier column (Winter, 2007) that owning a vineyard means developing a stronger and more intimate connection with nature – which really means worrying constantly about what might happen and realizing that you're pretty much powerless to do much about it.

Last summer's drought was good news for the 2007 harvest – very ripe grapes, with minimal disease problems, yielding intense and flavorful white wines that are just now being released, and potentially great red wines that are now aging nicely for release next year. But drought stresses the vines, so we need enough moisture during the winter to allow the vines to recover and build up energy reserves to use this year. Precipitation has been moderate, so we're happy.

We're off to a good start for 2008, without any major frost problems. April in the vineyard means "budbreak" – when the vines wake up and new buds emerge and become shoots carrying the grape clusters that are what it's all about. At this time last year we were reeling from the effects of the major Easter Freeze – a perfect storm of arctic cold air and clear skies that continued for three straight nights. Vineyards in Charlottesville and points south had as much as a foot of shoot growth – which got frozen and led to virtually total crop losses for some grape varieties. In much of the Piedmont the impact was limited because bud break had not yet occurred in this more northern region– a mere 50 miles of latitude made all the difference. Together with good luck.

What can you do? Some vineyards bring in helicopters to stir up the air, while others have installed permanent propane-powered wind machines for the same purpose. *Hey, it's only money.* Other techniques are increasingly being used too – delaying the start of pruning (which can in turn help delay budbreak), using specialized bacteria and fertilizers that may reduce the freezing point of water by a precious few degrees, or simply leaving more buds than you ultimately want - with the expectation that some will no doubt get frosted.

April showers bring May flowers ... and insects, in the case of vineyards. Our attention turns to esoteric topics such as grape flea beetles that drill into the tasty middles of new buds for their dinner, and grape cane girdlers that saw off the tender shoots and drop them to the ground for their babies to eat. Rains also trigger mildew that must be combated, though there is, of course, also another mildew that thrives on *dry* weather. Never a dull moment.

When I report again at the end of the season I hope that we will have had a great year, and will be bringing you terrific wines – please root for good weather in the meantime.

Scott Elliff is the owner/operator of DuCard Vineyards in Madison County, VA. He can be reached through www.ducardvineyards.com, which also includes information about limited production DuCard Vineyards wines, available only through the website.