

Want to be a grape grower in the Napa Valley?

Editor's note: Today, the Napa Valley Grape-growers begin a new monthly column exploring a variety of issues they confront in their mission to preserve and promote the valley's vineyards. Kicking it off is David Beckstoffer, president of the Grapegrowers. More information about the group is available at napagrowers.org.

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Ever think about how cool it would be to have vineyards in the Napa Valley? Maybe a little farmhouse on a knoll overlooking a few acres of cabernet? You could don your wide-brimmed hat and Carhartt jacket and walk the vine rows with your yellow lab on a crisp fall morning, brushing dew off of the leaves, plucking a berry and sampling the

sweet nectar of what would become your next 100-point wine.

Well, the good news is that your love of wine (and beer and Scotch) may come in handy as you overcome the shock that growing grapes in the Napa Valley is really hard work. Those lush vineyards that hug our hillsides and blanket our valley floor don't just sprout up after a good storm. It takes a whole

lot of planning and money and people to get those vineyards ready for the travel brochures and wine magazines. And making them pretty is the easy part. Producing grapes that are up to Napa Valley standards takes a little more work.

We are blessed with some advantages here.



Beckstoffer

But in the end, this is farming. And no matter how wealthy, smart or marketable you are, your success ultimately depends on the weather.

We've got some of the best soils and climate for growing wine grapes in the world. We've also got more than 150 years of history to draw from and some of the most talented, resourceful and knowledgeable owners, wine-makers, managers and workers that have ever muddied their boots. But in the end, this is farming. And no matter how wealthy, smart or marketable you are, your success ultimately depends on the weather.

Take this year for example. After a few dry years, we finally got some serious rain storms last win-

ter, filling our reservoirs, lakes and streams. We were jazzed. Early spring came and the rain continued. No problem, the clouds kept the frost away.

Spring moved on and the rain kept coming. We were starting to get a little anxious because the ground was too soft for tractors and our vines were growing like weeds (and the weeds were growing like weeds, too). In late spring, the rains started to subside and we let out a collective sigh of relief. We got on our tractors, mowed our weeds, suckered our vines and laid our compost. We were

ready to go.

Or were we? The rain had stopped but temperatures remained cool. The combination of mild temperatures and moist air created ideal conditions for mildew. Seeing patches of fungus starting to grow on clusters, we responded immediately. Spray rigs were dispatched, and crews performed triage on our precious berries, cutting off clusters that were too far gone and pulling leaves to allow air and light to penetrate the canopies.

Then things started getting dicey. After weeks of cool weather, temperatures suddenly soared into triple digits. With their protective layer of leaves diminished, the grapes were easy targets and sunburn threatened to shrivel the mildew survivors.

It appeared that this was going to be a year of

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challenges, but we Napa Valley grapegrowers were prepared to respond. We rushed to turn on the water, reposition canes, lay shade cloth and do whatever else we could think of to protect the berries and cool everything down. Then, after

found ourselves picking chardonnay, merlot, pinot noir and cabernet all at the same time. But vineyard managers were undaunted. In the midst of overseeing each day's pick, they were planning the next day, moving crews and trucks and tractors and bins like chess pieces. It makes me wonder how we ever got through a harvest without cell phones.

four days of intense heat, the cool morning fog reemerged over the hillsides and we started sleeping again.

Because of the cool season, we started harvest about two weeks late. As temperatures climbed in September and October, ripening quickened and we picked up the pace. Rather than the usual progression from whites to reds, we

We're now in the homestretch and the grapes that have survived the cold, the mildew, the sunburn, the European Grapevine Moth and the compacted schedule are arriving safely at the wineries. Despite this year's challenges, we are delighted to see that the cool growing season has worked pure magic on the grapes. Slow, even ripening has produced

berries with well developed flavors and nicely balanced sugars and acids. Although the crop size is somewhat reduced, the quality of the grapes has raised our expectations for a great vintage.

It's still too early to pass final judgment on the 2010 vintage, but there is one thing for certain — it will be unique. That's why this

business is so special. Every vintage is different. No year is like the last, and from the time the first buds sprout from dormant vines, grapegrowers have to be prepared for anything.

So before you buy that farmhouse on the knoll, make sure that the paint and plumbing are in good shape. It'll be a while before you get around to it.