

PRUNING FOR KICKER CANES

By Sarah Powell, Winemaker

“A skilled pruner knows how to read the vine... With a few snips of the loppers, the pruner selects what wood will be left to grow shoots and bear fruit, and also determines the shape and growing habit of the vine for the coming season and perhaps for seasons to come..”

If a vine is well tended, and doesn't experience damage from severe winters, or decline from disease, it should happily thrive and produce fruit for an entire human lifetime or longer. In Southern Oregon this should be the case with our better sites, if they were established correctly, have the appropriate rootstock, and are properly cared for. Our cold sites are susceptible to winter damage, however, and with the resulting disease pressure of crown gall, will probably need replanting within fifteen to thirty years. Considering the extreme expense of vineyard establishment and what I honestly believe to be improved wine quality with vine age, careful site selection, planting decisions, and tending of the vine are imperative.

Fundamental to a vine's care is the often little-discussed practice of pruning. I love pruning on a sunny winter day. Our pruning crew will tell you, however, that the majority of time spent pruning in Southern Oregon is in cold, wet weather. They do take pride in their art, though. It's like giving the vines a haircut, but also so much more. A skilled pruner knows how to read the vine. Last year's denuded growth reveals much about what the vine needs. With a few snips of the loppers, the pruner selects what wood will be left to grow shoots and bear fruit, and also determines the shape and growing habit of the vine for the coming season and perhaps for seasons to come. Errors can take years to correct, and can also dramatically under or overwhelm a vine's crop and ability to grow.

How the vine grows obviously has a huge impact on the amount of labor required to keep the fruit in the sunlight, keep the shoots away from the tractors, adjust the crop level. It also impacts the ability of sulfur sprays to penetrate the canopy, and natural airflow and sunlight to help control mildew and mold. And then there's the wine quality effects. A rank growing vine, which was pruned too hard, will probably produce a dense shaded canopy, and resulting high pH and vegetal tasting wine. A weak growing vine, which was not pruned enough, will probably be

too stressed to photosynthesize and ripen its crop. Berries from such vines are often tiny, quite phenolic and susceptible to shrivel, resulting in wines that are hard, green, and out of balance.

There are two ways to prune a vine: cane (a branch of commonly six to twelve dormant buds, depending on the vine spacing) and spur (a branch cut off at only one to three dormant buds). In the Medford area, our growers mostly prefer spur pruning. In the Illinois Valley, all our vines are pruned to two canes, about twelve buds each, except Gewürztraminer, which is allowed to have four twelve bud canes, and Gamay noir, which is allowed about fifteen two bud spurs. Whether to cane or spur prune, and how many buds to leave, depends on several factors: tradition, what you are comfortable with, and how the vine responds. Some varieties (like Pinot noir) produce smaller shoots and clusters when spur pruned. Depending on one's climate and soil, that may be desirable or not. Some varieties (like Merlot) have blind, weak, or unfruitful buds at the midpoint of a cane, and so are usually spur pruned. Some varieties (like Gewürztraminer) and richer soils produce very vigorous vines which need their growth tamed by leaving many more buds.

We normally begin pruning by leaving many more buds as an “insurance policy” against winter damage, insect damage, spring frost, wet weather during bloom. The extra buds are left in the form of “kicker canes”: one or two extra twelve-bud canes, which will be lopped off later, if not needed. As the buds begin to grow in the spring, we begin looking for signs of winter damage (buds which are very delayed to open, or are dead, or which push shoots with few, if any, clusters). If damage is signifi-



Photo: Reynaldo pruning a kicker cane.