



Stags' Leap

RIPENESS

When a fig is ripe, its plush, dark red meat lets off a fragrance, and in the mouth, gritty seeds crack against the molars, signaling a voluptuous sadness and completion. It lets off an odiferous signal, the seeds adding some component to the flavor that is more than textural.

Ripeness in the vineyard is a continuum that stretches back to the flower, and requires assessments throughout the stages when its fruit is not so gratifying in the mouth. For winemaker Robert Brittan, this is amply compensated by the relationship that arises between winemaker and vine, an ongoing conversation that includes discussions of many intricate and delicate subjects.

Grapes express their feelings about things with simplicity and eloquence, from how hot it was during bloom, or the fact that they aborted flowers, to how much they enjoyed the late rains of spring. He goes out looking for flavors and textural impressions, noticing the way a bunch feels in his mouth, what kind of finish it leaves behind, how much pulp, how brown are the seeds, the lignification that signals the dying back of the canes, even the quality of the peduncle attaching bunch to stem, the way it breaks off—a sound, a vibration, and a thought at the back of his head just above the neckline.

With Brittan's wine grapes, the signal of ultimate ripeness has also been attended by Brecon Jackson, Grower Relations. Brecons are surprising characters. When they aren't out berry tasting and building a database plotting vineyard characteristics at harvest against wine at release, they are often seen riding on top of ocean waves balancing on thin boards made of complex polymers, a sport invented by kings. A particular epiphany for this activity is the ability to hover over the front edge of a wave just where it's breaking and ride the energy to shore.



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Of course, grapes would have to be more complicated. They have more toes to hang over the edge of the curve of time, and all their toes are in a bunch. Jackson finds he has to be all over the Napa Valley, simultaneously, he notes from behind his Spy sunglasses, monitoring the vineyards that provide grapes to Stags' Leap. He's acutely aware of the curve of time and how it intersects other ascending and descending lines of force.

Sweetness, that innate and mysterious happiness. Acid, without which grapes would be picked either too soon, or perhaps not at all. A wine made from fruit without enough acid is flat and lusterless. This is partly to save humans from committing a crime, because to make wine from a mango when it's really meant to be eaten on the spot is probably in some old law book, written in severe language. Acid, the vividness component, and tannins, not to be slighted, originally named because of their use in tanning hides, performing this same function in the mouth, forming a complex with proteins in the saliva and soft membranes, stealing the mouth's moisture until the surface tissues contract.

In the long view, grapes developed acids and tannins to fend off hungry creatures until the whole daring moment of its existence, the seed, was complete. This same long view also developed Brecons and Brittans, who step up their regular visits to the fields from biweekly to weekly to daily, spending the time close to harvest in the vineyards for entire mornings, hefting bunches of grapes, tasting mouthfuls.

Between complete véraison and harvest, while the sugars mount and the acids retire, Brittan goes out looking for surprises, for what's going to engage him once he gets to the fermenting vats. There's a sudden burst of awareness when it's time to pick. It's in the psyche, he says, not just the tongue, not just the chemical balance of perfect



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sweetness and toned acid. This awareness is different for every variety, and is not the same in every vineyard, or every vine in a block.

Everything builds to this point. Not only are the grapes preparing for this moment, but his own physiology has been preparing, waiting, anticipating. Once harvest has started, and whole blocks of vines are standing leafy and defruited, there is something almost melancholy in the air, a definite feeling that something has passed and has ended. This is the time of year when the air clears and the light develops that heightened saturation.

From certain vantage points up on the hill above the estate, there is a palpable clarity to the view. You can even see, at times, St. Andreas himself working on the faultline, with his hoe and his brim hat, adjusting the flow of watersheds, releasing pressure, dancing through the overcast sky. That's the moment when the season turns, a sensation along the sleeve, the lift of a parcel of dust on a breeze that begins to smell different from its starting to its dying off, bringing with it an inexplicable sensation of damp through the heat waves.

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