

# BETZ

FAMILY WINERY

## Harvest 2011 Notes from Bob Betz

My most important take away from 2011 is the inability to generalize or make a blanket assessment of the vintage. Whether it was November freeze damage in Walla Walla, two inches of September rain in Russian River or record low heat accumulation in Dundee, West Coast conditions varied by specific location more than I've seen in the past. It will be a year when consumers need to make decisions not just on state or AVA, but on specific vineyards and specific wineries. West coast vintage charts will be difficult to construct in 2011.

For Betz Family 2011 ties with 1999 for the latest harvest in our 15 vintages. We picked our last fruit on Halloween, a couple cool site Cabernets and a couple southern Rhone varieties from the Yakima Valley. You've seen all the news about last November, the cool/wet spring and the summer that really started in mid July. We had a couple rain "events" in September and October, but they were isolated; the Columbia Valley's typical windy days post-rain came along and dried things out. There were reports of mold and mildew but we had none to deal with.

The weather demanded precise steps by our growers: reducing yields, canopy management for light penetration and disease prevention, and thoughtful/purposeful spray programs were essential. All that being done, we still picked our first grapes two weeks later than average, and picked our last grapes about 2 ½ weeks later than average.

Even then we had Brix levels that were 1° lower than typical, and in some cases 2° lower. But the fruit was physiologically ripe. Alcohol will be lower, but even at 24 Brix we'll still hit 14% alcohol. Some of the southern Rhone varieties, Counoise and Cinsault, were ripe in the mid 23s, giving us about 13.8 alcohol.

Overall the acid was not as high as we would have predicted from the heat accumulation. The vines may have understood the season better than humans and, combined with a couple extra weeks to hang, lowered the acidity to generally 5 to 6 grams/liter (pre-fermentation/pre-MLF), certainly a pleasurable level. There are a couple lots that will require a little blending, but we'll see TAs lower than that after both fermentations.

So it turns out to be a low pH and low TA vintage, quite attractive. Low TA will give us a pleasurable balance while the low pH will provide stability and longevity. Also the low pH gives us great color expression: blue, black, magenta, purple hues throughout the ferments. We should retain these colors unless we screw up. Most important, with the extra time on the vine, phenolic and flavor maturity was excellent. The flavors are full, complete and rich. No greenies. And there is real differentiation of varieties and vineyards, something we don't see as much of in the hot years. So much pepper in Mourvedre, smoke in Syrah, currants in Cabernet.

Picking dates were crucial to success. Fortunately flavor development preceded sugar development. Letting them hang was a good idea, but if we had waited much longer we would have had some real problems; canopies were collapsing by early November. Balancing flavor and sugar development against the potential for freeze or rain damage was a challenge. But in the end were really pleased.

2011 is such a unique vintage that there was so much to consider. Let me know if you have any questions,

*Bob*

