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It's not my year

Our critic sets out to make a natural, Beaujolais-style red, but it's not long before complications arise

BY BILL ZACHARKIW, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 19, 2011

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Press agent Bill Zacharkiw pours grape pulp and liquid, which had started fermenting in a sealed bin filled with carbon dioxide, into a press.

Photograph by: JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

I was tasting the wines of a young winemaker from Burgundy a few years

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contempt, "it takes three years from my vines flowering to when I put my wine to market. These people sit down, have a sip, and after a minute tell me what my wine is all about. Most of these people have never made a wine in their lives."

Touché.

For most people, October and November mean getting back into the routine of work or school, but all over the northern hemisphere, wineries are abuzz, vintners working non-stop, harvesting and crushing grapes, and turning the 2011 vintage into wine. This year, I decided to join them.

Along with winemaker Mike Marler of Quebec winery Les Pervenches, I decided to make myself a barrel of wine. But I didn't want to make just any wine. First, I wanted to make my wine with one of my favourite grape varieties, and considering our cool Canadian climate, a grape that should be grown more. It's the grape of Beaujolais: gamay .

I also love "natural" wines - wines that are made with as little human intervention as possible. Nearly all wines today are made using additives. Some have been used for centuries in winemaking. Sugar is often added in cooler climates to raise alcohol levels, while tartaric acid and powdered tannin are used in warmer climates.

Others are more controversial. There are cultured yeast strains that boost aromatics, enzymes that do everything from clarify the wine to extract colour. Sulphur dioxide and sterile filtration are used to remove any bacteria from the wine and alter the taste. There are also colourants and even "super concentrates" of grapes and wood extract to flavour wines. Winemakers use these techniques to play it safe and avoid complications or simply to alter the grapes Mother Nature has provided.

I had wanted to write on my wine label "made with grapes." But what started out as a very simple idea - making wines as naturally as possible - proved to be an adventure that was anything but.

IT STARTS WITH THE GRAPES

Marler practises organic growing and minimal intervention in his winemaking, so he was willing to try this more natural approach, even though he had never worked with gamay before. He doesn't grow gamay, and to my knowledge, three vineyards in Quebec have just started doing trial tests on the grape. But a four-hour drive away is a place that does grow gamay, and very good gamay at that - Grange of Prince Edward winery in Prince Edward County, Ontario.

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last year, I approached owner Caroline Granger about purchasing enough grapes to make a 225-litre barrel of wine, which according to Marler, means about 800 kilograms. I also said I wanted to pick them myself. She agreed and she showed me a block of her best vines. The bunches of grapes perfectly formed, just starting to turn to red from green. This onset of ripening is called veraison in wine-speak.

On Sept. 16, I went back, and the grapes looked fantastic, just like in the pictures. We bit into a few grapes to taste the juice and look at the colour of the pits, which were still a bit green, meaning that the grapes were close to being ripe. With a refractometer, I checked the Brix, or sugar, levels of the grapes. They were at around 19 (or potentially 10.5 per cent alcohol), and we were hoping for closer to 22 (12.1 per cent). After talking with Granger and Marler, we figured that two to three more weeks more were needed.

EVIL MOTHER NATURE, AND WHY MY KIDS HATE ME

Those next two weeks were alternating cool and warm weather, with lots of rain. Damn. This is what can kill a vintage. When you get lots of rain this late in the game, the grapes get engorged with water, diluting them, and rot begins to form on the clusters. We had set Wednesday, Oct. 12, as a target to pick the grapes, but the Thanksgiving weekend was warm and sunny, and the forecast was calling for a week of rain starting on the 12th.

This was my first lesson: You can't control nature, and it dictates when you work, not the other way around. So we changed our picking date to the 11th, but the friends who had agreed to help me weren't available then, and the winery was already short of hands. They had to bring in all their grapes from the fields as well.

My kids, 11 and 9 years old, wanted to help. I had picked grapes before and I know how hard a job it is, and I asked them a few times, "Are you sure?" I don't know whether they just wanted to get a day off school, but when they answered yes, we drove two hours from Ste. Agathe to Marler's winery in Farnham, hopped in a borrowed pickup, and drove another four hours to Prince Edward County, arriving at 10 p.m.

At 7 a.m. the next morning, we went to check the grapes. There were some good clusters, but most were at least partially infected with botrytis, a kind of mould, and black rot, a common occurrence. Grange was not the only one with this problem. I have talked to winemakers from Ontario to Nova Scotia, and they have all complained about it. Furthermore, some of the grapes had burst, and the vines were filled with wasps who were after the sweet juice. 2011 has been a challenging year.

Because we were trying to make wine with very little sulphur and additives, I needed the cleanest clusters possible, so Granger let me "cherry pick." Four hours later, my son stung by a wasp, my daughter cut and bleeding, we had maybe 600 kilograms, a couple thousand grape bunches. My back was aching. My kids were troopers, but Granger took them away, fed them and her pickers came in to help. We still had to get these grapes back to Farnham by nightfall.

BACK TO FARNHAM

At 3 p.m., with a pickup full of grapes, we were back on the road to Farnham. The job was only half done, and we arrived at Marler's at 8 p.m. A quick dinner and my kids collapsed on the sofa, and Marler and I went to unload the grapes and sort the good from the bad. Despite our best efforts to pull only the cleanest clusters, there was still mould everywhere, and each cluster had to be checked and the bad grapes pulled off one by one.

As we picked through each cluster of the 27 bins of grapes, we started throwing more and more grapes away. We had to smell each cluster, looking for acetic acid (vinegar). In the end, we lost maybe 15 per cent. I was feeling a bit down. We were approaching midnight, but Marler was happy with what we had harvested.

"How often do you get those perfect bunches, like in those pictures?" I asked. He simply smiled and said, "maybe once every three to four years, if lucky."

We were trying to make our own version of Beaujolais, so we used a process called carbonic maceration, a technique whereby whole bunches of grapes are placed in a sealed fermenting bin filled with carbon dioxide so that the grape sugars start to ferment inside each berry. The more standard way of making red wine is to crush the berries and let them sit on their skins for a up to a week, and then the fermentation starts.

It was well after midnight and I was dead tired. We put all the grapes in the stainless steel fermenting bin, added the carbon dioxide, put on the cap and I left for a well earned sleep. Nine hours of driving, personally picking close to 400 kg of grapes, trying to be vigilant and focused while sorting the grapes - this was by far the roughest 36 hours I had lived in a long while.

NERVOUS EIGHT DAYS

Next came the waiting game, as the grapes would spend eight days under carbonic maceration. Like a nervous father away from his baby, I

would call Mike daily for updates. We could open the top only once we decided to press the grapes because as soon as they are exposed to oxygen, all the bacteria start to work.

"Bacteria are silent, you never know what's going on in there," said Marler. His only indication was to test the juice that collected on the bottom of the barrel that resulted from individual grapes exploding or being pressed by the weight of all the grape bunches on top of them.

The first four days were fine, then I got the call. "A small problem," was Marler's message. I called back to discover that certain bacteria were prematurely eating up precious acid, which could have led to our wine smelling of vinegar. We had to add some sulphur, our first intervention.

PRESS DAY, ALL IS GOOD, THEN THE NEXT DAY, OUR BABY GETS ILL

We opened the top, and there they were, my grapes that had cost me a two-day back ache, a Nintendo game for my son and a shopping spree for my daughter. They had forgiven me. We squeezed the grapes on top of the pile and juice flowed out, but with very little colour.

Decision time. Colour, as I have said many times, is largely cosmetic and doesn't affect the taste. We had a few options, including crushing the grapes and allowing them to soak for a few days, but in the end we decided to go punk. Marler jumped in the barrel and for 30 minutes stomped the grapes, trying to release as much colour as possible.

Then we pressed the grapes. As the juice dripped from the press, I would fill my glass from time to time. It tasted sweet, as the fermentation had barely begun. And as we pumped the juice back into the tank, my job was to scoop out the dozens of wasps and lady bugs that drowned in the sweet nectar. I hoped one was the wasp that had stung Marler as we were pressing.

I went out every few days to check as my grape juice became wine.

But best intentions do not always make for the best wine. After a few days of fermenting, Marler told me: we have a "stinker."

It smelled like matchsticks and garlic, and Marler explained that our native yeasts weren't working efficiently. "Kinda like they have indigestion and passing wind?" I asked. He just laughed and said that the day before, it had smelled of vomit.

Ten days later, the alcoholic fermentation complete, we transferred our wine to a barrel to do the secondary, malolactic fermentation. During

more, more acid is transformed into lactic acid, which gives wine a creamier, softer texture. Its colour is closer to pink than red, and Marler thinks we will have to add a lot more sulphur, something we didn't want to do. We still have no idea how it will turn out, but Marler thinks, and hopes, it might turn itself around after it ages a bit.

It is now a waiting game, and that's what winemaking is all about. You wait for the grapes to ripen, you wait for fermentation to finish, then you wait for it to age. Our wine will spend the winter in its barrel, and then we will bottle it in spring. Our original goal of making a gamay that would redefine Canadian gamay has turned to hoping that our wine will be drinkable.

The error we made is the same one that I constantly complain about wineries making - trying to make a wine that you want as opposed to what Mother Nature wants. This year was not the year to make a natural wine.

What I learned has given me new respect for not only winemakers but also for all those people who work the fields and harvest the grapes.

Making wine is an arduous task, physically demanding and humbling. So many things can go wrong. I get it now. I hope that young Burgundian reads this.

The Retail Detail column will return

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