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Annual grape crush gets under way

By Wendy Schultz

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There was no huge vat full of kerchiefed and barefoot women happily stomping and sliding on slippery grapes, but the grape crush was happening just the same in Camino vineyards Wednesday.

The first crush of grapes for winemaking is always exciting, according to Tom Jones, owner and winemaker of Lava Cap Winery.

"Beer brewers get to do this about once a week, but we only get to do it once a year and it's exciting to see what we're going to have. This year it's a late crush."

The 2010 grape crush is about three weeks later than usual, according to Madroña Vineyard's winemaker, Paul Bush.

"Our late spring, with snow on the ground in mid-May and a moderate summer, caused growth to be slower," said Bush, "but the quality of the grapes is outstanding and this could be an exceptional year for wine if the weather holds."

"The sugars are low, but the flavors are right," said Jones. "That makes for a nice, fruity character."

"If the weather holds" is the theme for winemakers everywhere. Too hot and the grapes mature too quickly and may sunburn; too much rain and the grape sugar is diluted; too cold and the grapes won't continue to ripen. If the current mild, dry weather holds, the harvest, crushing and pressing could last until November.

"If it gets hot, we could be done in a month," said Bush. "If it starts to rain, then we're just done."

Wednesday was the first crush for Lava Cap, but the second for Madroña, which harvested chardonnay grapes two weeks earlier. Madroña is producing a sparkling wine from their chardonnay, currently undergoing its first barrel fermentation. So far, only 11 tons out of Madrona's usual 280 tons of grapes have been harvested and Wednesday's pressing were the pink Gwertztraminer grapes.

It's called a crush, but white wine grapes aren't usually crushed — they go directly from the field into a stainless steel presser, as pressing produces lower acidity juice. The grapes are harvested in the morning and kept cool in bins until they are poured into the presser. Harvest and pressing happen on the same day.



a cage that spins in one direction, bats that turn in another. The crushed grapes, along with their seeds and skins, are pumped into a tank so the juice will stay in contact with the skins to extract the color from them. Red wine grapes may go through pressing after crushing, depending on whether a higher or lower acidity wine is desired.

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At Lava Cap, the bins of chardonnay grapes are poured into a hopper, sent down a shaker table to remove any extraneous organic material such as leaves, carried up a chute and into a destemmer before moving to the presser. The machinery is loud and Tom Jones and his crew were whipping small forklifts around like crazy as Karen McNeill, Lava Cap's tasting room manager, and Jordan Mingle worked the shaker table, pulling off leaves and making sure the grapes were moving along.

"Crush is my favorite thing," said McNeill, "because it's the whole winemaking process."

At Madroña, the only sound is the whooshing of the presser as the membrane inside pushes one-and-a-half tons of pink Gwertztraminer grapes against screens on the side of the machine, and the gentle sound of their juice raining down into a tray beneath the presser. The juice, 21 percent sugar, is cloudy, sweet and almost colorless — this isn't Welch's — it's better. It is pumped into settling tanks before undergoing primary fermentation.

Crush days are long, beginning with early morning harvesting, hours of cleaning before pressing, the pressing itself, and hours of cleaning the machinery and work area before the next day's crush. In addition, the grape stems and grape must (skins, seeds and pulp) are put back into the soil immediately. Whether this year's crush is a long, slow process or a quick one depends on the weather.

"Small wineries make products that reflect the climate," said Paul Bush. "It's amazing that you can actually taste what happened that year."

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