

A delayed harvest for grape growers too

Slower harvest for grapes

August, 2011

By Dick Hagen

Much like corn and soybean producers, Renville County's vineyard operations are also on a slower production schedule for this challenging 2011 season. "Everything's set back at least 10 to 14 days from normal harvest," said Kevin Fluhr, Renville County's biggest vintners with about 4100 vines in his grape growing operation east and north of Hector which has the descriptive name of Flatlander Vineyard. He checked sugar content on his grapes August 18. "They're 8 to 10 points from being ready."

This veteran grower who also operates Hector Meats thinks however his 2011 grape crop will be a good crop even though it is really coming slow. For Fluhr that means about 4,000 lbs. per acre on his best yielding variety, Frontenac Gris. He has 7 different varieties and delivers to Field Stone Winery, Redwood Falls.

He's not yet netting, a practice used by some to prevent vineyard cannibalism by roving migrations of birds, especially Robins which occasionally find grapes very tasty. "But because grape harvest will be running later this year, vineyards may be even more appealing to our migratory feathered friends so netting may have to happen."

Though a few big vineyards now use mechanical harvesting equipment, Renville County vintners still rely on hand harvest. And that simply means hiring friends and neighbors to help out during that precious time span of usually just a few days. Fluhr has pretty much relied on labor from his own meat processing operation at Hector but this year that may change too. "I'm thinking of hiring a crew just to make certain harvest gets done when it needs to get done. Grapes too can get 'too ripe' on the vine if not harvested when sugar (BRIX score) and pH says it's time to go."

His take on the future of the Minnesota grape industry, which continues to be a slow but increasing industry? "It all depends upon the number of wineries that open up in future years. There've been a lot of grapes planted in the past 3 year. We've had a few new wineries too but this economy in general is sort of stagnant these days so who knows what's ahead," summed up Fluhr.

According to the Farm Service Agency, Renville County now has a reported 24 acres of vineyards at 14 locations. Though still a 'niche' crop in Minnesota agriculture, industry specialists estimated there are now about 1400 acres of vineyard in Minnesota. Also Minnesota now has 32 licensed wineries processing and retailing various kinds of wine. Iowa, with 80 licensed wineries and nearly 2,000 acres of grapes is moving even faster into this 'new Midwest' farming venture.

Stacy and Wayne Lindahl have a 1224-vine operation (2 acres) south of Renville. Sizing up their 2011 crop versus 2010, Stacy simply said, "Well it's looking better because last year we had frost damage. But it's not as good as other years. The wind and hail storms this year haven't been kind to vineyards just like they haven't been kind to field crops and farmsteads.

She too is predicting a later harvest of their grapes but like corn and soybean crops, their grapes too haven't picked up some maturation the past 2/3 weeks. "I'm seeing some coloring of the grapes beginning to happen (August 18 visit) but I think we'll be at least a week behind normal harvest."

They net their vineyard for bird protection and have been doing so for the past 3 years now. Already they've netted their Marquette vines because this maturity matures earlier. "We netted last weekend (Aug 13) and already the robins were making lots of noise when we put up the nets," said Stacy. Any more expansion? No way she commented adding, "If we had known how much attention, how much work a vineyard requires, we probably wouldn't have done that 2nd acre 4 years ago."

Current market prices are in that 65-68 cents per pound range, so even with a 3,000 lb. vineyard the gross revenue is only about \$2,000 per acre. Input costs on a yearly basis once your vines are in the ground? If your time is 'free', than seasonal costs are likely in the \$150-\$200 per acre range for herbicide, insecticide and fertility needs. Like many vintners she agreed the romance of having a vineyard is often the 'tonic' that gets folks into this unique 'hobby'.

Steve Zenk, Adult Ag/Community Education instructor, sort of started the 'grape growing fever. He and wife Maria planted only about 100 vines in 2001 and liked what they saw in 2002 with their first very limited harvest. Zenk did some studying about the crop and decided to share some info with his Olivia Community Ed class that 2002/2003 winter. Yes, indeed the 'fever' took hold and thus the 14 or more vineyards in the county today.

But today Zenk wonders if the industry might be expanding too rapidly, especially because grape prices certainly haven't been expanding. Compared with volatile corn and soybean prices, grapes are relatively stagnant. "Pricing cycles perhaps can happen in this grape industry much like other commodities but grape prices have been much the same ever since we started so I'm wondering if the bloom is coming off for the Minnesota grape industry?" he questioned. His vineyard is up to about 600 vines today and he's looking for an excellent harvest, albeit a bit later than normal.

Mixed opinions from Beth and Dan Elliot whose 624 vines (LaCrescent variety) have now been in the ground for seven years. "I still enjoy the vineyard but my husband thinks there's too much maintenance," said Beth. She's enthused about the outlook for their 2011 harvest. "There's a lot more clusters than last year. Last year we had some hail damage, even some frost. They look a lot better this year."

They too are seeing a slightly later harvest with delivery to Field Stone Winery, Redwood Falls. And whose project has the Elliot vineyard mostly now become. Beth doesn't hesitate, "Me and my daughters (Morgan, Molly and Dana). Dan does the maintenance, the spraying and the fixing of the wire trellises. With all the snow last winter, we had quite a few broken wires."

And are they glad they did their vineyard? She hesitated just a bit but did say that she and her daughters do enjoy their vineyard work, at least most of the time. "It's a good hands-on experience for my daughters and keeps them busy also." Future plans? Perhaps reflecting on the work load and 'flat pricing', Beth jokingly responded, "If we do anything it will probably be dig them up."

North side, Olivia resident Mike Clouse now has a vineyard of about 800 Marquette vines. He too questions if the heat and high humidity of late July will impact quality even though he's thinking a slightly better harvest this year than last. When Clouse got into grapes 6 years ago he admitted, "They're more work and more time than I thought. It's a very intensive crop but most of the time I find it enjoyable."

Thanks to ongoing breeding programs at the University of Minnesota Horticultural Research Center, Hwy 5 just west of Excelsior, there are now several variety choices of cold hardy vines. John Thull, Vineyard Manager, says this 10-acre research station has nearly 10,000 experimental vines with over 2,000 new rootstocks planted each year. It takes time however, like 15 years, for an experimental grape variety to pass muster and finally be realized for commercial usage.

"If it wasn't for our U of MN research program, Minnesota wouldn't have an industry today," said John Maloney, Cannon River Winery, Cannon Falls. Neither would Iowa because most of the genetic stock used in Iowa vineyards stems from the University of Minnesota breeding program. Maloney planted his first vines in 2001, opened his winery in 2004, and now has 30 acres in vines with his winery producing nearly 12,000 gallons of wine each year.

It's the explosion in winery numbers nationwide and wine consumption that tell the story. In 1999, only 2,688 licensed wineries in the U.S. In 2005, there were 4,929 --- an 83% increase in six years! Today the number of wineries nationwide is well over 5,000. In 1999, per capital wine consumption was 2.02 gals. By 2005, the number was 2.37 gals and now slightly in excess of 2.5 gallons per year per person. Today wine imports make up less than 25% of all wine consumed in the U.S.

Can there soon be too many? Not a chance according to Maloney saying that wineries complement each other. "Napa Valley wouldn't be Napa Valley if there were just a handful of wineries. It's a synergistic effect. The more wineries, the more interest, the more promotion and the more rural development be it agr-tourism, wine trails, even new jobs and industry created. I don't think anyone would disagree. At this stage the upside of the Minnesota wine industry is phenomenal."

And is it truly a labor of love? Toni Baumgartner says, "Yes. Though it is labor intensive there is great joy and peace in being in your vineyard."

However strong prices to growers may be necessary to keep the fever spreading. Echo Creek vineyard, the beautiful 20-acre vineyard planted 8 years ago by Sally Milroy on her farmland overlooking the Minnesota River near Belview is now history. All 14,000+ vines were pulled out recently because winery pricing didn't meet what was considered a fair return.

California still has about 80% of all the grapes grown in the United States. New York and Michigan are distant 2nd and 3rd place.