

# Barrels & Oak

Recent Research: Wood Tannin Potential and Wine Quality

## **Roundtable: Natural Winemaking**

Three Advocates Discuss Reasons and Methods

## **Lessons Learned:**

What Jim Verhey Learned from 30+ Years in the Vineyard

Why Mark Greenspan Changed His Mind on Natural Plant Extractives

Mendocino Winemakers Recall Best and Worst Business Decisions



# Lessons Learned

*The more that you read, the more things you will know.  
The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.*  
— Dr. Suess

**OVER THE COURSE OF** our lives, we learn many things. Sometimes we learn the easy way and other times we learn the hard way. Sometimes the best lessons come from making mistakes because those are the lessons that tend to really sink in. Sometimes we change our minds about assumptions we've held. Learning about the life lessons of others can help us avoid mistakes, at least in theory.

The May issue is chock full of wisdom from others who have grown grapes and/or made wine. They generously shared some of their life lessons with us.

Jim Verhey shares lessons he learned in his more than 30 years growing ultra-premium winegrapes in Napa. There are several important lessons, and each could be the subject of its own article. As an example, Verhey notes that as a grower, revenues per acre are more important than dollars per ton.

This issue includes the latest installment of our series on "best" and "worst" business decisions. What makes a good or not-so-good decision often depends on the individual situation. For one winery, the decision not to build an on-site production facility was the best decision. For another, building a production facility was the best decision. For one winery, not starting sooner was the "worst" decision. For another, the best decision was a point-of-sale system it chose for its direct sales. In still another case, the best decision was to finally give up on distributors.

Sometimes we make assumptions about what works and doesn't work and wind up changing our minds. Keeping an open mind and being flexible is commendable. Viticulturist Mark Greenspan changed his mind on a few things over time, from using soil moisture



monitoring to high density planting. This month he explains why he changed his mind about kelp extract.

This month a panel of advocates discuss their pursuit of so-called "natural" winemaking, we have a report on the latest in barrel research, recap a seminar on using new technology to understand how microbes affect wine, we highlight the newest in leaf removal automation, and winemaker Steve Reynolds shares what he learned when he treated grapes with ozone instead of SO<sub>2</sub>.

Jake Lorenzo explains how being in the wine business taught him to be humble, to challenge himself and to strive for a personal vision, but not to be too competitive.

Life is an ongoing learning process.

*Cyril Penn – editor*

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# Insight & Opinion: Lessons I Have Learned

Jim Verhey

**IN THE 30-PLUS YEARS** that I have been growing ultra-premium winegrapes in Napa, I have learned a number of “lessons” that I try to apply in my vineyard every day. Most of these are not my ideas, but I found them to be extremely insightful and applicable; so like all good ideas, I just stole them. I could write a chapter on each one, but I kept them short because I know they worked for me, and I bet they can work for you, too, if you give them a chance and enough time.

*Every growing season is the same...just different.*

– Dave Pina

As farmers, we tend to look to the past when forecasting the future, which is a mistake. We need to stay nimble and play the hand that Mother Nature deals us each year. We know every year is different, yet our winery clients are counting on us to deliver the best quality fruit possible, regardless of the challenges that Mother Nature puts before us.

*Strategy is easy, execution is tough.*

– Jim Verhey

It is not enough to have a good strategy without good execution or vice versa. You must have both. One without the other never works for any length of time.

*The hardest thing in farming is to do the right activity to the right extent at the right time...Therefore, when you mitigate, you compromise so make the right decision every step of the way.*

– Steve McIntyre and Phil Freese

Every year we seem to run out of enough time, money and labor to get everything done correctly and at the right time. A delay of two weeks can be critical in producing ultra-premium winegrapes so we need to figure out how to get everything done at the right time, regardless of what we think is possible.

**James Verhey** is the founder and CEO of Verhey Advisors, a consulting organization that assists individuals in purchasing and establishing ultra-premium vineyard and homesite properties in Napa Valley, and the CEO of Premiere Viticultural Services, which he founded in 2001 in response to the complexities and challenges that growers and wineries were facing in their efforts to produce world-class winegrapes on a consistent and cost-effective basis.

*Keep one eye on the horizon and one eye on tomorrow.*

– Phil Freese

It is important to understand what the future may bring (the horizon), but we also need to deliver the best quality fruit possible this coming year (tomorrow). Therefore we need to make sure we anticipate the challenges and changes we will be facing in the future while still making sure we are producing the best quality fruit today.

*Every drop of water is important to someone.*

– Marilee Talley

We need to understand that when it comes to critical issues such as water, we (residents, growers and wineries) are both part of the problem and part of the solution. It is everyone's problem. So we all need to stop pointing fingers at each other and work together to address—and resolve—the issues. What can we do? We can all do our part, regardless of how small these activities might seem, and we should make these a part of our lives, not just when we are facing a severe drought:

- Growers should focus on water efficiency in order to increase revenues or reduce costs. For example, either reduce water use per ton of grapes produced or increase production while holding water use steady, or both.
- Wineries should focus on water efficiency in order to reduce costs. Increase the number of times the same gallon of water is used.
- Residents, of which I am also one, should conserve or reduce water use in order to reduce expenses: for example, shorter showers, low flow toilets, drought resistant landscaping, etc.

*We irrigate because we can, not because we should.*

– Phil Freese

This is one of those insights that I never really thought about until I heard it. As a grower, I need to:

- Think of irrigation in three dimensions, not two dimensions (like Spock's three-dimensional chess) and move emitters between vines to expand the vine root system of my vineyard below any permanent cover crop.
- Deep irrigate only when necessary, again, to expand the root system.

*Every important activity in the vineyard happens before veraison.*

– Nick Dokoozlian

One of the most critical lessons I have learned over the past 30-plus years is that every important activity in the vineyard happens before veraison. Once veraison occurs, our job, as wine growers, is not to screw it up. That means that we should focus on those critical activities before veraison and then just protect the vines so that they can produce the best quality winegrapes possible at harvest.

*Good communication is over 50 percent of “quality.”*

– Jim Verhey

This is one of the earliest “lessons” I learned and one of the most important. Good communication (with your winery clients, with your workers, with your neighbors, with the community) is the basis on which we can resolve most of the critical issues facing us. It is actually very simple yet incredibly powerful.

*Revenues per acre are more important than dollars per ton.*

– Jim Verhey

It doesn't matter whether a winegrape grower produces 6 to 8 tons of white varieties per acre at \$2,500 per ton or 3 to 4 tons of red varieties per acre at \$5,000 per ton, as long as the expenses per acre are the same. And I would argue that there are fewer weather risks associated with white varieties than there are with red varieties. As someone once said to me: “With white grapes you are picked and paid before the red grapes are even on the harvest schedule.” It's a perspective worth considering.

*As a wine grower, I don't work hard for six to eight months every year just to screw up at harvest.*

– Jim Verhey

As I tell my winery partners every year, I don't pour my heart and soul into my vineyard during the spring and summer and then screw up harvest by delivering less than my best quality fruit. And as I always tell my son, “You must run through the finish line...never slow down before you finish the race.” **WBM**



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