

Wine Spectator

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On Harvest with ... Jay Buoncristiani

Early-spring warmth kick-started what could be a great vintage for Syrah

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During each year's harvest, Wine Spectator asks several different winemakers to share their thoughts on the challenges of the season and the quality of the grapes they're picking. Since there are so many factors that can influence the timing and quality of the harvest, ranging from the region to the variety to the experience or opinion of the particular winemaker, it's often difficult to get a true sense of what's happening in the vineyards. This year, Wine Spectator found winemakers who specialize in certain varieties to sound off on their individual, grape-specific experiences—right in the middle of harvest.

Jay Buoncristiani, along with his brothers Matt, Aaron and Nate, produce Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and red blends under the Buoncristiani label, using grapes from Coombsville, the southern end of Oak Knoll, and Stagecoach Vineyard, all in Napa. The Buoncristiani brothers began their work in a two-car garage in the Brown Valley area of Napa, but have since relocated to a larger facility, to accommodate their growing portfolio. Jay, who spent four years as winemaker for the Hess Collection, is now the winemaker for his family's winery. He is also a consulting winemaker for a few up-and-coming labels in Napa, and he and his wife Kristin have recently begun to produce Petite Sirah, Viognier and vintage Port for their new label, Gemella wines. Buoncristiani spoke to WineSpectator.com just as he was getting the last of his Syrah to barrel.

The Grape: Syrah

The Geography: Napa Valley

A potentially "killer" year for Syrah: "Everything, starting with bloom and set, was early, so what would be a normal growing season was shifted anywhere from two to four weeks earlier than normal. It had been pretty moderate as we approached late August, and then we had two and a half weeks or so of extremely high heat that pushed a major scramble for harvest for many wineries and winemakers, especially in Napa. After that warm period, the weather mellowed out. It was actually awesome weather for great hang time, and for slow and steady ripening. Since Syrah is essentially a late- to mid-season ripener where we are, we were able to cruise right into the first week of October with great weather, and, therefore, awesome complexity and good concentration. Because we did have this slow, even, moderate weather, I think it's going to be a killer year for Syrah—the aromas I'm smelling, and the color intensity. The wine was dark almost within two days after de-stemming. The intensity that we're going to have in these wines is going to be great."

Waiting for the "wrinkle factor": "One of the visual clues that I look for [with ripening], in conjunction with actually tasting the fruit, is what I call the 'wrinkle factor.' You get a slight dimpling of the skin, the turgor in the berries goes



Kristin Buoncristiani

Jay Buoncristiani has seen a "killer" year for his small-lot Syrahs.

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down, and you get this softening effect. For me, that's usually where the flavors are just to the point of it being ready. It happens at a pretty ripe level, so you also see a shift in the fruit profile, going from red fruit and cherry, to my target fruits—blackberry, boysenberry and even blueberry. You can actually taste that change around this 'wrinkle factor.' This year, I saw that transformation happening the beginning of October. We pretty much picked in a seven-day window. We started in the middle of the first week of October and finished in the middle of the second week."

A typical harvest day, or, the secret language of flags: "Typically, the day before, or a few days before the fruit is ready, I get flag-happy. I hang flags everywhere [in the vineyard] ... and almost over-communicate, so [the pickers] know exactly where to stop and start. Typically I'll be there when I can, but if the window is narrower and I'm picking multiple blocks in multiple areas, well, that's what the flags are for. A lot of times we'll pick one block three different times, based on the differences in that block. It can get nutty with small lots, keeping everything separate, waiting for the optimum time to blend all those components together, rather than just kind of throwing it all together in the beginning, even if the juice is from the same vineyard source. I end up with many different lots, and that's the fun side of it, too, blending different clones and different fermentation techniques."

Handling the hiccups: "Of course, there's always fruit that doesn't show up, because the truck breaks down, and you end up crushing at 10 o'clock at night under lights. That's no fun. Or there's the occasional machinery going down, or equipment breaking, and you have to improvise. Basically, when everything's running smoothly, that's when you need to watch your back. But this crush so far has been pretty mellow."

Making sure to let it breathe: "Hand-crafting Syrahs, I've become really aware of the tendency of Syrah to become reduced. I think a lot of winemakers know what I'm talking about here. In fermentation, there's more hydrogen sulfide produced than in other varieties. I think some people might chalk it up to *terrior*, but whether the Syrah is grown in the Rhône or Santa Barbara, the stink smells the same. It's not really *terrior*. In my fermentations, I make sure to incorporate a lot of oxygen during cap management, and I make sure my nutrient levels are sufficient so the yeast won't really struggle. You need to do this anyway, but especially with Syrah, you need to give that tank more aeration than a Cabernet or a Malbec tank. By doing that, you'll get a Syrah that's bright and has a lot of black fruit without any muddled, mushroomy or eggy sulfide aromas in the wine."