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Lamorinda growers begin grape harvest

By Jennifer Wake

Wendy Scheck harvests grapes Oct. 12 at Captain Vineyards in Moraga. Photo Andy Scheck

Surrounded by the rolling Lamorinda hills in the morning glow above the vineyard, the leaves on the vines planted in 2005 beginning to change color, wine club members from Captain Vineyards in Moraga met early on Oct. 12 to participate in the annual harvest and crush of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot grapes.

"Stepping out into the Captain Vineyards' backyard on a beautiful October morning takes your breath away," said Lamorinda Weekly publisher Andy Scheck, who was one of the 10 members invited to the sun-dappled hillside that morning. Participants ranged in age from 22 to over 70. "On a second look you discover the ripe grapes - and a lot of them."

For the past 10 years, regardless of the weather, Sal and Susan Captain have invited club members to experience and celebrate the harvest at their vineyard as well as to observe the crush. They have always had enough members to complete the harvest. "Most of our visitors on that date were harvesting for the first time, except one couple who had been at harvest before," Susan Captain said. "All of our club members have visited Captain Vineyards for wine tasting, as well as purchased wines, plus expressed their interest in participating in a more hands-on experience as an educational endeavor."

Starting at 7 a.m., after getting comfortable and having some coffee, along with a hardy breakfast and orientation, club members picked up a lug (a rectangular bin) and got to the real experience, Captain said.

"The vines at the bottom of the hill were still in the early morning shade, perfect for the harvest," Scheck said. "The bins filled up quickly to about 30 pounds; some harvesters carried them out to the sideline or even all the way up to the top of the hill. Besides the conversations among the harvesters who got to know each other, calls for empty lugs filled the hillside."

With the first truckload harvested, winemaker Sal Captain and his nephew Neal Captain started processing the grapes in the winery's garage. The club members could watch the work or empty lugs into the stemming machine, Scheck said.

Each lug is weighed and documented at crush, Captain explained. "Once we reach the limit, we stop and invite everyone to meet at the deck to start the celebration with lunch and wines of the grapes harvested."

This year, due to the heat and the abundant crop, Captain said they had to stop before completing the harvest. "We continued the next day until all the Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot were totally harvested and crushed." The grapes go through the fermentation process for around a week, depending on the weather, then it is ready to be pressed.

"The harvest and crush is a great opportunity for club members to experience the joy, friendship, cooperation, challenge and hard work that goes into a truly small family-owned and operated winery," said Captain. "That day, we harvested 1,309 Cab Franc and around 1,800 Petit Verdot. We continued the harvest for the next three days. Total Petit Verdot was 5,905 pounds!"

"It was hard work to carry the bins with the grapes up the hill but we had much fun," Scheck said. "It is a nice experience to work at the base of the wine production."

Captain Vineyards is part of the Lamorinda American Viticultural Area - the only one in Contra Costa County. All of the approximately 100 LWGA members are backyard vintners and many have won awards for their wines. Captain Vineyards has been recognized for its dry farming and becoming the first and only green winery in Contra Costa County. For information about Captain Vineyards, visit captainvineyards.com.

Sal Captain, holding the hose, and Neal Captain filling the fermenting tub with fresh crushed Petit Verdot wine. Photo Wendy Scheck

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