

Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

Fall in a pot!



A view through the crape myrtles to the smoke-shaded sun.

Photos Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian

"Truth comes out in wine." ~ Pliny the Elder
"The people who give you their food give you their heart." ~ Cesar Chavez

The fires and smoke have ravaged farms and vineyards throughout Northern California, including my family vineyards in Napa County. The grapes are plump, juicy and ripe. Harvesting would normally be in full swing this month, but, sadly, with so much smoke suffocating fields throughout the region, wineries require red grape samples to be tested for smoke taint.

Smoke taint is concentrated in the skins and during fermentation glycosides break down, releasing the volatile phenols and smoky flavors into the wine. The result tastes like licking an ashtray. The damage is not detectable by looking at or eating a grape. It is only noticeable in the wine. Since white wine isn't barrel-aged nor use skins, white wine doesn't experience this smoke taint.

The largest testing laboratory, ETS in St. Helena, is swamped with results backlogged for weeks or, as some growers are finding

out, over a month away. If a grower or winery is not a client, they won't be able to process samples until November. By then the window for harvesting will be over. The grapes will be dried raisins, not suitable for pressing.

What this means for viticulture in 2020 is that farmers may lose their entire crop and face increased financial hardships as the grapes hang on the vines. There may not be a 2020 red wine vintage as wineries are not allowing deliveries of grapes under contract until the lab results have confirmed an absence of smoke taint. Truth is always evident in the wine.

With the stifling smoke of the past weeks, my normal September gardening tasks have been placed on pause. I am sheltering indoors and suggesting to clients and readers to do the same to maintain health as smoke inhalation peril is increased during COVID-19. But this doesn't mean that I'm avoiding my garden. I've been asked to write another gardening book and am brainstorming in my library. And, I'm bringing the fruits of my labors inside to my kitchen while I chef it up.

"Oh, I can smell the sauce from here," my charity collaborator and friend, Terry in Washington, emailed me when I wrote her that, to mask the smell of smoke, I was making my family's traditional homemade spaghetti sauce with ingredients from my waning garden. My process reminded her of being in her Italian great-grandmother's kitchen.

With the intense sunshine and heat of the summer, tomatoes, onions, garlic, peppers and herbs are filled with flavor. Being Italian, neither my Nonie, mom, nor relatives measured anything. A recipe was handed down throughout the generations by watching, doing, and adding "a little of this, a pinch of that," lots of garlic, and several splashes of wine. We have always cooked by taste, adding spices as needed. Naturally, numerous "malfatti's" or mistakes occurred, which oftentimes, were our greatest successes.

The best cooks that I've ever encountered have also been avid gardeners. Gardeners experience nature using their senses. Gardeners amble through a potager snipping, smelling, nibbling, feeling, and seeing with a profound sensitivity to the innate characteristics of each legume, bloom, or crop.

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A vintage box filled with various basils and herbs makes for easy picking.