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**The Annual Life Cycle of California Vineyards**

**By Benjamin Bicais**

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The annual life cycle of California Vineyards is generally considered to begin in the Fall immediately after the previous year's harvest. During this time, vines lose their leaves and begin to go dormant.

The vineyard manager's primary concerns are pruning the vines and ensuring that they are protected from cold temperatures. Nature helps with the second objective.

Sap from the vine drips towards the roots and creates a natural layer of insulation. Dirt can also be mounded around the roots for added protection.

Depending on the severity of the climate, vineyards are normally pruned sometime within three months after harvest. In very cold climates pruning is delayed to the end of this time frame.

The longer pruning is put off, the later budbreak will occur in the Spring. In colder climates it is beneficial to postpone budbreak so the vine is not adversely affected by a late cold streak.

There are three major pruning techniques: cordon-spur pruning, head-spur pruning and cane pruning.

Cane-pruning usually involves cutting off all but three or four canes. Canes are selected based on the number of buds they produce.

Head-spur pruning is widely used in the Rhone Valley in Southern France and is also popular in warmer wine producing areas in California. This method effectively keeps grapes near the ground and allows them to continue to ripen at night due to the heat retention of the soil. It is generally not used in cooler climates because it can expose grapes to frost-bite.

Cordon-spur pruning is head-spur pruning but with a trellise system in place to train a few canes with a specific number of buds away from the earth. This method of pruning is the most conducive for

machine harvesting.

As temperatures rise, canes begin to grow and budbreak approaches. In California, this usually occurs in April or May. This may be the most hazardous time of the vineyard cycle, as remnants of Winter weather can hurt vines during this vulnerable stage. Flowers begin to form in June.

Grapes begin to develop and by mid–August, the vineyard reaches a time called veraison. This is the time when some grapes begin their color change and is another critical time in the vineyard life cycle. During veraison, the vineyard manager may prune leaves as well as some grape bunches. At this stage, the sugars are undeveloped and grapes still taste sour.

Although tradition dictates that harvest will occur 100 days after flowering, the decision to begin is ultimately the vineyard manager's. A date is selected based on the varietal as well as sugar and acid levels. Testing for the latter two variables is frequent in the final weeks and days.

The weather can dramatically affect grapes at this stage either positively or negatively. Late rains can dilute sugar levels and excessively high temperatures can detrimentally lower acidity. This can make wines either flat and boring or overly alcoholic. The risks of leaving grapes on the vine for too long must be weighed against the need to develop varietal characteristics.

After the vineyard manager accounts for all of the variables and decides that the time is right, harvest begins and the cycle starts over again.

Benjamin Bicais lives in the Napa Valley and is the webmaster of

.

### **Visit The California Wine Country**

**By Robert Fore**

If you're planning a trip to California wine country, there are many resources available that can make your trip fun and enjoyable. Many self–planning guides are available for visitors to complement the wine tasting experience and make for a pleasurable adventure. Family wineries in Sonoma Valley, Napa Valley, Santa Barbara, and Medocino area vineyards, just to name a few, offer a variety of options, such as walking vineyard tours, wine tasting seminars, and retail stores that offer endless selections of wine and wine related products!

A tour of California wine country can be enjoyed by many means, since drinking and driving is not encouraged, visitors can make their way by limo, bus, jeep, carriage, train, plane, and even by hot air balloon! Many tour packages are available and can accommodate any travelers' desires and pocketbooks. Tours of select counties, such as, the wildly popular Sonoma and Napa valley tours, can be combined with lunch or dinner, a mystery theater, mountain biking, or overnight resort and spa accommodations. Vacations can be booked online and be made as unique or as carefree as you'd like.

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Some tour operators even offer surprise packages that combine a little bit of everything for those visitors that desire an element of the unknown! Many packages can also be revised on a whim so you don't miss a thing, and of course, you can always visit again!

To find the tours that interest you most, you may begin by searching by destination, most popular tours, or by what activities various vineyards offer. There are many excellent on-line guides available, with stunning photographs of California vineyards, travel recommendations, and historic information. California wine country is vast and statewide, with different offerings throughout the year. The weather can also be a factor, and you may want to check ahead of time with tour operators or the specific vineyards you would like to visit, as to what they recommend to ensure that your trip is memorable for all the right reasons!

The possibilities are endless and can be as unique as you want. If a romantic getaway is what you're looking for, then possibly a quaint bed and breakfast surrounded by panoramic vineyard views would be just the ticket! It is also possible to fit in other attractions as well, depending on the area you plan on visiting. Many of the most popular tours fill up quickly, so do your research and book well in advance. With whatever amount of time and money you have available, there is a unique experience awaiting you in California wine country!

Rob Forre is a featured writer for

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