

Ampelos Vineyards Harvest Preview: Of Science and Senses

August 14, 2015

4:40 PM MST



View all
14 photos

Ampelos Vineyards is riding high, epitomized by this beautiful white horse, ridden by Ramon Beccara. This display of horsemanship among the vines was a treat to behold at the annual vineyard party for Filos wine club members.

Patricia Decker

Harvest is an exciting time in [wine](#) country. A year of work is crystallized in a few long days, when many crucial decisions will determine the wine in the glass. It's a delicate balancing act, hoping that Mother Nature, science, and logistics will cooperate. Wine grape growers cross their fingers that great weather continues, allowing for slow, even ripening of the grape clusters. They attempt to predict the day of harvest for each of the different varietals in their vineyard, and hope that harvest crews are available at the magical moment, when the science says "Go" and the senses agree.

For [Ampelos Cellars](#), 2015 looks to be an earlier harvest than in previous years. A warm Spring woke up the vines prematurely, and budbreak quickly followed. At the annual vineyard party for their [Filos Wine Club](#) members, [Peter Work](#) declared that harvest looked to be three weeks ahead of schedule for many of the wine grapes. He said, "We have had a warm year from January on. And during flowering, it was warm with a little breeze, which caused a fast pollination and quick

and good fruit set.” Surrounded by a sea of green vines with small, blue-black grapes, Peter explained how he and his wife, Rebecca, know when to pick the different varieties.

“You cannot make wine, you cannot grow grapes just based on numbers, you cannot base it on all your senses either, it’s a combination. We want to know what’s the sugar, what’s the acid, what’s the pH inside those grapes. What we also care about is what our senses can tell us.”

And that is the common sense part of it. Green leaves indicate a healthy vine, with active photosynthesis, which Peter jokingly says, “converts sunlight into red wine”. The grape clusters should be even in color, and ripe throughout, including brown seeds, which are associated with ripe tannins and aroma/flavor development, a sign of physiological ripeness. Sensory evaluation includes crushing a grape in your hand, and popping a grape into your mouth, to see if it truly is sweet and concentrated. Then, the science comes into play, and samples are taken back to the lab, where measurements include brix (sugar content), acid, and pH. For Peter, the sugar content needs to be 24-26 Brix for the style of wine that he makes.



Patricia Decker

Ampelos Vineyards has a lot going for it. Thoughtful planning from the start has helped with some of the challenges involved in winemaking. The vines were planted east to west, to maximize exposure to the sun. The **Sta. Rita Hills** climate is mild, with ocean breezes cooling the clusters, which makes for a kind of Goldilocks moment, not too hot, not too cold, just right. **Organic and biodynamic** farming brings a balance to the vineyard, no pesticides or commercial fertilizers here; instead, a compost heap, quartz crystals, a cow horn preparation, and cover crops, all in conjunction with the cycles of the moon, nurture the ecosystem. In the midst of a severe drought, the Works have two wells onsite that are in very good shape, providing the necessary water for the vines.

Seven **Pinot Noir** clones were planted, which, according to Peter, are the “spice rack” for the Pinot wines, “they are like the different instruments in a symphony orchestra, they work together, there is a synergy going on”. For example, he explains to Filos Club members standing among the vines in Block 11, “Clone 2A gives us nice, light structure, there’s a lot of floral component, like roses”. While Ampelos is keenly focused on Pinot, with almost 17 acres planted to the seven clones, they also have embraced Syrah and Grenache, very different in this cool climate incarnation.

During harvest, small batches of grapes are gently processed, after spending 24 hours in a cold room to avoid the use of dry ice. Only naturally occurring wild yeast is used for fermentation. **Pinot Noir** sees extended maceration, where the grape skins remain in contact with the juice for several days, which extracts flavor and tannin for a more structured, intense wine. Minimal, natural winemaking coaxes the purest expression from each varietal. Aged in oak barrels, some new, many neutral, the wines are allowed to evolve, released only when they are ready to drink.

In the 16 years since the Works purchased this land for their vineyard retirement project, Ampelos

has accomplished much. **Ampelos Cellars** is the first in the nation to be certified Organic, Biodynamic, and **Sustainability in Practice (SIP)**. In addition to their own wines, Ampelos works alongside actor Kurt Russell, producing his Gogi brand of wines. And now, whispers of a new alliance abound, a possible partnership with a producer from **Burgundy**, Pinot's homeland.

These elegant wines weave a spell, intoxicatingly intense in their aromas and flavors, enchanting all who taste the alchemy of **Ampelos wine**. As winemakers are fond of saying, great wine is made in the vineyard, and all the care and attention to detail has paid off for Ampelos, which produces a stellar lineup of wine. Sensuous and stunning in the glass, these are limited release bottlings, ranging in price from \$25-45 a bottle, only available for **purchase online** or through their **Lompoc Ghetto tasting room**.

Peter and Rebecca Work have a different definition of retirement, to do what you love, and Ampelos is proof, a labor of love in the glass.



Patricia Decker

Burbank Wine Shopping Examiner