Notes of a Winemaker

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Winemakers believe that the land speaks to them of possibilities. A winemaker's goal is to express those possibilities, to capture the best of what that land has to offer. Historically, success was perceived to be a matter of givens: a great site, a great year, or a great wine. Today it is possible (or we've fooled ourselves into believing it's possible) to take considerably more control of the outcome in both the vineyard and the winery.

In France, people speak about *terroir* when referring to great wines. That word, however, has no literal English translation. In the U.S., most people use the term interchangeably with "ground," meaning the location where the vineyard is planted. When one thinks of the things that make up *terroir*, one realizes that it is not exclusively about the land. It is, indeed, a concept embracing the site—the location where the vineyard is planted—and all of the criteria that come with that location, including the soil, the slope, the exposure, the climate (macro-, meso-, and micro-). The idea of *terroir*, however, is much more than that. It focuses also on the human factors associated with the site, and the rearing of the grapes, and the making of the wine. Some one person or some team of people make important decisions, including those about where to plant—that is, in what soil type(s), how steep, how rocky. At Harlan Estate, for example, the soils are of two distinct types. The hills on the east side are volcanic in nature. The slopes on the west are sedimentary. Those conditions factor into all of the decisions about which grapes to plant, how to plant them, and so on. In addition, the distinct soil types are part of the character of this land and thus part of what we want the fruit to reflect. Those differences, we feel, add great complexity to the wine.

The human factors regarding vinification decisions play an equally important role. What is the right quantity of fruit to have on each vine? When is the best time to harvest the grapes? What is the best temperature to ferment for that particular lot of grapes? How long should the wine rest in tanks in contact with the grape skins? How long should the wine age in barrels? A wine grower's goal is to allow the wine to become an expression of where those grapes are grown. That expression, however, is one that is guided through the eyes of the team making the decisions along the way. There is no formula for success, and there is no definitive "right way." It is all a matter of interpretation based on a combination of science, art, and experience. The expression of the wine then becomes an expression of the *terroir*, which encompasses the site as well as the decisions made by those interpreting it.

As we learn to understand the vineyard, this process continues to evolve. From the outset, Harlan Estate has held fast to a philosophy of small vines, more vines per acre, and lower yields per vine. With each revision, with each addition, we've adhered to our original master plan, which involves managing the proper stress at the appropriate place and time to produce the fruit of the greatest character and quality. The challenge, particularly with a hillside vineyard, becomes how to find a way to express that site, which is often quite powerful, and how to tame that power in an elegant way. That solution comes not from the site, but from all the decisions that go into growing the grapes and making the wine. To encourage the vines to produce fruit that best expresses the character of the land, the agricultural and vinicultural teams of Harlan Estate work closely together on the myriad decisions that go into the cultivation and farming of the grapes: from the preparation of the land and the layout of the blocks to the selection of the varieties, the choice of clones, when to harvest, and much, much more.

What may seem cutting-edge in viticulture and vinification today will be viewed as traditional tomorrow. When we began our vineyard planting in the mid-1980s, the norm for vineyard spacing was eight feet by twelve feet, yielding a density of 454 vines per acre (1,120 vines per hectare). We, however, wanted to plant more densely than that to lower the yield per vine. We planted approximately 800 vines per acre—nearly double the norm. When we planted the next phase of our vineyard in the 1990s, we more than doubled the original density again and yielded 2,212 vines per acre (5,500 vines per hectare). Now we realize that we can better utilize the space between the vines, while at the same time help to relieve some of the burden and excess stress of the vines to either side. By today's standards, yesterday's tight spacing seems conservative.

In the winery in the mid-1980s, it was exceptional to have dual temperature control for fermentation tanks and aging barrels; today, these are norms. So, too, our early use of small tanks, which permit better temperature control and thus a better relationship of skin to juice in extraction. Vinification practices continue to grow ever more technical, but they remain merely tools that can help us achieve our goals. The better the winemaker's grasp of the available tools and the greater his capability to interpret each vintage, the better equipped he is to bring out the character of the site.

Winemakers create what we create one year at a time. We assess what's given each vintage, attempt to comprehend the particular challenges and potentials, and choose the best tools to overcome the challenges and maximize the potentials. There is no art without the mastery of technique and craft, which can evolve only through multiple experiences and many vintages. Training to produce a work of art is different from training simply to make wine, and the university curriculum does not approach winemaking in this way. Our objective is to continue to learn, to continue to improve, and to pass on to the next generation our philosophy, standards, and knowledge—seamlessly. We feel the best way to accomplish this is through a mentor-protégé relationship. Having youth on our team is imperative. It wasn't so long ago that apprenticeship was common. A young person studied a craft from a master, perfected it, and went on to make it his life's work. This method may not confer artistry, but it raises the would-be artist to the highest level of his potential, and sometimes reveals the presence (or absence) of a gift.

For winemakers, every year is unique. We follow weather very closely, both short- and long-range forecasts. We often receive rainfall only during the winter months, when the vines are dormant; the rainfall during spring can vary from nothing to substantial. The speed at which the ground moisture dissipates dictates the onset of irrigation. There are developmental stages of vine growth that, depending on the weather each year, may perform better or worse. After bud break we watch for any impending frost that may harm the tender new shoot growth. We watch the onset of each growing season carefully to monitor the speed and vigor with which the shoots begin to grow.

As the season progresses we continue to monitor the weather, especially in the days just before flowering. At the time of flowering, normally sometime in late May or early June, we achieve the best results—the most uniform berry setting—if we have a constant moderate temperature (around seventy to seventy-five degrees), no wind, adequate ground moisture, good vine health status, and no rainfall or excessive heat. The next phenological hurdle is *véraison*, or color change, which

takes place in mid-summer. It requires a set of circumstances similar to flowering, but at a slightly warmer ideal temperature. (Around eighty to eighty-five degrees works well because it tends to inspire faster and more uniform completion.) These phenological stages require a great deal of energy from the vines, and we must ensure that they go into these stages in good health.

Weather awareness is ongoing throughout the season. Projected rain and temperatures for day and night, for example, determine how we irrigate, among other things. If the usual night-cooling effect doesn't occur, as sometimes happens, that can affect the pace of ripening. We closely monitor the amount of irrigation in the period between berry set and *véraison* because the amount of water the vines receive affects the berry size achieved at the end of the season, as well as the vine health status late in the year as the grapes are reaching their optimal maturity. The goal during the ripening period is to have a slow increase of sugars with flavors matching, and not too much sugar: in other words, to get the desired balance of tannins and flavor and mouth feel with acceptable sugars, and fruit in good condition as well.

As we walk through the vineyard and taste the grapes over the course of the growing season, we identify differences. The variations help us determine the vinification protocol: how to ferment, at what temperature, in what type of vessel, how much and how often to pump over. Every decision we make has to do with extraction, with how much we want to draw out of the grapes. We select the areas in the vineyard that are at their optimum maturity, harvest them, bring them in, treat them separately in small batches for greater control, and make a wine from the selection that is best suited to the character of that lot. We handle the grapes as gently as possible, trying not to touch the skins, to leave them as intact as possible. Picked by hand into small boxes, spread out on a belt conveyor and hand-sorted by a team of fifteen to twenty, the grape clusters are gently de-stalked. Then the individual berries are placed onto another conveyor for a second hand-sorting. A vibrating machine with slots removes any remaining stem pieces and also any raisins, berries that are too small, and green berries that never ripened.

Once the sorting is complete, another conveyor ferries the grapes to the top of the tank. After the tank is filled, we keep it cold, less than forty degrees, for five to seven days. (Cold maceration, or cold skin contact, is a Burgundian technique that fixes the color and develops an extraction of the fruit qualities that are in the skins in absence of alcohol.) Then we warm up the tank to begin fermentation. A screen inside each tank permits us to draw off the liquid, pump it up to the top, and sprinkle it gently over the top without disturbing the skins. Each lot has an optimal fermentation temperature. If the tannins are great and we want great extraction, we want to take the temperature up to a limit; the limit depends on the size and material (stainless steel or oak) of the tank and how much control we think we'll have over fermentation.

As the vines get older, their characteristic power becomes more elegant. Working with older vines is very different from working with younger vines. It's not possible fully to understand a place and its potential in one year, or in ten, or in one lifetime. How many chances does a vintner get to learn about a site one vintage at a time? And how many vintages does it take to develop a history of experience that you can use as a foundation for interpolation or artistic expression or methodology to bring out the best character of a site? I've worked with this land for more than twenty years now, and I feel that it is truly just the beginning.