

January 25, 2010

ATP Version

2009 HARVEST, MONTE BELLO WINERY

Every growing season is unique. In 2009, following a long, cold winter, a cool spring delayed fruit set by a month. We, like any farmer, began to worry. But a heat wave—unusual in mid-May—pushed the zinfandel vines ahead, and we started to relax. Summer and fall in Napa and Sonoma were not especially warm. Except for a few intensely hot days at the end of August, and again in mid-September, temperatures overall were below average, accompanied by fog and cool nights. As summer progressed, it became clear that the zinfandel harvest would be ten days to two weeks behind schedule.

In Monte Bello's cool climate, a two-week delay of harvest could spell disaster—another excuse to worry. The Bordeaux varieties, however, surged forward, extending their shoots a few inches each day, and pushing out new leaves. Cool, wet weather returned just at bloom, interfering with set, cutting yields, but summer brought a particularly strong inversion layer that kept nights atypically warm and days warmer still. Despite a late start, the vines caught up. Monte Bello was on schedule.

The zinfandel harvest began September 4, when our new, very gentle receiving system was in the final stages of installation. When the fresh welds cooled, and the equipment was washed, we celebrated with champagne as we crushed Beni Dusi's Paso Robles grapes. With each passing day, the new equipment was further fine-tuned. By the end of the week, it was working perfectly.

Automatic sorting machinery—designed to process small whole berries—lay idle for three weeks while we fully crushed the larger, thin-skinned zinfandel. It was put to use September 23rd, with the first Monte Bello cabernet. The learning curve was steep. After elimination of stem fragments (called "jacks") and tiny green shot berries, the clean whole

berries from 2.7 tons of fresh grapes were pumped into the fermentor. It had taken three hours.

We next used this equipment on September 27th for the small amount of Lytton Springs Syrah. It felt like the hottest day of the year. After eight painful hours of struggling to move these thin skinned grapes through the sorter in the intense heat, we finally got all fifteen tons into three small fermentors. The crush pad was a disaster. Juice, stems, and grapes were splattered everywhere. Once the sun had gone down and temperatures cooled, we cleaned the area and equipment and went on to de-stem and sort the cabernet harvested that day on Monte Bello. We learned a painful lesson: the sorting equipment had limits as to which varietals it could handle. For the remainder of vintage, we used the new equipment only for cabernet, merlot, and petit verdot.

All but one of the zinfandel vineyards were safely in by October 1st, and quality looked superb. We were harvesting Monte Bello parcel by parcel, and had just begun to relax when a new weather report reached us. Satellite photos showed a huge storm heading our way. Again, time to worry—except that those warm nights on Monte Bello were ripening the vineyards ahead of schedule. Thanks to the advance warning, we picked through the weekend, and with the help of our Sonoma vineyard crew on Monday, October 12th the last of the Monte Bello was brought in as the rain began. The storm was the tail of a typhoon that had struck Japan the previous week; it dropped a record six inches on northern California. Aside from causing hillside erosion, the storm also delayed pressing by two days. Because our presses are on the storm side of the winery, the heavy rains, and winds of up to eighty-five miles an hour, closed them down. The last tanks were pressed October 21st.

The zinfandels' natural secondary fermentations were slow to start, and took as long as eight weeks to finish. For the first time in years, we postponed zinfandel assemblage as we waited for the components to settle down. The Monte Bello lots had no difficulty starting malolactic; a few even started during primary fermentation. Most began in tank, and finished in barrel. The first Monte Bello assemblage is set for February 2nd and 3rd. Early tasting of individual lots and informal blends shows exceptional quality. The wines have intense color, dark

fruit, and firm, balanced tannins. We expect the 2009 Monte Bello to stand with the great wines of the world in what—in many regions—looks to be a great vintage.