

# Crush Course in Winemaking

C O R K Y W A L S H

**W**e're not talking inert here, we're talking live, writhing hose. One-inch transfer hose, two-inch crusher hose, electric hose, water hose, steam cleaner hose. Hose possessed of an uncanny ability to snag itself in Tru-Flo tank valves, wedge itself between barrels and, lacking anything to engage, snarling itself into Rubik's Cube contortions for sheer spite. You want winemaking? Forget the enologist, he'll just confuse you. Talk to the hosedragger.

Hosedraggers love the fall crush at the winery. After a dormant summer of piddly cellar work, they rise — phoenix-like — to embrace the sun. It's easy to spot the hosedragger: he's got his shirt off. The enologist? He's the worried guy with the refractometer glued to his eye. The refractometer measures density of liquid, or the amount of sugar in the juice. Sugar is important because it indicates how rich or complex the wine will be. The enologist is calculating a) if he can make a \$5 or \$10 bottle of wine, so he can b) pay off the loan he took out to buy the grapes in the first place.

Theoretically, these problems are circumvented if he's grown the grapes himself, but most wineries buy some percentage of their output from other vineyards. A disastrously low sugar content can result in some last-minute decisions ("Let's make a Pinot Noir Blanc this year") and unwanted legal hassles with the grower. Besides this, the enologist has to worry about yeast cultures, labor shortages and ominous rain clouds, so it's really no wonder he'll snap like a gator when you offer the well-worn witticism about stomping grapes with your feet.

Talk to the hosedragger instead. He's the one whose pale body is crusted with dried grape skins because he forgot to strap down the crusher hose, which then jumped like a freebasing anaconda, spewing glop over all concerned. He'll be embarrassed by this gaffe and will offer you a sample of fresh juice.

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You'll notice its not Welch's, but a heavenly nectar, thick and rich, full of particulate matter and the ever-present bee. But be quick to imbibe; by tomorrow, the sugar begins turning to alcohol, and the nectar will become a fetid mess called the *must*.

White wine grapes pass directly from the crusher (small machine) to the press (big machine), which retains the skins and then squeezes out the remaining juice. White wine *must* is fairly benign, requiring some minor tinkering by the enologist with acid levels and a refining procedure known to hosedraggers as the Horror of Bentonite, before popping up on your store shelf in four or five months.

The exception, of course, is chardonnay, or any burgundy style (barrel-fermented) white, which enjoys as much skin contact and aging as the enologist sees fit. The reds, however are another matter.

**R**ed wine *must* seethe in the tank while the alcohol extracts color from the skins and wild yeast cultures fight for power. The *must* is treated with metabisulfite to subdue the unruly yeasts, then inoculated with an approved culture that comes in mysterious glass tubes from someplace only enologists know about. The fermentation of sugar to alcohol releases massive amounts of carbon dioxide, which pushes the skins to the top of the tank, where they dry out and become a potential source of spoilage known as the *cap*.

Enter the hosedragger, whose job it is to pump over the *must* and saturate the *cap* without inhaling the amount of carbon dioxide required to make him fall off his ladder.

When the fermentation subsides, the *must* must be transferred to the press. This is accomplished with a special tool known as "the five-gallon bucket from Orchard Supply." First, the juice is pumped out, leaving a quivering mountain of pulp steaming with carbon dioxide. The hosedragger hacks his way through this — an experience not unlike having your nose flushed with battery acid — until he can wriggle in and start handing out buckets of pulp.

A few days of pressing red wine and that cellar starts looking mighty cozy.

When the final bucket has been pressed, the crush is over for another year. The leaves are turning now; the wine murmurs in its barrels. Enologist and hosedragger



**NOT A HOSEDRAGGER.** Winemaker Bob Roudon arranges his freshly picked estate chardonnay grape just minutes before their first crush. For a lighter look at the process, read this page.

share a bottle. "Maybe next year," says the enologist, "we can afford a *must* pump." The hosedragger considers this: a *must* pump...with a

*four-inch hose....* and 10-pound fittings on each end! He prys a fruit fly from a facial cavity. Maybe next year he'll become an enologist. ■