

# How Steinbeck vineyards grows great grapes

By Fred Strong  
The Daily Press

Yes, he was asked. No, Howie Steinbeck, to the best of his knowledge, is not related to the author John Steinbeck. However, his grandparents were contemporaries of the author here in San Luis Obispo County while Steinbeck inhabited the county to the north. The home at Steinbeck Vineyards was built by them in 1923.

The vineyard planting began in 1987, in stages, right up to the present. Steinbeck purchased the ranch from his grandmother in 1971 while he was still working for Western Farm Service, a major supplier of agricultural chemicals.

However, in 1978 he made a deal with Gary Eberle to work the Eberle vineyards. He did large

plantings of those vineyards in late 1978 continuing through the early '80s. He planted 30 of his own acres in Chardonnay and Cabernet in 1987 and retired from Western Farm Service in 1989.

By 1989 he had 61 acres planted on his own ranch: 40 acres of Cabernet and 31 acres of Chardonnay. He also became a major partner in the Eberle vineyards and a minor partner in the winery.

Steinbeck vineyards are acknowledged to be one of the finest vineyards in this appellation. So, how does Steinbeck do it?

He says immediately after harvest he takes soil and leaf samples and tests them to find out what the chemical composition is. He does a heavy irrigation for an Autumn root flush and adds nutrients according to the test

results of the soil and leaf samples.

During the irrigation he uses a neutron probe to a depth of seven feet to determine the hydrogen atoms present in each foot of soil depth and adjusts the irrigation accordingly. Steinbeck says he may add gypsum because of the high sodium salt levels in local well water. The gypsum changes the sodium charge and allows it to leach out.

Then he takes a week of vacation time. By that time the vinyardist is VERY tired.

Upon returning he uses herbicide, before the leaves drop, and uses sprinkler irrigation the same night to get the herbicide into the soil.

He then watches for the first frost which causes the vines to go dormant.

If they are dormant by De-

ember 15 he has his contracted laborers begin the pruning, which continues through March 15. The vines he wants to leaf the latest are pruned the latest.

The Chardonnay is spur pruned down to two buds per spur. He also leaves only seven spurs on each side of the stake.

The Cabernet is cane pruned. The number of canes per vine varies between four and six depending on the vigor of the field. With an old field he lets the canes keep a four to six inch spacing between canes.

During early winter he plants a cover crop of barley on the slopes of the fields to prevent erosion during the rainy season. Barley only takes nourishment from the top 12 inches of soil and does not deplete nourishment for the vines

whose roots are much deeper.

The cover crop is mowed just before bud break so that the vineyard isn't too cool.

After bud break he watches for a late frost and uses frost protection in the form of sprinklers. Wind machines are not used in this area because our inversion layer is too high for them to do any good. (Edna Valley and areas to the south do use some wind machines.)

When the shoots are 3 - 6 inches long he puts the first sulfur on. He uses several applications 7 - 14 days apart. He switches to a 21 day type sulfur product after the first three applications or when the shoots are 21 inches long. The sulfur applications end in July, if no worms, leaf hoppers or mites begin an infestation.

However, he notes, mildew is the

Continued on page 7

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