

crush me a grape



crush



Volunteers take part in October crush, when grapes journey from vine to wine. | by Teri Citterman

On a crisp fall morning, cars loaded with volunteers trickle into the parking lot of a large concrete warehouse in Woodinville. Like the understated entrance to a speakeasy, a small, simple sign on the window whispers “DeLille Cellars.” This is the winery’s crush facility. Inside, people mill about in juice-stained jeans amidst a couple million dollars’ worth of fine wine. Greg Lill, the co-owner, describes the day as a “genesis of wine.” “People are excited because they are touching the grapes that will soon become an expensive bottle of wine,” says Lill. “There’s a silent reverence about what we’re about to do.”

The majority of DeLille grapes come from two vineyards in the Red Mountain viticultural area near Tri-Cities—Chaleur Estate and Grand Ciel, the latter of which is 50 percent owned by DeLille. With these grapes, winemaker Chris Jpchurch has consistently produced award-winning wines for the label, whose latest honors are scores of 95-plus from *Wine Advocate’s* Robert Parker for the 2002 and 2003 Chaleur Estate Reds, each a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, and petit verdot.

No more than three hours pass from the time the grapes are picked in the Eastern Washington vineyards to the time they arrive at DeLille for crushing. The process is a long way from the image of Lucy Ricardo in her Italian skirt and kerchief stomping barefoot in a

tub full of grapes. Today there are two ways to crush grapes: manually and mechanically. DeLille’s grapes are hand-picked and hand-sorted—which requires a lot of hands. For its 15th vintage, DeLille will crush about 25 times and rotate through a list of more than 300 volunteers, among them retirees, restaurant and wine enthusiasts, and any interested party with a little free time. Even aspiring winemakers sometimes start out as volunteers. Lance Baer of Baer Winery “volunteered for a couple of years; then we hired him as our cellar rat for about three or four years,” said Lill. “Then he started making wine and now owns his own winery in Woodinville.”

The crush process begins with volunteers sorting 35-pound lugs, or stackable plastic bins that each hold 50 clusters of grapes. They place the clusters on the shaker-sorter, a vibrating stainless-steel, rectangular table that shakes the dirt and debris from the grapes, which fall through small slits in the table. This makes it easy for the next group to pull off leaves or pluck out the occasional spider. “It’s kind of like a Cracker Jack box,” says Lill. “Every year you wonder what trinkets or toys you might find.” In past seasons, they’ve found everything from a dead rattlesnake to a lady’s watch.

Next, on the destemmer machine, each cluster settles into a two-foot wide plastic mesh conveyor with square holes and travels up a 30-

CRUSH COURSE



DeLille Cellars

Contact DeLille Cellars to volunteer for October crush or to reserve space at Paulée de Woodinville 2007 (tickets for this year’s black-tie event on October 29, with dinner prepared by Wild Ginger executive chef Nathan Uy, went for \$268 and sold out). (425-489-0544; contact@delillecellars.com).

Here are a few other Woodinville wineries that enlist volunteers:

Betz Family Cellars

425-861-9823
www.betzfamilywinery.com

Matthews Cellars

425-487-9810
www.matthewscellars.com

DiStefano Winery

425-487-1648
www.distefanowinery.com

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degree angled ramp into a series of five rotating fingers. The fingers gently drag the berry clusters back and forth against a grate, and the grapes fall through the holes and roll out like marbles onto a slow-moving belt. The next assembly of volunteers performs what Lill calls the "12-hand massage." "They touch and feel each berry for stems, leaves, over-ripeness [too soft], under-ripeness [too hard], or raisins," he explains, "and pull out everything that doesn't look or feel like a flawless grape."

When nothing remains but perfect specimens, the grapes are fed into the crusher, which is less of a crusher and more of a breaker. The berry falls into two wheels that look like rotary cogs about a quarter-inch apart, and is squeezed just until the skin breaks.

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Finally the berry falls into the fermenter, which looks like a big vat of pink soup. For the next two weeks the berry soup will be gently mixed and punched down with a stainless-steel paddle twice a day, absorbing the hue of the skins. In many wineries, this process is done mechanically, but at DeLille and other artisan wineries, it is done by hand. "At the end of the two weeks, we have a very purple soup with some skins mixed in. The bottom of the vat resembles the bottom of a French press coffee pot with all the seeds, skins, and pulp collected on its floor," says Lill.

Then the juice is ready for aging in the barrel. Eventually the wine is bottled—volunteers are also needed for bottling the first and third weeks of June—and then released about two and a half years later. DeLille uses 100 percent new French oak barrels and produces Bordeaux- and Rhone-style blends using dark red fruit like syrah, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and grenache.

Now the work is done, and the 2006 crush is a memory. But what's a harvest without a culminating celebration? DeLille hosts Paulée de Woodinville—an idea borrowed from Burgundy's Paulée de Meursault, a legendary vintners' luncheon—where wine makers reach into their private cellars and pour world-class vintages like first-growth Bordeaux and California cult wines. Being present at the creation of a fine wine is its own reward, but celebrating with the finished product is a pleasure unsurpassed. 🌸