One of the most talked about issues this season is the thing called ‘Hang Time’. It seems like every grower I’ve talked to since harvest mentioned it at some point in our conversation. Several growers have commented that they wanted to know anything the Commission can do about this issue. The goal of this column is to briefly outline the topic, tell you where you can go to get more information, and let you know what the Commission is going to do to address it. Some of the information comes from NotRidado’s Presidential Message in the November issue of the Allied Grower Growers Newsletter (www.alliedgrowersgrapegrowers.org) with the wonderful title: G Vĩnh Men, Losers, Hang-Time and Vintage Dating” and also from a column that appears in the November newsletter of the California Association of Winegrape Growers (www.cawg.org).

Over the past few years many wineries have been asking growers to leave grapes on the vine longer and longer in order to allow them to reach fuller flavors and achieve optimum ripeness, thus the term ‘hang time’. Traditionally, growers and wineries have used objective measures, such as Brix, to determine harvest dates, contract standards and proper compensation. Unfortunately, many of the measures associated with determining the length of hang time, such as ‘flavors’, are more subjective, based on little or no research, and therefore ripe for debate, so to speak. Thrown in the fact that long hang time is associated with fruit dehydration (loss of weight) and you have the makings for lots of arguments, misunderstandings, and frustrated growers.

Furthermore, the unusual growing season of 2004 seems to have brought the hang time issue to the front burner. Red and white varieties were ready to harvest at the same time causing backups at the winery and winery capacities were not able to process the grapes in a timely manner. This resulted in longer hang times in many vineyards, whether wanted or not. I am sure many growers were wondering whether they were being asked to delay their harvest for legitimate reasons related to wine quality or simply because the winery could not handle the grapes. In either case, they knew that longer hang times meant reduced tonnage and subsequent lower returns.

The LWWC Research Committee devoted a significant amount of time at their November meeting discussing this issue. It was clear that every member considered this a very serious issue, that there were important points to consider from both the grower and winery perspective, and that we need to be careful and not just point fingers at the other side and say it is all their fault. The Committee decided the first thing to do was to find out what is known about hang time and its effects on flavor, ripeness, wine quality, and the long term effects on vine health, particularly for vineyards that are also being managed using deficit irrigation. Initial inquiries have determined that quite a bit is already being done regarding accumulating known information on hang time. For example, the California Association of Winegrape Growers (CAWG) Board of Directors has asked its staff to seek a follow up meeting of a subcommittee of the Wine Institute’s Technical Issues Committee and CAWG representatives to re-convene discussions that were initiated last February on the topic of grape maturity and hang time. The Board also voted to sponsor regional Smart Market workshops to facilitate grower education about business practices associated with contracts and working with wineries to meet clearly spelled out expectations and agreements for compensation. And finally, CAWG has contracted with Stan Grant, Progressive Viticulture, to do a literature review on this issue. His goal is to provide CAWG with a preliminary report by the first of February with a summation of research done to date, gaps in knowledge and a suggested list of projects for future research. Furthermore, some wineries are doing field trials to gather data on the relationships between hang time, ripeness, flavors, wine quality and vine health. Also, there are industry meetings being held over the next few months designed to inform growers about the current knowledge on the issue and generate public dialogue.

At the moment it appears the most important thing LWWC can do on this issue is to find out what is known and what is being done by other groups to answer the unknowns. By this coming February, the Research Committee will amend the situation and if it is clear there are some important unanswered questions for Lodi growers that can be dealt with locally, actions will then be taken to answer these questions, either through literature searches, field trials or both.

In the meantime there are two meetings to bring to your attention. The first is a ‘Hang Time’ session sponsored by the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association on January 11th from 1-5pm at the Napa Home in St. Helena. The panel will include Drs. Andy Walker, Richard Smart, Linda Bissen, Nick Dookoalian, and Rob Steinbauer. The event costs $75 for non-members. Call 707-994-8311 to sign up.

The second meeting is a break out session at the Unified Wine & Grape Symposium at the Sacramento Convention Center Wednesday January 26th from 2-4 pm. The title of the session is “Evolving Contract Issues: Beyond Brix”. In conclusion, from the growers perspective, if the way the wineries are going to do business in the future is to insist upon longer hang times, then either a regulatory or contractual solution to needs to be found to compensate growers for the lost tonnage. At the yields and prices currently being paid for high Brix grapes it will make it difficult if not impossible for most growers to survive.

If you have further questions and concerns on this issue do not hesitate to contact myself or Chris Storm at the Commission’s office.
Lodi-woodbridge winegrape commission

Growing Profile: Joe Valente

Joe Valente's active role in the FFA as a High School student has rubbed off on his upper American offspring who are currently featured in the book “California Vineyards and Wildlife Habitats” (California Association of Winegrowers) and one of Amy's FFA project was one of the feature articles. In 1999 Amy needed to come up with an FFA project, so Joe suggested monitoring the random wood duck boxes. Apparently, one of the employees at Kautz Farms decided to build a few wood duck boxes next to place around the ranches to support the employee's hunting hobby. After a couple of years, the employee left the company leaving behind the boxes and an increasing wood duck population. Amy and Joe decided to incorporate the wood duck boxes into her FFA project. Since then, Joe and his family have built and placed more than 50 wood duck boxes around the vineyard. In 2003, Lodi Woodbridge Winegrape Commission Research Committee, of which Joe is also a member, the vineyard was planted in 2004 in a total of 47,500 square feet. The Valentes monitor all 50 boxes up to 9 times during the monitoring season.

During the 2004 season, the Valentes monitored the 50 boxes from March to July and recorded that of the 639 eggs laid, 427 hatched. Each monitoring outing includes a ladder, clipboard and an average there are 15 eggs per box and the Valentes have never been to a farm” says Joe, who is trying his best to change that, assuming the role of full vineyard manager, Kautz Farms had just hired Claudia, his wife of 25 years. That March the Tokay HS agriculture advisory board and was instrumental in reviewing vines for balance in a measurable way

Joe, as a 4H leader helps kids age 8-18 with farming skills. The 17 or so 4H'ers build bird houses and feeders and learn wood working safety skills. Joe also engages many high school classes about farming and agriculture, but he most recently hosted on his dairy farm, a field trip of 15-20 mori who were impressed with the grapes. Joe has always been a very open minded farmer who, in his own words, takes an open-minded approach to farming and encourages others to do the same. Joe also loves the wine industry, its schools, winegrowing, and the wildlife in and around the vineyards he manages.

Joe Valente has been a part of the Lodi community since he was born and raised in the Tokay High School area. He was raised on a wheat, tomatoes and alfalfa farm near Lodii and attended Tokay High School where he took an active role in the Future Farmers of America (FFA). After graduating from Tokay High School, he obtained his AA degree in plant science. Within two months after graduating from Delta College, Joe got his first post-college job at Kautz Farms as an assistant vineyard manager and married Claudia, his wife of 25 years. That year a bit of cover crop seed is saved from the vineyard and Joe started experimenting with minimal pruning back in the early 2000's. He noticed that a winemaker visits a minimally pruned vineyard. Before the visit, the winemaker likes the wine quality, but after the vineyard visit, the winemaker wants nothing to do with the vineyard and there are even some who recommend not even pruning the vines in this industry based solely on perceptions that are rarely justified. Joe's favorite trellis system is the horizontal arm with a 36 inch arm, which Joe employs on 80-90% of his vineyard average. This allows the fruit zone to be spread out, while providing a balanced vine system.

Joe Valente is a busy man. Whether he is tending to 50 wood duck nest boxes, helping 4H'ers learn wood working skills, teaching the Tokay High School agriculture classes or giving vineyard tours to local or national groups of winemakers interested in growing wine grapes. Joe Valente remains the easy going farmer who will try just about anything to produce high quality wines.

The early finish to the 2004 season makes last year’s vintage seem a fairly distant memory. Some difficult times always seem to be fading into history, but even though the grape glut appears past, the “road has yet to begin rising” to meet the average grower. With hopes of better prices there is also hope for better weather this year, and the prayers of every grape grower for a good vintage season. That is far from the reality of the current grape market. The 2004 season was unprecedented in this regard. The 2005 season appears very promising, with the average rainfall of 34 inches and a warmer, drier summer. The total fruit set was high, with a total yield of 200 tons per acre. The Valentes have been monitoring the vineyard since 1994, and have observed that the average yield is 15 tons per acre. They have also observed that the vineyard is in good condition, with no significant pest or disease problems. The yield this year is expected to be around 20 tons per acre, which is in line with their long-term average.

Joe believes that kids will be future food purchasers, they should know where their food is being produced. “Most kids have never been to a farm” says Joe, who is trying his best to change that, and for this reason he has been involved in the agriculture education program for many years, assuming the role of full vineyard manager, Kautz Farms has just hired Claudia, his wife of 25 years. That year a bit of cover crop seed is saved from the vineyard and Joe started experimenting with minimal pruning back in the early 2000's. He noticed that a winemaker visits a minimally pruned vineyard. Before the visit, the winemaker likes the wine quality, but after the vineyard visit, the winemaker wants nothing to do with the vineyard and there are even some who recommend not even pruning the vines in this industry based solely on perceptions that are rarely justified. Joe's favorite trellis system is the horizontal arm with a 36 inch arm, which Joe employs on 80-90% of his vineyard average. This allows the fruit zone to be spread out, while providing a balanced vine system.

Joe Valente is a pretty kick back guy who, in his own words, takes an open-minded approach to farming and encourages others to do the same. Joe also loves the wine industry, its schools, winegrowing, and the wildlife in and around the vineyards he manages.

Joe contacted us to share his story, in the hope that his experiences, skills and knowledge will be of value to others who are interested in growing wine grapes. Joe Valente remains the easy going farmer who will try just about anything to produce high quality wines.