



Winemaker Nigel Kinsman supervises the final picking at Stagecoach Vineyards this Fall.

It takes small village to harvest Stagecoach Vineyard

“If you have ever seen that scene in ‘Apocalypse Now’ where they are trying to establish a beach head camp so that they can surf, that is what harvest is like at Stagecoach Vineyard,” consulting winemaker Aaron Pott says of picking fruit at Krupp Brothers’ legendary Atlas Peak and Pritchard Hill vineyard.

“The vineyard becomes a good size town replete with 50 or so 1970s era vans and an old Ken Kesey-esque school bus - all in various stages of decay – roaming the vineyard roads.”

While Pott jokes that Dr. Jan Krupp, former internist and founder of Stagecoach and Krupp Brothers, should just build a small village at Stagecoach with a company store, it is true that at harvest, the Krupp Brothers team is master of its own 1,000-plus acre domain. Jan moves across the vineyard radio in hand, shouting instructions to vineyard managers Esteban Llamas and viticulturist Jason Cole. The vineyard has its own trucking fleet to haul picks directly to their crush facility, and in any given season, Stagecoach has 120 full-time employees, with an additional 160 contracted on an as needed basis.

From a hawk’s eye view (of which there are several rare breeds on the mountain vineyard), harvest might appear to be chaos. After all, harvest workers are pulling in fruit for not one but 20 different wine producers in the valley. To put it another way, in 2008 there were over 95 wines with a Stagecoach Vineyard designate.

Krupp Brothers Winemaker Nigel Kinsman, however, says harvest may move at a frenzied pace but every step is controlled and choreographed. Up until the point where they deliver fruit to the wineries, Stagecoach Vineyard is self-sufficient. They may pick for more than 20 clients, but they handle all the picking. They schedule clients on a first come, first served basis. Sure, Paul Hobbs checks in frequently, but according to Nigel, even he confidently relinquishes control to the Stagecoach team.

Nigel believes that’s in large part due to Dr. Jan Krupp, the vineyard’s most passionate advocate. “Jan knows every clone and where every clone is planted. How many vineyard owners do you know who could literally know every inch of their 700-acre vineyard?” Nigel says.

Vineyard Manager, Esteban Llamas, worked alongside Jan to plant every single row. Viticulturist, Jason Cole, possesses incredible farming acumen and with both of their expertise come picking time, the vineyard is in prime form. For the past two months, Jason and Nigel have been setting the stage with aggressive crop thinning. Because last year’s crop load was so light, Nigel was ready for the vines’ 2009 balancing act. “We were expecting the vines to respond by producing more fruit, so our guys have worked hard all year to maintain the appropriate levels.”

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They've also taken pains to thin fruit and position the shoots to ensure clusters are evenly spaced and receiving equal shares of light. Nigel says you have to be an active advocate to grow such premium fruit. By the time harvest rolls around, Nigel is intimate with every single block going into Krupp Brothers' wines; he sources fruit from every part of the vineyard, he knows every soil subset, and once crush is upon them, Nigel walks the vineyard every single day.

As for the pick dates? Nigel says they're not here to be raisin farmers. He looks at resolution and tannin profile in order to judge harvest times. Once he sees ripe tannins with moderate sugar levels, the Krupps' own grapes get top picking priority. Nigel doesn't see this as a conflict; he feels the crews give the entire vineyard impeccable attention. Every client gets top quality fruit, but this is first come, first served after all. And Jan Krupp was here first.

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