



Developing a Vineyard Labor Force: A Creative Example

Farmers, and therefore grape growers, are by their nature and need problem solvers. One big problem for vineyards, especially those in southeastern Pennsylvania, is an unreliable, if not unavailable, source of skilled and experienced labor. Wine vineyards are known for their intensive hand labor needs, and most of the vineyards in the region are too small to mechanize successfully. Among the essential components of a successful vineyard and high quality fruit, skilled labor, whether it is the owner or a hired crew, is very near the top of the list. Growers have always relied on haphazard sources of labors, from friends and family, to seasonal workers who come and go as they please. Like all of agriculture, the wine industry is facing a strain on labor resources, even during a severe recession when many people are out of work. The fact is, most Americans do not want to perform farm labor. This is at least partly why less than two percent of Americans, a country with a great agricultural heritage, are involved in farming. Hanging like a dark cloud over all of the challenges of farming are immigration issues, but let's leave that alone for now.

Achieving uniformity in a vineyard is a hallmark of quality and for the best wine growers it's a goal every single day. In a recent *Wine Business Monthly* article, the eminent viticulturist Mark Greenspan (www.advancedvit.com) addressed the importance of variability (or the lack of it) to wine quality. . . "I still contend that the primary enemy of fine wine is variability, and I don't ever expect to waiver in that opinion although there are other factors that detract from wine quality. The very best wines of the world are either made from small vineyard blocks, carefully controlled for uniformity, or are made from harvests of sub-zones of uniform fruit maturity within blocks." After working with vineyard crews for over 20 years, I know that they hold the key to achieving the concept of uniformity in the mind of the winegrower into results in the vineyard. After all the evaluation, design and development of the vineyard are done, they execute the work necessary to realize the intentions of the design for the wine. It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of a good crew to the production of quality of wine, and I believe it's more important in the vineyard than the cellar. Training and cultivating a crew for long term service should be close to the top of the list for every vineyard owner. Each time a crew, or even a crew member departs and a new person has to be trained, uniformity and consistency slips, not to mention the vineyard manager or owner's time spent managing the business.





Brian Dickerson (<<) grew up on a farm and you can tell right away that he has farming in his blood and that he loves vineyards. He began working in vineyards at Stargazer Vineyard and Penns Woods Vineyard and has now set out on his own. He combines managing Mica Ridge Vineyard with his real estate job and helping other vineyards in the area. After Ike Kerschner left MRV, Brian took over and the vineyard has not missed a beat, but the first year was a struggle to manage the eight acre vineyard because he didn't have a reliable source of labor, so he did a lot of the work himself, which he knew

was not a sustainable answer to the labor issue. Those who know Brian know that he is well connected in the community, including the county government. He also had some casual contact with the Amish in the area. Whereas I had always thought the field workers for vineyards in southeast Pennsylvania would come from the nurseries, mushroom houses or orchards, Brian saw the Amish as a potential work force. He successfully applied for a workforce development grant through the Chester County Economic Development Council and then got busy finding his crew. After some initial contacts, he placed an ad in an Amish newspaper and the calls started coming in. He asked me if I could provide viticulture education and training for the new workers.

I have worked with southeast Asian refugees, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Americans, and now the Amish, and I can state with certainty that each group has its own particular quirks and needs. The Amish certainly know about farming. They work hard and don't mind working outdoors, they are legal and can be paid by check, and they speak English. There were many desirable reasons to develop an Amish crew. The big question was could they be taught the finer points of viticulture?

The initial training session in March at Northbrook Orchard went very well. Present were two young Amish men (20s) and two older men. We covered pruning and vine balance, got to know each other and then, straight away, went out into the vineyard. Brian worked closely with them until they felt comfortable with pruning decisions. If you walked along the rows now at MRV you would think it was pruned by a professional crew (>>) with many years of experience. Brian's only concern was speed, but quality was the paramount and the pace picked up with their level of comfort and experience.



The Amish love working outside and farming is in their blood, too. The older men are semi-retired after successful careers, and more or less looking to fill time with interesting and rewarding work. The young men, I believe, are adventurous and considering a career in the vineyards. The best example I know of is Sam Zook, who is Jan Waltz's vineyard manager in Manheim, and one of the best in the business. Of course, there are some conditions that come with working with the Amish. When the crew first got started, Brian was making a daily 160-mile roundtrip loop to pick up and return the workers to their homes. Eventually he was able to find Randy, a former dairy farmer and land surveyor, who could transport the workers, and also help with tractor work in the vineyards, an ideal solution. The Amish have particular holidays they observe and do not work on Sundays. This crew is very polite and respectful, hardworking, eager to learn and please, and appear to really enjoy in working in a vineyard.

The most recent training meeting covered the basics of canopy and crop management, integrated pest management (disease, bugs, weeds, animals, etc), as well as weather threats and some vine physiology. They are attentive and ask good questions, thankfully, in English.

If this crew sticks, and the early indications are positive, Brian will build a reliable and experienced work crew that will be able to implement his viticultural goals and produce high quality wine grapes. He is investing a lot of time in training now, but later on the crew will be able to work on their own leaving the vineyard manager to tend to other duties. The crew is currently working at two vineyards totaling 40 acres with a possible third which would bring the acres to fifty. Five workers can probably do 50-75 acres without too much trouble. At large vineyards that are managed by professionals and experienced crews, this is all very normal. But for small vineyards in the Eastern US, finding a source of reliable and skilled labor will always be a challenge. The common fact regardless of size is that the quality of work in the vineyard impacts the quality of grapes and wine. The wine industry is slowly developing this vital resource.

All farm workers should be treated with respect, paid a fair wage, and provided enough work to keep them busy throughout the year. They should be given the proper training and outerwear, and all worker protection standards should be followed. I have advocated smaller vineyards sharing a crew so there would be enough work and allow the workers to stay on the vineyards and consider it permanent, full-time work. Amish wage requirements are generally lower since their personal expenses are not as great as the English (non-Amish), but there is the added cost of transportation.

In my experience and opinion, people relations and management are the most challenging part of any business. Getting the right people to do a job well and in harmony is the Holy Grail for every business. Brian Dickerson understood his needs and thought outside the box about a solution, and so far it looks like he succeeded. He partnered his own considerable knowledge, skills and connections with a state-funded grant, and reached out to Penn State for training assistance. In the way that our society was designed, this is the ideal solution, and one that hopefully will help MRV to grow and succeed, and maybe other vineyards, too. With the economic benefits of agri-tourism that a vibrant wine industry brings to an area, there is little doubt that Chester County will be rewarded for its investment. But it took a creative thinker and hard worker like Brian to get us all together. I tip my straw hat to him.

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