



Pick Now, Drink Later

Volunteers Heed a Call But Must Wait to Consume Fruit of Their Labor

Story and Photos by Karla W. Sartin

Outside Lago Vista row upon row of grape clusters glisten in the just-risen sun. Luscious TV commercials add to the romantic view of harvesting plump grapes that will be transformed into wine. Reality is slightly different.

Amid the Tuscanesque vistas on the north shore of Lake Travis lurk black widow spiders, red wasps, bees, snakes and the potential to lose a finger – all points that Rick Naber, co-owner of the 80-acre Flat Creek Estate Vineyards and Winery, alerted his volunteer harvesters to early on an August morning.

"Do not cut your finger," warned Naber. "I guarantee someone here will do that."

Add more cautions against heat exhaustion and dehydration, and the jovial spirit of the 6 a.m. gathering of 27 volunteers was dampened. But none was deterred.

The work goes like this: Grope through the layers of vines, find the grapes, reach in with one hand to find where they're actually attached, position the pruning shears at the correct stem and angle, avoid gloved fingers, cut the bundle of fruit and place the bounty into buckets. It's not quite as easy as it seems at first blush. The grapes grow on thick vines and curl tightly to the sturdy trellis system, marked by 12-gauge wire and heavy-duty tiebacks.

The pickers first concentrated on the Muscat Canelli grapes, a "block" of some 48 rows that will become bottles of Muscato Blanco wine.

"It's like playing hide and seek," said Kathy Mitchamore, a first-time harvester from Leander. "I thought it was very interesting," she said of the invitation to help Flat Creek staff harvest the grapes. She learned about the opportunity during an Austin Pond Society tour of the estate. "I thought it'd be fun," she said, wiping sweat from her brow and arranging vines to peer in for another cluster.

Against prediction, no fingers were lost, and no one had an allergic reaction to a sting, owners Rick and Madelyn Naber reported. Harvesters did find a black widow in a bucket, which was presented to Rick Naber, who freed the spider and returned it to its work. "They're really good for pest control," he said, noting the vineyard has not used insecticides this season.

The Nabers and Flat Creek staff thanked the volunteers with a chuck wagon lunch and "Blessing of the Vintage" ceremony by the Rev. Richard Goodwill of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church of Cedar Park. "We do all hand-harvesting, and we completely appreciate your giving us a hand," Madelyn Naber said.

The grapes brought in were destined for washing and de-stemming.

Depending on type of grape, they may be pressed or left relatively whole. After further processing, the essences of these grapes harvested in August 2003 will appear in bottles in early 2005.

With five Italian varietals plus a lone French planted four years ago, the winery has yet to debut a vintage from its own grapes. Madelyn Naber says that will change Valentine's Day 2004, when wine from 2002 grapes will be sold, including a Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Grigio and Muscato Blanco. The Nabers anticipate the estate's French Rhone Shiraz will become a "signature" Texas wine.

While Flat Creek's own fruit ages in 60-degree oaken barrel rooms and in stainless steel, the Nabers haven't been idle. They have been producing wines exclusively from Texas grapes under the estate's award-winning Travis Peak Select label – the Cabernet Sauvignon 1999, Muscato D'Arancia 2000, Muscato Blanco 2000, Cabernet Sauvignon 2000 and Due Ami 2002, which are available in the vineyard's tasting room and at Central Market, Whole Foods, World Market and HEB locations.

Harvest is over for this year, but the winery and tasting room is open Tuesday through Sunday. In November, Flat Creek will take part in the Texas Hill Country Art and Wine Trail.

To reach the vineyard, drive six miles west of Lago Vista on FM 14-31, turn south and follow Singleton Bend Road almost 3 and a half miles, and turn left at the bottom of the hill. You'll see the vineyard.

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Volunteer picker Colette Muñoz of Austin, above, and the Rev. Richard Goodwill, below, who blessed the harvest

