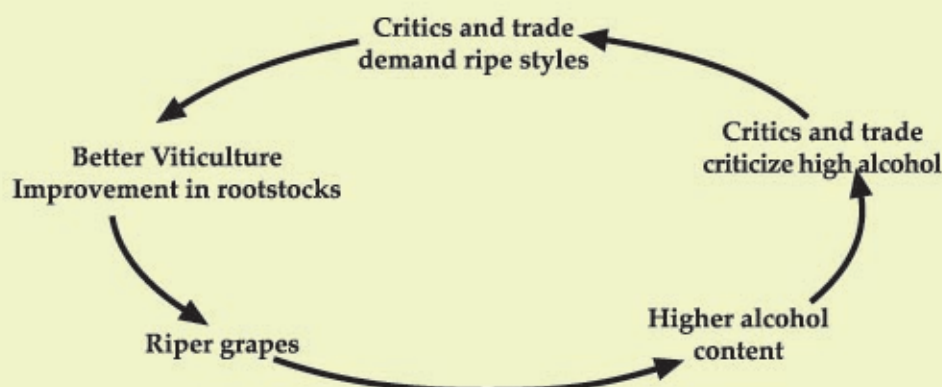




REX'S PRACTICAL TIPS #11

The circular discussion: Wine Alcohol Levels

We are starting to see comment from wine writers, wine judges and the wine trade about our escalating wine alcohol levels, whilst at the same time they criticize wine made from immature grapes. The dilemma looks something like this:



It all seems to be a bit of a circular discussion. If you take a quick look at the winning wines in many competitions; or the wines getting media attention; or the wines on offer on the many emails that come into our office, one common factor persists. So often they're described as "super ripe", or "rich and concentrated", or some other term which indicates long hang time in the vineyard.

There's absolutely no doubt that in these days of instant gratification, big rich ripe fruit bombs are in. Restraint and elegance are almost forgotten in the marketers lexicon. It seems that there is market demand for the big rich wines that by virtue of style, have high alcohol as well. This is probably the case with most red wines, but the case for high alcohol whites is hard to make.

So, what can we do in the vineyard to ensure that our winemaker has grapes that are phenologically ripe but with moderate potential alcohol?

We do know through countless trials that leaf plucking improves phenological maturity and reduces brix. But fully exposed Sauvignon blanc in Marlborough in a dry season no, no that doesn't work either.

The wine writers, critics and retailers have become more and more fussy. They demand wine made from fully mature grapes. In New Zealand this does mean that some seasons will deliver naturally high alcohols.

Your ability to influence your current **conventionally spaced** vineyard in such a way that you produce fruit with a high



level of phenological maturity and moderate brix is rather limited. In fact, once the vineyard is planted, the primary drivers appear to be site and seasonal weather patterns.

There is some pretty good evidence out there that changing vineyard architecture, (in row spacing, between row spacing and trellising systems) is the only significant control mechanism. High density vineyards achieve higher crops with phenological maturity and moderate alcohol.

Until you plant your next vineyard from scratch, the best advice I can give you is to turn a deaf ear to the wine writers and always aim for balanced vines which give a consistent yield and quality commensurate with the site.



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