

Wine & Spirits

THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WINE

striking a balance

Cabernet

Napa Valley

14.6 94 | Nickel & Nickel 2006 Oakville Napa Valley Martin Stelling Vineyard

Dirk Hampson, partner and director of winemaking, mentioned 2004 as the year that produced the highest sugars (other winemakers echoed his recollections of 2004). “That was the season. I saw vineyards that were at 27° and 28° Brix, two to three weeks before they were going to be ripe. Our 2004 was the highest alcohol Stelling ever, at 15.3 percent. That’s higher than we choose to go, but as a single-vineyard wine, that’s respecting the vintage and the vineyard. Our 2002 was 13.0, an elegant year, a moderate year, most definitely a fully ripe wine.”

Planning ahead, Hampson and his team farm the site to promote the most uniform flowering possible, to avoid extended bloom. “We have to wait for the trailing edge to get fully ripe,” he says, “which means the leading edge could get overripe. If you have a more uniform flowering, the picking window is shorter.” That helps limit the number of over-ripe, raisined grapes, which can feed sugars into fermentations and run up alcohol levels in the finished wine.

“As we continue to see relatively high Brix to get the right flavors,” says Hampson, “we continue to have a bias that moderate alcohol is more enjoyable and more desirable. That’s partly personal. I’m a small guy, and if I drink a glass that’s 15.5 percent, I’m not going to get a second.” Still, he says they don’t use high-tech equipment to remove alcohol. “It’s too harsh a treatment to preserve single-vineyard characteristics.” Instead he says, Spinelli ferments a portion of the wine in open-top vats, which allow some evaporation of alcohol. And by maintaining a high humidity in the cellar, more alcohol dissipates during aging. “We’d like to get ripeness without high Brix. You get prune and raisin flavors in high Brix wines; in the end they’re more about winemaking than vineyard character.”