

FROM CAMEL VALLEY VINEYARD

Even St Luke sent his 'little summer' early this year, and we were able to start picking the earliest ripening grapes on the 25th September. Now that our vineyard has quadrupled in size since the original plantings we are no longer able to rely on family and friends willing to earn a little extra money grape picking, and this year we engaged agency staff. Much easier than the early days when we had to get picking finished in order for the pickers – our teenage children and their friends – to get ready to catch the bus to Newquay for a Saturday night out.!

We never really had enough picking boxes, so once we had filled them we'd lose 2 pickers to picking them up, crushing the grapes and loading the press. For the rest of us it was often 10 hours of picking a day – much more civilised now. For a start, we've invested in enough boxes – we pick into small boxes which hold about 25 -30 kgs of grapes. These are collected up throughout the day by someone whose sole task is this. They are then manually emptied into huge bins set out in the vineyard which hold 330 kgs of grapes. These bins are collected on the tractor and we are able to use pallet forks to tip them into the crusher or press, eliminating the need for lifting heavy boxes by hand.

The agency staff were a wonderful group of workers, quick and efficient at whatever task they had, always happy and smiling and a real pleasure to work with. Because they're based in the West of Cornwall they really wanted a whole day of work to make their travelling worthwhile, so once they had finished picking the designated grapes for the day they would spend the afternoons de-leafing other vines. This enabled as much sunlight onto the grapes for perfect ripening, and also it made the task of picking those grapes a few weeks later that much easier.

Everything was going perfectly, with a day or two of picking followed by a few days of wine making and clearing up. We even thought we might get to the Harvest Thanksgiving this year, an event we usually miss – because we're harvesting. But it was not to be. After a fairly intensive picking day on Saturday 17th October, which we didn't mind as we thought we'd have a few days to recover, Bob saw heavy rain forecast for the following week. Not only does rain dilute the flavours of the grapes, but it makes picking an unpleasant task, and almost impossible to manoeuvre tractors around the vineyard. So the decision was made to pick the entire remaining crop the following day.

Incredibly, 21 pickers picked 20 tonnes of grapes in one day. We had two teams of winemakers, one working 12 hour days, the other 12 hour nights. Over that weekend 40 tonnes of grapes were picked and vinified using a 5 tonne press and a 3 tonne press which had to be loaded and unloaded many times throughout the 48 hours – a fantastic achievement. In order to make the highest quality wine they

were even managed to whole berry press a large proportion of the grapes, which requires no crushing but takes a lot longer to press.

So now, a few weeks on life is a little less hectic, the wines are bubbling away in the tanks and everything is clean and tidy once more.