

Creating a Winning Club

by Don Panagapka (AWO News # 46)

Introduction:

As we are all aware, the KW Winemaker's Guild has consistently been a top winemaking club in the AWO over the years.

I would like to outline here, some of the procedures and methods that our club utilizes to maintain a high level of achievement, in the hope that other clubs may adopt one or more of our methods to improve their level of expertise.

I understand that many clubs are more of a "social" nature and others have their own methods. However, perhaps you may gain some insight from the following.

Here are some of our methodologies that the KW Winemaker's Guild uses to achieve success.

Winemaking equipment:

Our club either individually or as a group have the following equipment to increase the possibility that we make the best wine possible:

- refractometer (measuring brix)
- ph meter (absolutely necessary to understand winemaking)
- mechanized crusher-destemmer (convenient and efficient)
- bladder press (more even pressing of the grape must, therefore less bitters and more yield, as well as control of pressure)
- filtering system including sterile filtering equipment (to prevent re-fermentation and/or unwanted malo)
- accurate SO2 measurement (Rebelin system which is by far the most accurate system for the amateur winemaker) as well as all of the common equipment such as carboys e.t.c..

Our objective is to eliminate errors in winemaking by having the best equipment available (within our cost limits) and therefore achieve the highest level of success possible.

Mentoring system:

Any new member to the club is assigned a "mentor" (someone in the club who has experience and knowledge). The mentor monitors all of the new winemaker's activity so as to ensure that mistakes aren't made and that the new member is successful immediately.

New members are usually in "awe" of the amount of technical knowledge that is necessary to make good wine and hence, someone to monitor and ask questions to is very important to building their level of confidence and skill.

Without this system, we have found that they will lose interest as they become overwhelmed with the technical knowledge necessary to make quality wine.

This fast-forward mentoring system has resulted in exciting new members who invariably score medals in their very first AWO competition.

Club projects:

Our club has at least one or more club projects each year.

The new members, as part of the project, are ensured that they are successful in their first venture into winemaking, and, with the information shared during the project they gain a lot of knowledge and confidence in their winemaking skills.

As the new members acquire more knowledge over the first and second year, they are then asked to be a cellarmaster of a club project (e.g. 225 litre barrel of Cab for instance) which, with that responsibility, accelerates their knowledge curve and brings them up to the level of expertise of other members of the club.

Encouraging new members to compete in our club competition and at AWO:

Even new members in their first year are encouraged to compete at the club level and hopefully qualify to the provincials. The wine judge's feedback alone is worth the effort of the new member to increase their winemaking skills. Then, if they qualify for the provincials they seem to escalate to a higher level of interest in winemaking.

A common winemaking area:

Presently we are using a storage shed offered by one of our club members.

All grapes/juices are brought there to be crushed/destemmed/pressed.

This common winemaking place is a perfect venue to share knowledge (especially for new members).

After the crushing/destemming and the pressing the next day, the individual winemaker can take his wine home in pails to continue making the wine on his own. However, a club project (as per above) remains at the common storage site to be dealt with by all members of the club.

We find that this common area of winemaking is crucial to share and gain knowledge with all members of the club and therefore, very important in making the best possible product.

The social camaraderie and "bonding" of the club members is an added bonus.

Start with quality product:

As they say "you can't make a Ferrari out of Volkswagen parts".

Similarly getting the best grape product available will ensure that you produce the best product in the end. Sources we have are:

- 1) two or three growers in Niagara that we can rely on and have established longstanding relationships with.
- 2) Central Valley C.A. product via Borsellino's in Toronto.
- 3) Peter Brehm (premium frozen juice product from California/Washington/Oregon) product.

Encourage members to become specialists in various wine categories:

We try to cover all of the wine classes in AWO. In that it is a very difficult task for an individual winemaker (see next issue's article on Individual Success at AWO), we try to encourage our club members to specialize in certain classes.

As that winemaker becomes more knowledgeable in his "classes" he shares that knowledge with other members of the club thereby increasing the level of knowledge of all members of the club in all of the wine classes.

Acquiring new members:

This has been an ongoing problem with AWO over the years. That is, why are there thousands of "kit" winemakers and our membership at AWO is at a virtual standstill ?

Well, the KW Winemaker's Guild generally has the same problem but manages to get its' members from one of two sources:

- 1) interested friends of the present members (especially when those friends recognize the quality of the wines)
- 2) advertising: our local newspaper is distributed to approximately a half million subscribers.

During the grape season why not call the local paper and have them do a photo-shoot of a crushing/pressing ? Newspapers often jump at an opportunity to cover local winemaking. Then, with appropriate information in the news article interested prospective winemakers call/email the club and presto you have a new keen winemaker. Many of KW Winemaker's Guild's members (e.g. John Tummon) have been acquired in this manner.

In sum, the philosophy of our club is to strive for excellence.

That, along with the procedures above, have allowed us to continually produce fine winemakers. Hopefully, some of the info here will help benefit your own club.

Happy winemaking!

Don Panagapka