



Ten Questions with Lynn Diehl

Becky Zelinski — First Crush

Becky Zelinski and her husband, Lowell, share wine grape growing, harvesting and winemaking information with their customers in the best possible way, right in the vineyards and winery, through their First Crush winemaking experience. www.firstcrushwinemaking.com

Q: First Crush is a great way to make some wine country memories beyond the tasting room, let's start with *your* memories of the first harvest you worked. How did it all unfold?

A: Having lived and worked in viticulture for several years, my husband and I finally got the bug to make our own wine. We picked enough fruit from a customer's vineyard to make one barrel of wine (or so we thought). We took it home and crushed, fermented and pressed it. We quickly discovered that making garage wine is not only challenging and probably impossible for most people – but it's also expensive making small lots of wine. We even had the luxury of being able to call all of our winemaker friends in the area and ask questions, borrow supplies, etc. My husband jokes that our first wine probably cost us about \$100/bottle to make!

Nonetheless – we had a blast. The entire winemaking process is fun and interesting, but the best part is picking the fruit in the vineyard. Fall is my favorite time of year and I think the most beautiful season in wine country. I'm a photographer so I photographed the entire process, then turned my photos into a slideshow that I shared with family and friends via email. We started receiving numerous replies from people begging for the opportunity for this type of the experience. This is how First Crush was born.

Q: The first of this year's Harvest Getaway's is Sept. 3, what do you have planned for participants?

A: This early harvest is our "white weekend" and is the first year we will harvest and produce a white wine - a barrel-aged Chardonnay or Viognier.

All of our weekends are fun-filled, two-day, unparalleled wine country experiences. I describe it as a first-class winemaking safari. You haven't lived until you've had a Five Star dining experience amongst the vines.

We begin Friday evening with a winemaker dinner featuring a local winemaker. His wines are matched with local artisan meats and produce prepared by a local chef. The dinner is served al fresco at the winery or vineyard. On Saturday morning, we take our harvesters into a carefully selected vineyard. They enjoy a continental champagne breakfast with the grower and take a tractor ride with our viticulturalist to learn about Paso Robles' terroir and the specifics of the location.

Then the fun really begins. We give them basic harvest instructions and set them loose with their clippers and totes and let them help pick the fruit that ultimately becomes a premium, professionally made wine.

After sorting and crushing the fruit at Silver Horse, we serve a gourmet lunch with Silver Horse, Tassajara and First Crush wines on the beautiful picnic grounds. After lunch, they kick off their shoes and take part in the First Crush stomping competition.

Q: Since most guests are novices, how do you keep them from cutting their fingers, or getting sunburned?



A: Wine appreciation skills and interest in winemaking vary. There's low to minimal risk for our harvesters and we try to keep the work fairly light. We only use clippers for picking – not the actual picking knives. We conduct a safety training session and have first aid on hand. We encourage people to bring gloves, hats and sunscreen!

Q: Harvest has such a romantic sound to it, but it can be hard work – how do you balance work with fun?

A: It's a bit like any adventure. Part of the fun is the challenge and the opportunity to conquer the vine! But we really do let people experience a fairly romantic version. It's a pretty leisurely pick that's done in 1-2 hours. In groups of about 20 to 40 people, it's fun and it goes quickly.

Q: How did you and Lowell choose Paso Robles?

A: Lowell obtained his master's degree in soils from Cal Poly, SLO. Like many Cal Poly alums, he'd always dreamed of returning to the Central Coast. So, after obtaining his doctorate in soil-plant-water relations from U.C. Davis, and about 25 years working as a soils and irrigation scientist, we got the opportunity. We were living in Bakersfield when Lowell decided to go back into business for himself providing agricultural consulting, GIS (geographic information systems) consulting services and aerial imaging analysis in vineyards (and other crops). We started Precision Ag, Inc. in 2003. He was commuting back and forth and we had a five-year plan to get our business established in Paso Robles. When we started looking, we decided that we'd like some property to give us some space so we chose only to look in the North County. We bought 5.5 acres in 2003 with the plan to build our home first before moving to Paso Robles. We couldn't wait. Our last chicken left the roost in 2004 so, as she left for college, we left for Paso Robles. We now manage vineyards, provide viticulture consulting services, irrigation scheduling, soil moisture monitoring and telemetry services for hundreds of acres in San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties. We still have some ties to the valley.

Q: Does the cool growing season affect how you plan the weekends?

A: Unfortunately, I couldn't get Mother Nature to become an executive officer for First Crush so the weather is always a bit of a challenge. Our weekend dates are preset to give people the ability to plan their vacations with us. Paso Robles is blessed with many great microclimates for producing wine grapes with great variances from east to west and north to south areas of the AVA. We have access to many vineyards that will be ripe on the week-

ends we've planned. We'll start berry sampling soon and decide what will be ripe when and where. This is how we choose our vineyards. It's a bit hectic but the only way to ensure that we're getting good, ripe fruit for our winemaking program.

Q: What does Lowell say about grape development?

A: This year, the cool growing season should make for some wonderful fruit. Lowell has spot-checked some vineyards that we work in and says that veraison - when the berry ripening actually begins - is only 1 to 2 days off of where we were last year.

Q: Who's in charge of the actual winemaking?

A: First Crush makes its wine as a custom crush winery at Silver Horse Winery, and Silver Horse winemaker Steve Kroener is our winemaker. I'm learning about winemaking and work as assistant winemaker, as does Lowell – who knows a lot about chemistry. We all work together, but Steve is the boss. We also have a fabulous winemaker, Craig Reed, who makes wine out there now and helps with our winemaking workshops. His label is

Tassajara. We have a good team.

Q: First Crush keeps the winemaking experience going all-year-around with monthly or by appointment workshops and seminars. How do the blending seminars work?

A: The blending workshops are great for team building, bridal parties, company parties, reunions, groups or individuals. We provide all of the supplies and tools and let them be a winemaker for a day.

They learn the history of blending, how to taste and evaluate wines, and they blend Paso Robles produced wine varietals. If they want to purchase it, we record their private formula. The customers can come back to bottle and label their wine or we'll do it for them.

Soon, we'll have our Wine Workshop open at Silver Horse that will be open every weekend so customers can "stop in to blend."

Q: Do you see First Crush, as it grows and matures, offering multi-level education?

A: Yes, I believe this is the direction we are headed, and the interest is definitely there.

We currently offer one winemaking workshop the third Saturday of every month which provides, real-time, hands-on winemaking learning experiences taught by viticulturalists, winemakers and industry reps. We cover one grape growing and one winemaking topic that coincide with what's actually happening in the winery and vineyard! ♣

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