

APRIL'S CRUELITIES

Vintners lose sleep in this unpredictable month

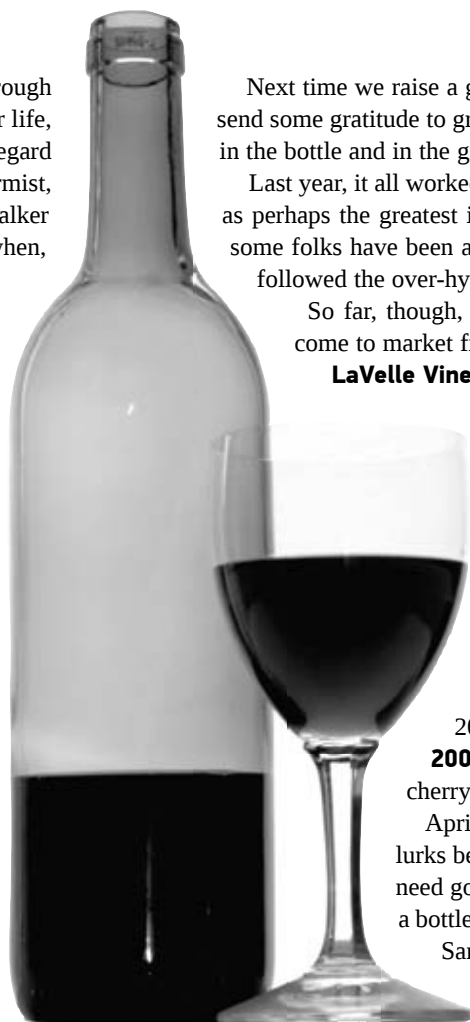
Every year, Oregon's April just hammers me. I'll toddle briskly through winter's months, savoring the rains, blissfully indulging an interior life, inside our house and inside my own skull. I revel in the rains, regard them as profound blessings, in their various forms, from the feathermist, so light it won't dimple the meniscus on a pond but will leave a walker soaked, to the guttugusher that floods fields and leaps river banks. I fret when, as recently, we enter a dry spell.

I moved here nearly 50 years ago (day-um, the time!). Before then, I'd lived in many arid regions — Nevada, New Mexico, Southern Cal, even, as a kid, three years in Morocco. I'd had enough sun, yearned for a world of wet — and got it.

But even after nearly a half-century in my adopted home, I'm never really prepared for April, the overwhelming burst of flowers, the sudden flush of leaves on trees that, just moments ago, seemed skeletal. Right now, a catalog of blooms in our garden includes anemones, primroses, daffodils, hyacinths, tulips, forsythia and many more, including "weeds." The wafting scent of daphne blooming outside our bedroom window colors my dreams. So much life, such vigor and vitality, I feel humbled, hardly a mote in April's eye.

Almost gratefully, I turn to thoughts of wine. But that takes me to viticulture: Wine begins with farmers, people who tend vines and cultivate grapes. For them, too, April is a trembling time. They welcome the rains, sure, but worry about a sudden freeze, or too much rain, too little sun and warmth. And that's only a glimpse into their nightmares. Images of fields of vines turned brown and withering after a drifting cloud of herbicides applied to roadside weeds, those can ruin sleep for farmers.

But most seasons, the buds will break open, new growth will sprout, clusters will form, sun will come and with it swelling fruit — and a raft of new worries before a vintage is picked and new wine made.



Next time we raise a glassful of delicious Oregon wine, we should take a moment to send some gratitude to growers and winemakers whose labors and passions put the juice in the bottle and in the glass. Thank you.

Last year, it all worked beautifully. Already, wine people are touting the 2012 vintage as perhaps the greatest in Oregon's (rather brief) history. "Epic," it's been called. But some folks have been a bit more careful; maybe somebody remembers the fiasco that followed the over-hyping of the 1987 vintage.

So far, though, our early experiences have been very, very good. The whites come to market first; the reds need more time.

LaVelle Vineyards 2012 Pinot Gris (\$25 — stiff ticket but an experience)

just bursts with floral aromas; on the palate, we get flavors of ripe pears and quince, finely balanced with crisp acidity. This is one of Matt LaVelle's best-ever wines.

Capitello 2012 Sauvignon Blanc, Walnut Ridge (\$20)

is so aromatic even seasoned wine tasters guess at Riesling or viognier. Flavors dance across the palate — sweet grapefruit, stonefruit, honeysuckle. What we have here is New Zealand-style "savvy," as they call it, bold, ripe and round, not at all grassy.

Meanwhile, market shelves sag with yummy wines from 2010 and '11, even some fine '09s, a few '08s. Try **720 Cellars 2008 Pinot Noir** (\$19), ripe and ready to brighten April with cherry/raspberry flavors.

April's cruelties have hardly begun. The eruption of the rhodies lurks behind dark foliage for a full-frontal May assault. We're going to need good wine. Happily, it's available. Grab a glass and opener. Tuck a bottle under your arm. Go outside and bravely face your floral future.

Santé. ■

Lance Sparks, Ph.D., teaches writing at LCC and can be reached at freelanceandwildkat@comcast.net

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