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James Laube Unfined

Rotten Grapes Yield Liquid Gold

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If you didn't know better, you might think you'd just stepped into the vineyard from hell.

It's Nov. 27, a month after most of the grapes in Napa Valley have been picked, yet there are still grapes on the vines here in this rural Coombsville vineyard, hidden by a grove of trees east of Napa.

Most of the foliage has perished and is crumbling on the ground. The few leaves that cling to the vine are yellow and listless. The grapes are a rotten, ugly mess.

Yet there in the brilliant morning sunlight stood Dolce winemaker Greg Allen, who wore a big smile. A long, drawn out harvest is almost over and from the look of things, it's going to be a successful year for Dolce, the late-harvest, botrytised Sémillon that ranks among California's finest dessert wines.

Allen, who's nickname is "Boy Tritus," is the sole employee of Dolce, which was the brainchild of the late Gil Nickel, founder of Far Niente and Nickel & Nickel wineries in Napa's Oakville appellation. In 1985, Nickel set out to create a Château d'Yquem of California, and at times, Dolce is pure and brilliant, sweet, ultrarich and opulent, with a honeyed nectar, fig and tangerine medley of flavors.

Ugly and moldy as the grapes look, *Botrytis cinerea* is working about as perfectly as it can. The "noble rot," which thrives in warm autumn humidity, is winning out over rival and damaging molds that compete for the remaining grapes hanging on the vines. While the wrong funguses would render the grapes useless, botrytis works one of wine's wonders. It attacks the grapes and causes them to shrivel, concentrating the flavors, sugar and acidity. "Most of the fundamental questions of how molds form in the wild can't be answered," said Allen as we walked down one of the last rows about to be picked.

This 17-acre vineyard, owned by Dolce, is mostly Sémillon, as is the wine, and it is managed largely in contradiction to accepted viticultural practices for dry wine vineyards. The vines, for instance, have a full canopy designed to trap humidity, minimize wind flow across the clusters and keep direct sun off the berries.

The vineyard is constantly being thinned, since a large crop delays the spread of botrytis and can render wines that have either vegetal or vinegary flavors.

The berries come in many shapes and sizes. Some are fuzzy with mold. Some are dimpled, shriveling toward raisin. Some are plump and yellow. Others are a shade of faded pink and violet and still others look like dinky Halloween lanterns, with black holes that look like eyes. These berries are decimated, victims of yellow jacket attacks. The pesky winged insects "keep me up at night [worrying about their potential damage to the berries]," said Allen, since they can puncture the sweet berries and inject a bacteria that induces vinegar.

Harvest presents numerous challenges. Many of the clusters are discarded because they would impart an off flavor in the wine. Sugar levels are high and can range from 20 to 48 degrees Brix. Allen has a target sugar level of 33 to 34 Brix.

Once picked, the grapes are crushed and barrel fermented in new French oak. One key to the fermentation is using yeasts ("I use the wimpiest yeasts I can," joked Allen) that will stop fermenting, leaving 11 to 12 degrees Brix of sugar in the wine, and an alcohol level of about 13.5. The wine will spend about 30 months in barrel and, in a good year such as this, Dolce will yield up to 2,800 cases of wine, most of which will be bottled in half-bottles (375ml). The 2003 vintage sells for \$85 a half-bottle.

Walking through these rows of vines provides an amazing view of the remarkable journey these grapes take, in a vineyard that looks all but neglected.