Winemaker Roundtable:
Horror Stories

Winemakers tell the haunted tales of harvests gone wrong and their rather creative solutions to the problems.

Lance Cutler

Lance Cutler has been a working winemaker in Sonoma Valley for 40 years. He has been a contributing editor for *Wine Business Monthly* for more than 13 years. His unique perspective on winemaking has led to our Industry Roundtable series and our Varietal Focus series. Lance is also the author of six books including *The Tequila Lover's Guide to Mexico and Mezcal*.

ALL OF US WHO make wine know that the work is difficult and that it takes planning to do the job right. Still, it doesn't matter how much experience you have or how conscientious you are about planning—some things will likely go wrong. It is how we deal with things when they go horribly wrong that helps define us as winemakers. ***Wine Business Monthly*** thought the time was overdue to ask winemakers for their "horror stories." Here is a batch to which any winemaker can relate.

Jerry Seps from **Storybook Mountain Vineyards** was brief, "Not much here, aside from the year I cut my finger off in the stemmer/crusher. Great body that year."

Car Troubles

Sometimes things can go wrong even before you start. **Steve Edmunds** remembers his very first **Edmunds St. John** harvest in 1985. "I was buying 9 tons of Syrah grapes from **Estrella River Vineyards** in Paso Robles. I'd made wine as a home winemaker for a number of years but never more than about a half-ton of grapes, so I didn't even know what 9 tons looked like. We rented a couple of trucks and drove down to Paso on a Saturday. We left Berkeley at 8 a.m. with my stepson driving one truck and me and my wife in the other.



Steve Edmunds

"We exited the off-ramp in Paso, and my stepson pushed the clutch pedal down to the floor, and it never came back up. We pulled over to the side of the road and saw that the cotter pin that held the clutch pedal in place had sheared off. I was able to reach the rental agency, but we were stuck there for hours waiting for someone to come fix the truck. We didn't get to the vineyard until 4 p.m. We picked up the grapes and gassed up the truck at the vineyard because they had a gas pump.

"We started back to the winery, but my truck started acting up and wouldn't go much faster than 40 mph. I figured that it was loaded with 4 to 5 tons of grapes so that might have been the issue. Once I got to the highway, it started to sputter, and I had to pull over. I waited a bit and tried again. It started right up but just wouldn't go above 45 mph. In the meantime my stepson took off because he wanted to go out that night, so he headed up to Berkeley in the other truck. This thing kept happening. The truck would go for a little ways; then it would sputter and stop.

"After the third time, I figured I needed to get ahold of someone to find out what was wrong. It was getting dark, but my wife stayed in the truck, and I tried to hitchhike to a truck stop we had passed. Someone came by, and it was someone who had purchased grapes from the same vineyard. He drove me up to the truck stop. Fortunately, the people at the truck stop said they had a guy who would come look at the truck for $150. I waited a while, and this guy showed up in a pick-up truck.

"He was a really nice guy, and he took me back to the truck but had to drive carefully because he didn't have a driver's license. When I asked why he didn't have a license, he told me it had been taken away for drunk driving. We finally made it back to the truck. He tried starting the truck, but it wouldn't start. He asked if we had filled the tank, and I said, 'Yeah.'

[The] first flat-bed, loaded with 10 tons of grapes, rolled down the slight incline, smashed into the front of the truck and pushed the second flatbed about 4 feet. It slammed into the crusher, ripped it right out of the ground and made a mess out of all the transfer pipes.

"He asked, 'Did you ventilate it?' I didn't even know what that was.

"He went over, unscrewed the gas cap, relieved the pressure, and once that was done, the truck started right up. We drove off and didn't get home until 1:00 or 1:30 in the morning. I woke up the guy who lived at the winery. He got the forklift, and we put the bins in the winery. I went home and got about four hours of sleep. Then we came back down and started crushing grapes. That was my initial foray into owning a winery."



Jim Bundschu

Late one harvest evening **Jim Bundschu**, owner of **Gundlach Bundschu Winery**, returned from delivering grapes only to discover he had a flat tire. After a long harvest day, he dragged himself from the truck and changed the tire. He flipped the flat tire up into the empty grape gondola and figured he'd drop it off to get fixed the next morning.

The next morning came early, and Bundschu was out supervising his picking crew as they harvested Chardonnay for **Sebastiani Vineyards and Winery**. After another long, exhausting day, he drove the truck to Sebastiani and sat in line with the other growers, waiting for his turn at the crusher. It was mostly local growers in those days, so they would stand together, watching the grapes be crushed and talk about harvest, growing up in the valley as kids and discussing where they could go for a beer when they were done. Finally it was Bundschu's turn. They tipped the 4-ton gondola. The grapes spilled out, and there on top sat the flat tire, rim and all. Bundschu says he was teased about that for years.

The late **Tracy Toovey** was working as cellar master for **Grand Cru Vineyards**. They were receiving grapes in 2-ton gondolas anchored five to each flat-bed truck. A driver showed up with a set of doubles. He parked the first set on the pavement just above the crush pad, disconnected and backed the second set down to be crushed.

Evidently, the driver forgot to set the brakes on the first flat-bed. While Toovey ran the crusher, that first flat-bed, loaded with 10 tons of grapes, rolled down the slight incline, smashed into the front of the truck and pushed the second flatbed about 4 feet. It slammed into the crusher, ripped it right out of the ground and made a mess out of all the transfer pipes. It took three days to repair the damage before they could again accept grapes.

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Chuy Ordaz

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Grower Relations Gone Wrong

Chuy Ordaz, who owns **Palo Alto Vineyard Management**, was in charge of all the picking crews for **Kenwood Vineyards**. In 1973, a grower needed some help picking grapes, and it turned into a dangerous situation. Chuy explained what happened:

"This grower needed help for harvest, so he called **Mike Lee** and asked if we could help him. Mike asked me to take a crew over and help him out. My crew had some small guys from Oaxaca. One guy left a couple bunches of grapes on a vine. The grower, who was big and tall, got really mad, and he came up and picked up this little guy by the shirt and carried him back to show him the grape bunches left on the vine. When he did that, he really got my crew angry, and they told me they didn't want to pick grapes for this guy. And they stopped picking.

"When they stopped picking, it really made the grower mad, and he started yelling. I told him, 'You can't treat my guys like that. You're going to get yourself in trouble. Do you realize how many people I've got working here?' That made him even more angry, and he stormed into his house.

"I went up and talked to him again. I told him if he wasn't careful, these guys could kill him. Every one of my pickers had a knife, and the grower was big, but to do something like that pissed everyone off. I tried to control the guys. I think I had 16 guys, and they were really mad at what he did. The grower finally cooled down and came over and apologized. He really didn't have a choice. What he did was pretty bad.

"I was kind of in the middle. This grower didn't realize that what he had done was a big insult. I mean, it was just a couple bunches of grapes, less than 1 pound. I don't know why he was so pissed off, but my guys were really mad. Since then, that grower really changed. Whenever he saw me, he'd come up and say hi, and he was always friendly after that."

John Batto's Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard out by the Sonoma County airport was always one of the last vineyards picked. Slow-ripening, it was usually picked below 24° Brix and made lovely, well-balanced wines, winning the sweepstakes award at the **Sonoma County Harvest Fair** in 1983. Because the grapes were harvested so late in the season, getting pickers always posed a problem. One year Batto hired some guy to round up a crew. They showed up, buckets in hand, and set about picking the crop.

They finished up, and Batto brought them the traditional case of beer for the end of harvest. He tallied up the number of buckets from each picker and paid them accordingly. He took off to deliver his grapes to the winery. Since it was the end of harvest, the pickers left the buckets since they no longer needed them. It wasn't until all the beer had been drunk and all of the pickers had left that Batto, upon his return, realized that the top 2 inches of each bucket had been cut off. He figured he had overpaid almost 10 percent to the pickers because each bucket, while full, carried fewer grapes than normal.

Some Rather Creative Solutions

Zeke Neeley, currently winemaker for **Kenwood Vineyards**, recalled an incident that proves a good mechanic is worth his weight in gold:

"I think it was in 2012: we had a destemmer that was an old model... obsolete. Late one Friday night (why does it always have to be late at night?), while halfway through a lot of Napa Cabernet, it started grinding out smoke, so we opened it up. Our maintenance supervisor figured out that the bearing cup that holds the shaft inside the destemmer had seized up, and the bearings were all ground to dust. This destemmer had been made by a company that went bankrupt, so there wasn't an actual distributor to call, just a dealer who bought their inventory when they went under.



Zeke Neeley

"Our maintenance supervisor, **Richard DeGarmo**, knew the guy's home number and called to ask if we could get another bearing cup. I can't recall the exact conversation, but the dealer said something to the effect of, 'I don't have that part here, but we can **FedEx** it from Europe, and it will get here next week.' That wasn't going to help us much since we had all that Cab sitting on the crushpad and picks lined up for the next morning, Monday and Tuesday. We called around to see if we could rent a mobile destemmer unit, but it was the middle of harvest, and we weren't having any luck. The winery I worked for was 100 percent estate, which meant we couldn't send fruit to an outside facility for processing; everything had to be done on-site.

"Meanwhile Richard had been looking around for something to make the machine work when he glanced at his desk. Many oak barrels are delivered with little oak bungs hammered into the bunghole to keep dust and rodents out of the barrels during transport. Richard had a couple on his desk and noticed that they were roughly the size of the bearing cup. He took one back to his woodshop, shaped it and drilled out the center until it was the exact shape of the broken bearing cup. He greased it up, put it in the destemmer and then fired it up. The thing worked like a charm. It even had the pleasant side-effect of smelling like a toasting barrel as the destemmer heated that cup up.

"It wasn't going to last forever, but I believe we made it through that fruit and one more full day of harvest before the actual bearing cup finally arrived early the next week. That is one of those stories that reminds me that you can never give up during harvest. There is always a way to make it work."



Charlie Tolbert

Charlie Tolbert told a story about the first time he made late harvest Riesling with **Dick Arrowood** at **Chateau St. Jean**:

"The incident that comes to mind is in the early days of Chateau St. Jean. Dick wanted to crush TBA (totally Botrytis affected) White Riesling. It came in really late in the evening because it's such a laborious pick. It was tipped



into the hopper, spores flying into the air, through the crusher; and when it hit the **Art Rafanelli** must pump...thud—and that thing would pump bowling balls. These grapes had no moisture. They were nearly 40° Brix. It was hard to really tell because the hydrometer would float to wherever it was placed. The juice was that thick. It was like trying to pump oatmeal.

"My memory is trying to unclog the must pump at 11:30 p.m., armpit deep in the 40° Brix mush. All the while Dick was insisting we weren't to put any water in it. It was a long, sticky night. This stuff was never going to pump. We did learn it made much more sense to place the grapes directly in the press and take the better part of a day to press it out."

"Harvest Brain"

Something all of us winemakers know about is exhaustion. Day after day of long hours of physical work and stress can take a toll on our ability to think straight. **Sam Bilbro** of **Idlewild Wines** told a story about how trying to make things easier backfired on him.


Sam Bilbro

"My typical harvest starts off pretty hectic because I am very frontloaded making whites and Rosé. I tend to get over half of my fruit in the first two weeks of harvest. This last 2016 harvest was very hectic and very busy, and I had this tank of Rosé that was a little fuller than normal. It was maybe 8° to 10° Brix and just starting to slow down. I usually want to give a little stir and get everything up in suspension to keep it going. I don't do a cold and slow ferment. It is all native yeast ferment, and I don't add nutrients either. So I usually circulate the tank to keep it up and moving quickly to get it to finish.

"I was really tired and short on time and short on energy, so I thought I would get really smart, and instead of circulating my tank the normal way, which involved getting a pump and setting up hoses and cleaning everything up when I'm done, I'd just add a scoop of dry ice. It would sink to the bottom, bubble up and mix it all in, and I wouldn't even have to think about it. It was tired brain and tired body trying to think. I climbed up on the ladder; and as I dropped in the scoop of dry ice, I literally realized, 'Oh no, what did I just do?'

"I scrambled down the ladder, as fast as I could, because I realized it was about to explode from all of the CO_2 in the tank. Half-way down the ladder there was an absolute explosion of Rosé bouncing off the lid and spraying like a shower everywhere. In the end, I only lost about 15 gallons of wine, but I was drenched, and Rosé was everywhere. I had to run to the tank with a bucket and relieve the pressure off the bottom of the tank so I wouldn't lose more wine. I've over-filled barrels before, but this was like 10 times more powerful. It was a complete Rosé shower.

"It was one of those things where you try to be smart, when you are way too tired physically and mentally. Instead of doing the thing that you always do that you know works, you try to get creative and try something new. By the time I washed everything down and squeegeed the floors, I probably lost an extra hour of labor, along with 15 gallons of Rosé. That one definitely bit me in the ass."



Equipment Struggles

Forklifts are dangerous and prone to accidents. **Lance Silver**, owner of **Tobin James Winery**, told of how he used a forklift as a job interview.


Lance Silver

"Back when we were first starting out, we were a small, three-person operation. My family was living at the winery. There was an early Sunday morning delivery, and we were bottling on Monday, so I didn't want to turn it away. I jumped out of bed and got on the forklift, but I was a bit rusty with my forklift skills. I unloaded the truck; and as I was saying goodbye to the driver, I forgot to put the mast down on the forklift. I drove it straight into the roll-up door, denting it in half.

"I didn't know what to do. In those days Paso Robles was a one-horse town. No one was working on Sunday. I couldn't close the door. I figured I was going to have to sleep in the winery to keep guard. Then I remembered that our general manager's husband, who was between jobs, was a Mr. Fix-it guy. I called him, and he showed up with a crowbar and a hammer, and somehow got the door down and locked. It was so amazing that I offered him a job. That was 18 years ago, and he is still with us."

Marcelo Hernandez was the vineyard manager for Gundlach Bundschu for more than 20 years; but before he took on that responsibility, he worked in the cellar. One evening, when I was working as a cellar rat for Gundlach Bundschu, we were emptying a 5,000-gallon tank of Zinfandel. Emptying a tank was a three-man job: one shoveled, one ran the pump, and the third handled the end of the pipe to fill the press. Unfortunately, the owner/winemaker left for a social engagement, so it was just me and Marcelo.

Normally, one guy would shovel grapes while another would turn the pump on and off as it filled up with grapes. The third man would slide the 6-inch PVC pipe we had rigged with an elbow from side to side, filling the press. Since there were only two of us, I climbed into the tank with the shovel. I leaned far through the manhole, signaled Marcelo and strained to turn on the Ministrine pump. I folded myself back into the tank and shoveled pomace for all I was worth, trying to limit the amount of air in the 6-inch hose.

No matter how fast I shoveled, there was no way to keep up with a Ministrine pump with a 6-inch line. At Marcelo's end, grapes would flow out and then stop and then flow again. Then the grapes stopped coming out. Marcelo figured I was taking a quick break, but I was shoveling pomace like mad. I could not see Marcelo while I was inside the tank. Finally, over the loud, grinding noise of the pump, I made out some screaming. Marcelo had figured out that grapes were plugged in the hose and was yelling for me to stop shoveling.

I stopped and looked out the racking door just in time to see the plug of grapes in the hose break loose. While Marcelo hung onto the PVC pipe for dear life, the pressure lifted him off the ground. The PVC elbow shot off, and a stream of grape pomace exploded from the hose, blasting all the way to the ceiling. The PVC pipe had a mind of its own and swung in an arc, carrying Marcelo with it. We ended up with a wide stripe of purple pomace going up the wall of the winery and extending across the ceiling for 20 feet. Stained purple, that stripe remained tattooed on the ceiling for almost two years before fading away.

Barrels are a critical component in making fine wine, especially red wine. Winemakers are familiar with the intoxicating, toasty, vanilla aromas filling the air when opening a container of new barrels. Zeke Neeley discovered something else:

"Five or six years ago we had about 32 barrels come in from a small cooperage in France. Because of all the things that can happen to barrels during transport, I make sure the guys take the time to inspect every barrel as they unload. Usually, the problems we run into are an occasional end-piece broken off a stave or a crack at the bung hole. This time they called me down to the loading dock because the barrels had lost their hoops.

"Apparently, back in France, the cooper was getting complaints from French winemakers that the hoop nails were catching on their pants when they handled the barrels and causing unsightly tears, so the cooperage eliminated the nails and just hammered the hoops on snug. I guess this is fine if you are just shipping to a neighboring part of France; but if you happen to ship through the Panama canal and let containers sit on a dock in Oakland for a month, the oak will dry out and shrink a bit, and you end up with a container with a bunch of hoops on the floor. The cooperage's rep was very apologetic and came out to hammer them back on himself. So it wasn't catastrophic, just a new one for me."

Once wine is made, we would figure things were pretty safe, but **Jeff McBride** of **McBride Consulting** told us a story about the laws of thermodynamics that he learned while working at Kenwood Vineyards:

"We had a 3,500-gallon tank filled with Chenin Blanc that was going through cold stabilization. We had just mixed up a 130° F batter of bentonite clay in a slurry to add to the wine for heat stability. We hooked up to a centrifugal pump, went in through the racking valve and went back out through the bottom transfer valve. The lid on the tank was not bolted down, but it was

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Jeff McBride

sitting there loose. I was up the ladder and told them to start adding the bentonite. Chenin Blanc holds an incredible amount of CO_2. As soon as we shot some of that hot bentonite into the tank, foam started rising. I immediately came down the ladder, shouting for them to stop pumping. The hot bentonite displaced all of that CO_2. It blew the lid open and started a waterfall of Chenin Blanc cascading all the way to the floor. I dove under the waterfall and shut off the valve, but that little bit was enough to fill up the whole tank aisle with Chenin. It looked like at least 1,000 gallons of wine and foam, but turned out to be less than 200 gallons. So: Do not mix hot bentonite into a cold tank of Chenin Blanc with high CO_2.

"Another time I had to re-learn the law of gravity and pressure. The old Kenwood was a two-story winery. I was racking red wine up on the second story. When I finished, I hooked up a water hose to the line to chase the wine up to the tank. I was standing there tasting, waiting for the water, but it never came. We didn't have check valves on the water line at the time. Meanwhile the water line started siphoning red wine. It ran through the water line all the way to the gardener out in front of the winery, who was watering the plants. Red wine started coming out of his hose. He didn't know what to do, so he tried pinching the hose, but it didn't work. He must have thought he was Jesus Christ turning water into wine. After that day, we put check valves on all of the water lines."

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Party Fouls

Lance Silver told a story of how a **PG&E** disaster turned into something special.

"The Zinfandel Festival Party is our biggest event of the year. It is a two-day event attended by 1,500 people each night. Three months prior to the party, which takes place in March, they were widening the highway in front of the winery. PG&E needed to move some power poles to make the stretch across the highway, and they put in a temporary line during construction. The supervisor putting in that line didn't bother to look across the street and see our winery, which uses 480 amps of power. We didn't know it, but they put in a temporary 120-amp line. December, January and February went by, and we didn't use much power in those months—as is the case for most wineries.

"When our big event came, which had tents with all kinds of lighting, refrigeration, four bands with amplified music, ovens and stoves, it created a ridiculous draw of electricity. The party started on Friday night, and the line actually melted, landed on the property where the party was taking place and proceeded to set the fence on fire and started igniting one oleander bush after another. The bushes went up in a burst of flame that looked like fireworks. I was in one of the tents when everything went dark. People started shouting, 'Oh, look, they are shooting off fireworks.'

"I was in charge of the entire operation, and I didn't hire anyone to do fireworks. So, I ran out of the tent and watched as the fence went up in flames. We had a fantastic group of security made up of off-duty police and firemen, and they jumped into action. They immediately caution-taped the dangerous area while everyone left the pitch-black tents and watched the fireworks show.

"Unfortunately, we had an over-zealous police lieutenant, who insisted that we evacuate. He pushed people out the door and into the parking lot, and 600 of the 1,500 people left before I realized what was happening. I cried

out to him, 'What are you doing? Everybody is safe. Security has taken care of the situation.' Both the police chief and the fire chief were at the event as customers. They stopped the evacuation and explained that the situation was under control. PG&E was on the way, so we moved the remaining people to a safe area. We evacuated one tent, and we re-directed the working lights in the parking lot into the second tent. The bands all came outside and started playing acoustically all around the parking lot. The chefs put their food on trays and brought it out to the people. The remaining people had the time of their lives. They thought it was the best party ever.

"The fallout came when the 600 people who were evacuated found out that they could have stayed and that they missed a great party. They all wanted to come the next night, but we were already sold out. That was difficult dealing with 600 people who got cheated. That cost us and PG&E free tickets for the next year."

Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, harvest parties were private affairs just for cellar rats. Kenwood Vineyards always had one of the best harvest parties, and they would generously invite most of the cellar rats throughout the valley. (There weren't more than about 20 of us at the time.)

Chuy Ordaz and his crew would cook birria, and it made for a great finish to harvest. Someone at Kenwood recognized that these parties were great fun and could be a great marketing tool. So they decided to invite family members, growers, key customers, wine writers and other assorted hangers-on. Kenwood's 1983 harvest party was special. **Steve Sullivan**, who worked at Kenwood for 12 years and is now the partner of **StaVin Inc.** and **Safe Harbor**, will never forget what happened at that party.

"The guest list got away from people. Before we knew it, there were more than 250 people in attendance. The food was great. The beer and wine flowed freely. We even had a mariachi band. People danced and laughed and carried on. It was a great party, and everyone was thrilled it had gone off so well. The next day a group of us went back to the winery to clean up. We got everything straightened up and put away; and because the birria was so good, we decided to chow down on leftovers. So we had another great meal, some cold beers and a few bottles of wine.

"That night I got deathly ill, worshipping at the porcelain god for nine or 10 hours. I thought I was going to die or at least cough up a lung. Mike Lee called me up and asked how I was feeling. I told him I was dying, and he admitted he was too. He told me that his phone was ringing off the hook. Of the 250 people at the party, about 150 of them had gotten sick. Six to eight of them had gone to the emergency room. Even people who didn't eat meat had gotten sick. It turned out that someone had brought special chili peppers up from Mexico, and they were somehow contaminated, so the salsas and the molés were all causing trouble.

"We talked about sending apology letters but decided that was not a good idea, so we came up with the idea of a T-shirt. The T-shirt depicted a mariachi band and revelers and said, 'I survived the Kenwood Harvest Party.' We made sure that everyone in attendance got one of those shirts."

IF YOU MAKE WINE for a living, then you know that every stage of production is fraught with danger. Things can and will go wrong when you least expect them. The first thing for a winemaker to do is work your way around the problem. The second thing to do is laugh about it. Finally, you have a responsibility to turn it into a good story and tell it to others. **WBM**

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article has some pretty good stories. I am certain that hundreds of other winemakers have dozens of stories just as good. If you have a tale that would interest our readers, try contacting our writer at* lctoon@winepatrol.com.



