

ask the
AWRI

Assessing grapes for disease

In seasons where conditions favour the development of fungal diseases, grapegrowers and winemakers are under pressure to meet quality targets by managing the level of disease-affected fruit entering the winery. This can be difficult for both parties. In this article, AWRI Senior Viticulturist **Robyn Dixon** explores some of the tools and resources available to grapegrowers and winemakers to manage disease assessments in a fair, equitable and mutually beneficial manner.



What tools are available for growers to do their own disease assessments?

Information about monitoring for key grapevine pests and diseases found in Australia is available on the 'Pests, diseases and viruses' page of the AWRI website. Grape Assess, a digital application developed by the University of Adelaide, with funding from Wine Australia, is a monitoring tool that uses visual techniques to assess diseases and disorders. Grape Assess can be downloaded for free from the Android and Apple app stores.

What is The Code of Conduct for Australian Winegrape Purchases and who does it affect?

The Code of Conduct for Australian Winegrape Purchases was developed for the Australian wine sector by peak body Australian Grape & Wine and its Code Management Committee (a committee with equal representation of winemakers and grapegrowers). It serves as a foundation for building relationships between growers and winemakers that are fair, equitable and mutually beneficial and provides a quick and cost-

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effective dispute resolution mechanism. The Code sets minimum standards relating to grape purchasing, including mechanisms for determining price; quality assessment for the purpose of affecting price; and payment terms.

The Code is a non-prescribed voluntary industry code. Winemakers who elect to become signatories are governed by this code in their commercial dealings with growers. Where the Code is incorporated into a contract by reference, it has contractual force. There are currently 72 signatories of the Code, representing 60-70% of the Australian winegrape crush.

Is there an industry-recognised Standard Operating Procedure for fruit condition assessment that wineries should be following?

In 2018–19 the ACCC's Agriculture Unit conducted a market study of the winegrape industry. The study examined competition, contracting practices, transparency and risk allocation in wine grape supply chains. One aspect of the study was a review of the industry guidance on quality assessment standards so that they reflect current best practice. The study indicated that winemakers should reduce their reliance on subjective measures to determine payment and eliminate their use altogether where objective measures are available to measure the same or similar characteristics. Where they exist, the use of industry-endorsed standard procedures for quality assessments affecting price are a requirement of all signatories to the Code. Under the Code, supply agreements must also clearly outline any other quality testing and sampling methods that winemakers intend to use.

Australian Grape & Wine has produced industry-endorsed standard procedures for testing winegrapes for Brix or colour and guidelines for collecting grape samples in the vineyard for Brix and colour assessment. Although there is currently no industry-endorsed standard procedure for pest and disease assessment in the vineyard, the recently updated booklet on winegrape assessment (Hooper and Wilkes 2022),

provides the following useful guidelines:

- Use the disease assessment key from Scott *et al.* (2015) to quantify the percentage incidence and severity rating of disease in the vineyard.
- Commence assessment of disease in the vineyard by veraison at the latest, or earlier if resources allow.
- Conduct assessments of disease in association with the winemaker/ grape purchaser.
- Ensure assessors are trained in the technical assessment of pests and diseases that can affect wine quality.
- Use an assessment method that produces results that are statistically valid, taking account of vineyard variability. Retain accurate and consistent documentation to support this.
- To ensure thorough monitoring, conduct 200 observations per 'hot spot' or block, stopping to assess 20 sites and assessing 10 bunches or leaves at each location by choosing one to five vines. Growers are advised, however, to consult purchasing wineries regarding their disease assessment protocols.

Furthermore, The Code states that the timing and methodology of these assessments should be specified in the grower supply agreement and, where an adverse assessment decision is made, evidence to justify the decision should be documented and be accessible to each party in the event of a dispute (this is a requirement of signatories to the Code).

Should a grower be present during a disease assessment?

The Code of Practice clearly states that a grower should always have the right to be present during a vineyard inspection and this should be encouraged.

What is the agreed process for notifying the grower of rejection due to disease?

Signatories must provide notification of possible downgrading, penalties or rejection in accordance with timeframes laid out in the Code and in any case as early as possible with consideration to the fact that the grower may wish to seek alternative arrangements to prevent further loss. Furthermore, identifying

problems as early as possible allows the grower the opportunity to take action that might avoid grapes being downgraded or rejected.

What is the agreed process for dispute resolution?

Information about dispute resolution can be found on the Dispute Resolution page of the Australian Grape & Wine website or by contacting the Code Secretariat.

AWRI helpdesk

The AWRI helpdesk provides a free-of-charge technical advice service to Australia's grapegrowers and winemakers. For further information about grape assessment or any other technical matter, contact the AWRI helpdesk on (08) 8313 6600 or helpdesk@awri.com.au

References and further reading

Australian Grape & Wine Inc. 2021. *Code of Conduct for Australian Winegrape Purchases*. Available from: www.agw.org.au/industry-resources/the-code-of-conduct-for-australian-winegrape-purchases

AWRI webpage on pests and diseases: www.awri.com.au/industry_support/viticulture/pests-and-diseases

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Scott, E., Zanker, T., Petrovic, T., Kravchuk, O., Evans, K., Emmett, B., Perry, W. 2015. A diagrammatic key to assist assessment of powdery mildew severity on grape bunches. *Aust. N.Z. Grapegrower Winemaker*. 623: 46-49.

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