

# Wine 101: The Powers of Pruning

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Ampelos Vineyard in the morning

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In the Vineyard with Peter Work of Ampelos Cellars

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By [Matt Kettmann](#) (Contact)

In 2012, a good friend and I enrolled in what might best be called Wine Grape Growing 101, a yearlong experience of following the seasons in Santa Barbara County vineyards on the way to making our first barrel of wine. Aside from a few lessons at the historic Bien Nacido Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley, our home classroom was Ampelos Vineyard, where pinot noir, syrah, grenache, and a tiny bit of viognier grow on about 25 acres in the Sta. Rita Hills between Buellton and Lompoc. (Riesling is on the horizon, as well.) Our professor was the inimitable Peter Work, a former IT expert originally from Denmark who left his corporate career to focus on wine after a near-miss with the 9/11 attacks forced him to rethink his life.

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I first met Peter and his wife, Rebecca, on a wine tour in 2007, when a brush fire broke out on the property next door as he explained his biodynamic farming practices and we sipped on his vibrant, alive wines. (Read about that day [here](#).) In the ensuing years, we connected sporadically, but he really came



back on my radar in early 2012, when I brought a French winemaker/filmmaker to his tasting room during the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. (Read about that [here](#).) Because of that trip, I returned to Peter with film and wine on the brain to produce (with another good friend) a two-minute documentary that premiered as part of the Green Shorts Film Festival at the Lobero Theater last April. (See that video [here](#).)



While filming that short, Peter heard that I was doing some vineyard learning with my friend at Bien Nacido, and he suggested that we do the same with him at Ampelos. So starting in March, we began regular trips to the vineyard to experience the seasons, get our hands dirty, and start the unending process of understanding and appreciating wine grapes.



I wrote a little about it last year [here](#), but

Peter Work, owner of Ampelos Cellars, leads a tour of his vineyard just minutes before spotting the nearby blaze.

this year, based on my experiences — which included lots of lessons from vineyard manager Andres Lerena plus occasional chats with Jeff Newton of Central Coast Vineyard Care — and direct input from Professor Peter himself, I will be publishing a more detailed series of reports on what is happening in Santa Barbara County vineyards each season, which activities might be underway, and why. Toward harvest, we will also venture into the winemaking process inside the Ampelos Cellars wine production facility in Lompoc and check in with how our barrel of cool-climate syrah is doing.

Altogether, this series will bring Wine 101 to you, providing more information about what's happening to the county's rural landscape — something that even non-drinkers can appreciate —and, for those who love wine, why what happens each season matters so much for what's in your glass.



By Matt Kettmann

**The Power of Drinking**

## The Powers of Pruning

The fire almost interrupted a fine, wine-soaked lunch at Ampelos.

Our introductory lesson is in pruning, the first step taken on vineyards each year, in which the vines are hacked back to a size and shape that will bode well for the months to come. I was able to participate in this activity just this month, and, like almost everything in the vineyard, it requires much more mental focus than physical effort. That said, I was sweating in the February sun after less than an hour of spinning pinot vines.

I asked Professor Peter Work a few questions about pruning to get a better sense of why it's such an integral part of the growing process.

### What's the importance of pruning?

It is to help the vine to focus on the coming season's growth. At the end of the year, there are dozens of shoots, each with dozens of buds that each can create new shoots for the year. By pruning, we reduce the number of potential shoots by over 90 percent, which gives the plant a chance to direct its water and nutrient intake to the 15 to 28 buds that are left. All of this results in better quality grapes and wine.

Giuseppe Bonfiglio

### What's the basic schedule for the process?

We start pruning around February 1 — first pinot noir, then syrah, and finally grenache, the same order as bud break and harvest. We have 40,000 vines to prune, and, with a small crew of only six people, it takes about three weeks.

### Is this a good time to check into the vines for any other problems?

We check under the barks for certain insects and fungi, and when you cut the vines, you can also inspect for the general health of the plant. As we prune, we also notice the vigor from last year's growing season, such as the thickness of the shoots and the distance between the buds. The factors are early indicators of the crop level for this year.



### How does biodynamics inform pruning?

Ideally you want to prune under certain phases of the moon. The ideal time is on a descending moon where the energy of the vines is pushed toward the roots — and therefore you're not weakening the vines by cutting it.

Pruning Ampelos vines.

### Do others do pruning differently, or is it a pretty standard operation?

Some vineyards use mechanical pre-pruners to save costs. We do pre-prune, but manually. The pruning itself is a manual operation for all vineyards in the county. Vines can be pruned using either cane or cordon-spur pruning. Many vineyards use the latter because it is faster, but we prefer cane pruning. Our trained staff can prune about 32 vines per minute.

### Do you have any particularly memorable experiences, good or bad, from pruning over the years?

In general, pruning is one of the highlights of the year, which is why I always spend some time with the crew pruning. It's always fun when our friends and wine club members help out because they are so afraid in the beginning to make a wrong cut. A few years ago when I joined the pruning crew, the first day one of the guys asked my foreman what he would do if I made a bunch of mistakes, if he would fire me.