

TOP STORY

As 2018 Harvest Begins, Growers Remain Optimistic for Good Yields and Quality

Bins of sparkling wine grapes have started to hit crush pads in the North Coast of California signaling the start of the 2018 harvest.

Growers throughout California are optimistic regarding both the quality and quantity of grapes based on conditions through the spring and early summer. Other states, such as Texas, are deep into the harvest and report an exceptional year, while growers in the Northwest are just hitting the midpoint of *veraison* and there too the mood is optimistic.

The only dark cloud, both literally and figuratively, are towering pillars of smoke from raging wild fires that have spread into remote parts of Northern California and elsewhere.

The Mendocino Complex fire, which includes the River Fire and much larger Ranch Fire were of the most concern in early August as the flames came close to vineyards and populated areas of Mendocino and Lake county. Firefighters were able to check the blazes but they then advanced deep into more remote areas. The River Fire was 100% contained as *Wines & Vines* went to press but had burned nearly 50,000 acres, while the Ranch Fire was only 64% contained and had become the state's largest fire in history at nearly 315,000 acres according to CalFire. Six firefighters have died in California this year.

While the fires have covered much of the state's premier wine regions in smoke or haze, most growers and winemakers are hoping it came early enough in the vintage to miss the worst effects of smoke taint.

Jon Ruel, CEO and former viticulturist for Trefethen Family Vineyards, said in late July that some smoke was visible in the sky above the Oak Knoll estate and toward the east.

During *veraison*, grapes are



The 2018 harvest kicked off for Mumm Napa with an early morning pick of Pinot Noir for sparkling wine on Aug. 15.

more susceptible to smoke taint: as the fruit matures, the skin gets softer and compounds called volatile phenols found in fire smoke can easily permeate that supple skin, manipulating the molecular compositions, causing what is known as smoke taint.

Ruel said none of the fires or resulting smoke are close enough to the Trefethen estate vineyards to make him or his vineyard management team worried about the 2018 harvest. "That said, with the devastating fires around Napa and Sonoma Counties last year, we are all certainly on edge," he said.

When asked about this year's harvest, Ruel remains happily optimistic. "The 2018 vintage is looking very good!"

Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes saw "typical timing" for bud break in late March, followed shortly thereafter by the Bordeaux varieties in late March, Ruel said. However, he said the spring temperatures were overall cooler than

average, thus growth was slow. "One of the benefits of the slow growth was that it made it easier for our crews to keep up with suckering the vines," he said.

Ripening just a few days behind normal

But, as for timing, Ruel said that overall the vines are still running a few days behind due to those cool temperatures in April. "It's only a few days, maybe a week, behind," he said. "But it feels like much more because the last few vintages were all so early."

Up Valley, Sam Kaplan, winemaker and vineyard manager at Arkenstone Vineyards, has a similar story. "At this point, I'm very optimistic that we're on track for a great harvest," he said. Arkenstone's Howell Mountain estate vineyards are 13 acres of predominantly Bordeaux varieties.

Kaplan said at the beginning of the growing season, due to cooler than average spring tem-

peratures, he thought the vines were tracking about 10 days behind previous vintages, but a July heat spike, with days warming to between 80° F and 90° F, have "let the vines catch up." "We're expecting a normal start time to harvest," he said, which, atop Howell Mountain, is usually the first week of September.

And the crop at Arkenstone looks healthy. "It's not too heavy, not too light, clusters are open but not too huge, which is typically nice for quality," Kaplan said. He estimates his vines will yield between 2.5 to 3 tons per acre — a low but healthy yield he said is on par with the past few vintages.

Conditions favorable in Sonoma County

In Sonoma County, John Olney, COO and winemaker for Ridge Vineyards Lytton Springs, said Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley experienced a completely dry February,

which lead to concerns about moisture in the soil as the vines entered the growing season. But because of a “few good soakings” in March, those concerns were alleviated — though bud break occurred later than anticipated in early April.

Olney said things have evened out temperature-wise. “There have been a few heat spikes with temperatures over 100,” he said, “but July has been pretty moderate, especially over the last two weeks.”

He added he expects that harvest won’t begin in the estate vineyards until Sept. 10.

Olney said that there’s been a lot of steady, periodic wind during the growing season that’s helped limit the occurrence of mildew. And though there have been a few mealy bug sightings, the vineyard team has released predatory wasps to sustainably take care of that issue.

In Sonoma County’s Russian River Valley, Nicole Bacigalupi, third generation owner of Bacigalupi Vineyards, said, “All varieties



Many growers in Oregon and Washington have been dropping green clusters as they plan for bountiful harvest in the Northwest.

across the board look better than last year.”

The family’s estate vineyards, located on Westside Road where they also own and operate their winery and tasting room, are planted to 121 acres of predominantly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, as well as Zinfandel and Petite Sirah.

Though Bacigalupi said they’re “right on track with ‘normal’” this year, she noted that there’s been significantly less fog in the Russian River Valley than in past years. “This may make our picking dates slightly earlier than we would have had with a similar temperature year with fog,” she said.

Bacigalupi said the vines’ yields are slightly up from last year in most blocks of Pinot Noir, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah, with estimates of 4 to 5 tons per acre. Chardonnay, she said, is about on par with last year, and is expected to yield about 3 tons per acre.

Large crop predicted in the Northwest

All signs are pointing to an above-average wine grape crop in the Northwest, and growers from British Columbia to Oregon were busy thinning clusters in mid-August as veraison kicked in.

Some of the biggest numbers are likely to come out of Washington state. A preliminary forecast from the Washington Winegrowers Association, which represents growers across the state, puts the 2018 crop at a potential 268,255 tons. This is on par with the 2016 record of 270,000 tons but 17% above last year’s harvest of 229,000 tons.

By contrast, Oregon harvested more than 85,000 tons,

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on par with 2015's record crop, while British Columbia growers picked a new record of 32,700 tons last year. "For the past couple of years, several new vineyards have been planted. This year's estimate reflects the newer acres coming into production," said Vicky Scharlau, the Washington association's executive director.

The harvest will come from approximately 58,208 acres this year, up 4% from 56,073 acres in 2016. The new acreage to date has been in established viticultural areas such as the Yakima Valley AVA, in particular Red Mountain, as well as Walla Walla and the Horse Heaven Hills. However, new areas along the Columbia River are also opening up with five new AVAs planned, the most recent being an application perfected in March for Goose Gap around Badger and Candy Mountains in Benton County.

A working group of growers and vintners develops the estimate, the association explained,

as an early indicator of crop size, by variety, for growers and vintners to use as a management tool. "[It] is not intended to be a prediction of crush," the winegrowers communications manager Katlyn Straub emphasized.

Quality and quantity in Texas

After a second warm winter in a row (2017-18 was the "hottest on record") and earlier than normal tornados and hail in late March, Texas enjoyed a grape growing season that was quite nice, with no "untimely" rains or other widespread problems, said Justin Scheiner, assistant professor and extension viticulture specialist in the Department of Horticultural Sciences at Texas A&M University.

Messina Hof Cellars, located in Bryan is now about 25% through harvest, according to Paul Bonarrigo, the winery's owner and winemaker. So far 300 tons have been harvested, and he expects to process a total

of 1,100 tons. The drought is making ripening happen faster and, he said, "the quality is incredible. There's a nice balance of Brix and acid."

Bonarrigo summarized the Texas harvest as being "excellent, exceptional" in quality, and noted that it will probably be the highest tonnage that Texas has ever produced.

Ed Hellman, professor of viticulture and Enology at Texas Tech University's campus in Fredericksburg, said the harvest across Texas is earlier this year because of the heat and the drought. However, he is less certain that yields overall will be much more than normal. "That remains to be seen," he said. "Last year there was a bit of overproduction. But there is more new acreage producing this year. Will that new production balance out the lower yield from smaller berry size?"

Hellman said the grapes are "clean as can be," with no disease, and small berries can be a

good thing, especially for the quality of red wines. Tempranillo is just starting to be harvested in the High Plains, and he reports that the color on those grapes "is awesome!"

According to Wines Vines Analytics, Texas currently has 324 wineries producing 1.9 million cases per year. The state's grape and wine industry has a \$13.1 billion economic according to an economic impact report from WineAmerica in 2017.

What is much less certain is the exact number of vineyard acres in the state. Hellman said counting wineries has always been easier than vineyard acres, but he added grower Andy Timmons, who owns one of the larger vineyards in the High Plains AVA, reported last year that 5,000 acres were harvested in that appellation alone. Based on that, Hellman said he believes Texas now has between 8,000 and 9,000 acres in total.

—Stacy Briscoe, Peter Mitham and Linda Jones McKee

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