

# Battling Wildfires and the Pandemic, Some U.S. Winemakers Forgo the 2020 Vintage

BY STACY BRISCOE



*Chateau Boswell winery in St. Helena, California, U.S. / Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg via Getty Images*

“The buds will break again,” says Craig Becker, co-founder, general manager, and director of viticulture and winemaking of Somerston Estate in Napa, Calif. It’s a sunny outlook for someone who saw 1,400 acres of his 1,682-acre property burned during the

August Hennessey Fire.

As of Tuesday morning, other than closures along Highway 128, Somerston Estate has not been affected by the Glass Fire that ignited in St. Helena this weekend, Becker reports.

He had expected to harvest 454 tons of grapes and produce 22,500 cases of wine this year. The new total is zero, however, as grapes tested positive for smoke taint earlier this month. The fruit is the sole source for the winery's portfolio, and 30% of Becker's crop is sold to long-term winery partners.

Though all structures were protected, the estate experienced extensive vineyard infrastructure damage in August that now needs replacing.

"This is a big financial blow. But I would say this would be more of a challenge if we didn't have our history of consistent volume growth," Becker says, noting that Somerston made just over 18,000 cases in 2019, up from 9,000 in 2016.

Becker plans to use what's left from the previous two vintages. "DTC [direct to consumer] is going to be really important ... to make sure we can bridge the gap between 2019 and 2021," he says. "We're making up new skus geared toward DTC to keep consumers interested and keep our portfolio fresh."

Smith Story Wine Cellars, which produces wine out of Obsidian Wine Co. in Sonoma, will not produce a 2020 vintage. The business already experienced financial losses due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, like decreased wholesale revenue, the fluctuation in tasting room closures and rental issues with their previous custom crush facility.

Smith Story decided back in spring 2020 to reduce production from 80 to 20 tons, and to limit grower partners to those focused on regenerative organics. But following the August fires, "Our growers that we were going to make wine with said they didn't want to tie up our cashflow with [tainted] grapes," says owner Alison Smith Story. "It was not a fun call with anyone."

Smith Story Wine Cellars was projected to produce 3,000 cases of California wine this year.

By the time Smith Story was alerted to the potential for smoke taint in the fruit, ETS was already inundated with samples. "They wouldn't have been able to get results back in time. This happened right at the time we were deciding a pick date."

Fortunately, the company has about 5,000 cases worth of wine in storage from previous vintages. Smith Story also imports wines from Europe. "I think we're going to be fine," Smith Story says, adding that she intends to pay her growers per their contracts despite not accepting their grapes.

**“We have a vision not just for next year, but for the next decade, with our eyes wide open.”—*Alison Smith Story, owner, Smith Story Wine Cellars***

Currently, Smith Story is in Anderson Valley, safe from the Glass Fire, and the company's wine warehouses in South Napa and Windsor, and winery in Sonoma, are all safe as well.

“It's horrifying what's happening in North Napa and parts of Sonoma County. Please pray for the safety of our friends, neighbors and firefighters,” Smith Story writes in an email.

Looking forward, she says the business will source grapes and wine from outside California. “We have a vision not just for next year, but for the next decade, with our eyes wide open.”

In Washington's Lake Chelan AVA, Robert Anderson, owner and winemaker of Lupine Vineyard, produces a modest 800 cases of wine each year. This year, he's discarded more than 500 liters of Pinot Gris and left the equivalent of 3 tons worth of Pinot Noir “to the birds.”

“Smoke taint is not a factor for us ... Abandoning our Pinot Noir is a purely financial decision caused by decreased sales,” Anderson says, citing a 50% reduction in total revenue due to COVID-19. That loss of revenue means he does not have adequate finances to bottle and label his Pinot Gris, nor hire vineyard crew to help harvest his Pinot Noir. “With so few sales, we had to make a choice where our limited revenue would go,” he says.

The boutique winery operation sells primarily through the DTC market via two local farmers markets. However, due to local regulation surrounding public tastings, Anderson has not been able to pour or sell his wines as usual.

“Our 2020 season is driving us close to failure,” Anderson wrote in a September 7 letter to the WA State Farmers Market Association. “Our situation is dire.”

Anderson is frustrated and scrambling to save his small business. The silver lining, if there is one, is his 2018 Pinot Noir currently in cellar. He says he can feasibly bottle and label this wine. The question is, how and where can he sell his wines with such limited DTC channels at his disposal?

Since starting in California wine country early Sunday morning, the Glass Fire has combined with two other local fires and has burned 36,236 acres across both Napa and Sonoma counties. It is 0% containment, according to Cal Fire Division Chief Ben Nichols, as of a 5:00 p.m. PT media briefing on Monday, September 28.

There have been reports of destroyed and damaged wineries, but as the fire moved quite quickly, the exact level of damages and confirmed cases are still being determined.

The past year has been an onslaught of challenges with little immediate relief in sight for the wine industry. As Becker says, “The buds will break again.”

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# Wine Industry Job Fair Devoted to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Launches

BY [WINE ENTHUSIAST](#)



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A new initiative aims to create more equitable hiring processes and sustainable careers in the wine business. Be the Change is billed as the first-ever virtual job fair to prioritize diversity and inclusion. The two-day event will be held December 2-3, 2020.

“As a Black queer woman, I am no stranger to being a token to meet an employer’s bottom line. Because of this experience, I became a DEI professional,” Lia Jones, founder and executive director of Diversity in Wine & Spirits, and co-founder of Be the Change, said in a press release. “What makes this initiative unique is our vetting process of the employers to address the need for safe spaces for a diverse workplace.”

Be the Change is helmed by Jones; Rania Zayyat, founder and president, Wonder Women of Wine; Cara Bertrone, national accounts sales manager, Folio Fine Wine Partners; and Philana Bouvier, vice president of fine wine, Republic National Distributing Company, and chair, WSWA Women’s Leadership Council.

In addition to a virtual job fair for up to 1,000 jobseekers, Be the Change will host a roundtable discussion on diversity, equity and inclusion in hospitality. It will be moderated by Bouvier and feature Jones as well as Dr. Hoby Wedler, sensory innovation director, Sensepoint Design; Bobby Stuckey, MS, partner, Frasca Food and Wine; Stephanie Gallo, CMO, E. & J. Gallo; and Susana Balbo, founder and winemaker, Susana Balbo Wines.

“I immediately saw the negative effect that COVID 19 would have on employment and diversity,” Bouvier said in a release. “We are going to implement change in multiple industries and it begins with wine, tech and legislation.”

In 2021, Be the Change plans to lobby for legislation regarding diversity, equity and inclusion. It will also host a second employment event in March 2021.

Employers can register for the December job fair starting November 2.

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