

ARTICLES

31ST MARCH 2021

*by Stacy Briscoe***Survivor Vines**

Navigating St. Helena Road on my way to a vineyard tour, I suddenly feel a quivering sense of fear. It's not because the narrow, winding route has me gazing over the cliff's edge at every convex turn. (Although I find myself regretting my choice of breakfast more than once.) Or because of the fact that, at some point, my GPS cuts out and I'm left to my own sense of direction. (Never a good thing, believe me.) No, fear strikes me because gnarled, blackened trees are everywhere I look; melted four-door trucks sit abandoned by the side of the road; remnants of homes and wineries stand skeletal, exposed.

Since 2017, wildfires have become an annual crisis for Napa and Sonoma's wine industry. In 2020, the one-two punch of the LNU and Glass Fires cost Napa County alone \$2.7 billion in losses. Indeed, Napa's Spring Mountain AVA saw the most



full-on flames.

(We'll stick a pin in the pandemic and lockdown for just a moment...)

There's no denying that climate change is real. The word "wildfire" now modifies the word "season," a stretch of time that can last anywhere from July through October. This is unprecedented territory for California vintners, who are figuring out how to deal with this added stage to the growing cycle.

I reach my destination and, burnt perimeter aside, the property is beautiful. Napa and Sonoma mountain vineyards always are. Unfortunately, the purpose of my visit to meet with [Cornell Vineyards'](#) viticulturist and winemaker Elizabeth Tangney is not to sip her beautiful Bordeaux blends out on the patio, overlooking the landscape. (Although, I'll admit, we do a bit of that as well.) No, I am here to talk to her about vineyards: assessing that damage, determining vine vigour, and making the hard decision — to replant or revitalise?

As we walk through the vineyard, burnt grapes still hanging from crusty canes, Elizabeth tells me that 11 of the estate's 20 blocks are scheduled for replanting. "When I find soot on a vine, for me it's toast. Because that means the fire touched the vine, got hot enough to get to the cambium, to leave a mark, and will affect the sap flow," she says. "The problem with gambling on 'will the vine die or not' is that it may die next year or it may or die up to five years down the line."

Growers like Elizabeth have to consider what it means to "save" a fire-scorched vine. There are really two different definitions of the word: will the vine grow? Probably — you'll get a sucker; you'll get a couple of shoots. The vine isn't dead. But will it produce high enough quality grapes to craft a \$150 Cabernet? Questionable.

Once the sap flow is disrupted, chemical imbalances ensue. "The numbers get messed up — acids, sugars. So, while you may have fruit, it might not taste good and you're dealing with a different quality," Elizabeth explains.

The...good news? Silver lining? (Cue the theme song to Life of Brian.) In pulling out all the damaged vines, Elizabeth now has a "fresh start," if you will, to re-establish new blocks that will (hopefully) be more tolerant of California's constantly decreasing rainy season and increasing growing season temperatures.



cross-arms — up to 20 inches at the highest point — and promote shading. Drought-tolerant rootstocks, like 1103 Paulsen and 140R, with their fine root-hairs that innately dig deep in search of every drop of water, will replace the less vigorous systems currently in the ground. Elizabeth is even planting one “hot little block” to heat-loving Carmenère — a varietal in keeping with the estate’s Bordeaux-blend program, but a new addition at least partly influenced by the current climatic conditions.

There are also what I call “survivor vines” at Cornell. A few blocks that didn’t have soot still show some level of greenness in the internal tissue, with irrigation lines that are mostly intact. Elizabeth thinks these will ultimately be pull-and-replant vines. Her weather station — before it burned — registered the area’s temperature at over 180°F at one point during the fire. So, she knows the area got hot enough to damage the vines. The issue is that they don’t look damaged, nor are they acting damaged. They look like they’re really trying to survive.

“Industry expert please,” says Elizabeth. “But there isn’t one. We don’t have someone who can tell us, ‘Yes, this is the protocol.’ Really, this is uncharted territory.”

The only thing to do is make a decision. And learn from it.

Elizabeth has agreed to keep the vines in place, see them through to the next harvest, assess the quality of the fruit it bears, and keep me up-to-date with their progress (or failure).

In the meantime, she’s sending soil samples to a lab to assess the health of the biome. Were the little fungi and microbes damaged in the fire? If so, are they coming back? At what rate? How will the health of those near invisible life forms affect the vitality of her vines?

Through necessity, the Sonoma and Napa mountain growers who were once wildfire-novices are swiftly becoming those much-needed industry experts of the future. “It’s not exactly an area I thought I’d become an expert in,” says Elizabeth.

Traveling back down the hill is less scary. It’s something I’ve noticed on several road trips, long runs, even international flights. Once you have an idea of the terrain, the length of travel, the twists and turns and bumps in the road, the journey somehow seems shorter. The more you understand, the easier it gets. Uncharted territory



Photo of Elizabeth Tangney courtesy of Cornell Vineyards

[← On Reviews And Scores](#)[The Wisdom Of Age →](#)

ALSO ON TIM ATKIN MW



8 months ago • 2 comments

One of the nice things about wine publications is that one gets to read about more ...



16 days ago • 2 comments

South Africa has been experiencing renewed international interest for ...



7 months ago • 1 comment

A bunch of anonymous newsletters targeting the wine Twitter bubble ...

[0 Comments](#)[Tim Atkin MW](#)[Disqus' Privacy Policy](#)[Login](#) ▼[Recommend](#)[Tweet](#)[Share](#)[Sort by Newest](#) ▼

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS [?](#)

Be the first to comment.

[Subscribe](#) [Add Disqus to your site](#) [Add DisqusAdd](#) [Do Not Sell My Data](#)

0

Search products...

SEARCH

Join up to receive my latest news and views

email address

SUBSCRIBE

© Tim Atkin - Master of Wine 2021

[Privacy Policy](#) [Terms and Conditions](#)



Design: [Elise Castrodale](#)

Development: [Sam Oakley](#)

.

