

California Crushes Lowest Total Tonnage in a Decade, Grape Prices also Down

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The [2020 Preliminary Winegrape Crush Report](#) for California, released by the [National Agricultural Statistics Service](#), revealed the state's lowest wine crop figures since 2011. Statewide, California crushed 3.404 million tons of grapes, down 13% (about 88 million gallons) from 2019.

The drastic decrease is a result of multiple factors: lighter than normal yields for the 2020 vintage; devastating wildfires that burned throughout the state, damaging vines and tainting fruit; and the pandemic, which shifted consumer interest toward less expensive wine purchases.

“Overall, we think the crop was off by about 10–15% (before wildfires),” says Jeff Bitter, president of [Allied Grape Growers](#). “But the Crush Report is really a reflection of what happened due to fires and smoke that manifested almost exclusively in the coast.”

Data from the report shows key coastal varieties were most effected, particularly in Napa and Sonoma Counties, which were hit hard by two separate fire events, the [LNU Lightning Complex](#) and [Glass Fire](#), during harvest season.

“Our estimation, even prior to the report, is that somewhere between 240,000 and 325,000 tons of winegrapes didn’t get harvested because of smoke.”— Jeff Bitter, *Allied Grape Growers*

Compared to 2019, Napa crushed 39% fewer grapes overall. Cabernet Sauvignon, the county’s leading red variety, was down 43%, while Zinfandel declined 47%, Merlot 42% and Chardonnay 35%.

Sonoma County crushed 36% fewer grapes in 2020. Its most-planted red variety, Pinot Noir, was down 38%, while its leading white grape, Chardonnay, was down 44%.



In 2020, Napa and Sonoma crushed 39% and 36% fewer grapes, respectively, than the previous year / Getty

Bitter believes these drops are indicative not just of damaged fruit, but of buyers' rejections of potentially smoke-damaged product. "Our estimation, even prior to the report, is that somewhere between 240,000 and 325,000 tons of winegrapes didn't get harvested because of smoke," he says, noting some growers may have also left grapes unharvested for insurance purposes.

Despite the scarcity of premium coastal fruit, California's grape prices also saw a massive decrease. Statewide, Cabernet dropped from \$1,767 to \$1,231 (-30.4%), Pinot Noir from \$1,880 to \$1,208 (-35.8%) and Chardonnay from \$939 to \$828 (-11.8%).

"This is one of the biggest questions of the Crush Report, and it's really hard to say what the answer is, given all the challenges of the past year," says Glenn Proctor, partner of [Ciatti Global Grape and Wine Brokerage](#).

Proctor wonders if buyers who normally pay top-dollar rates for North Coast fruit renegotiated due to the uncertainty of smoke taint. "Additionally, the large 2018 crop led to 105,000 tons left on the vine in 2019," he says. Even though California saw a grape "shortage" in 2020, there was little urgency to purchase replacement fruit—many producers still have prior vintages in tank or barrel.

The other issue influencing the year's numbers? The human factor.

"There's been a change in demands due to the pandemic. Consumers started to pantry load—trade down, but buy more," says Audra Cooper, partner and broker for Turrentine Brokerage. She calls the current state of the California grape and bulk market a "transitional market."

"This shift in purchasing habits helped clean up old vintages that were sitting on the bulk market across all varieties and regions, albeit at lower prices than previously, when the trend was toward premiumization," she says.

"There's a challenge for wineries who primarily sell through restaurants trying to get into retail to sell products," says Steve Fredricks, president of [Turrentine Brokerage](#).

Wineries with the capabilities to do so are now shifting production, adding broader regional or even state-appellated brands or private labels to their portfolios to sell in retail outlets at consumer-approved pricing.

The question remains whether the trend toward value-priced wines will continue, or if demand will shift back toward premiumization.

"It's hard to make those projections," says Bitter. "One thing's for sure: 2020 is not a year we can benchmark for anything."

