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NEWS

A Vintage Lost?

As the Glass fire moves away, Napa and Sonoma winemakers are assessing damage to grapes and making difficult decisions about whether to produce wines in 2020



Roasted grapes hang from fire-damaged vines at a vineyard near St. Helena in Napa Valley. (Getty Images)



By Aaron Romano

Oct 8, 2020

The Glass fire, which erupted Sept. 27 in the hills above St. Helena, burned wineries and vineyards. It also halted harvest and may prove to be the knockout punch for the 2020 vintage

[<https://www.winespectator.com/packages/2020-wildfires>] in both Napa and Sonoma. The preceding LNU Complex fires in August had already impacted the vintage, as smoke lingered over the region [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/how-will-weeks-of-wildfire-smoke-on-the-west-coast-impact-the-2020-vintage>] for weeks when much of the year's crop was going through veraison and thus acutely susceptible to smoke taint. The Glass fire only further jeopardized the vintage, and very few wines will be made this year as a result.

"It is one of the saddest years ever," winemaker Phillipe Melka told *Wine Spectator*. "Usually, harvest is a happy time. We have very, very little hope."

Melka consults for 25 clients throughout Napa and Sonoma. His own winery in St. Helena survived a close call, but a guesthouse and part of his home and vineyard

were all seriously damaged by the Glass fire. He estimates that 35 to 38 percent of Napa's crop he's surveyed has been harvested to date, but believes only a portion of that could result in bottled wine, given the final impact of smoke taint. "Everything we test is [destined for] bulk, bulk, bulk," because of smoke taint, he lamented. "Possibly 70 percent will be declassified."

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Fellow consulting winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown echoed Melka, estimating that perhaps only 20 percent of the Napa crop will get bottled. "We have clients that didn't vinify any grapes this year, but none have made that public knowledge, mostly out of respect for those who are giving this year their best shot."

Kirk Venge, owner of Venge Vineyards in Calistoga and a consultant for several wineries, said he's considering calling it quits for the year. "If it's not harvested yet, it's

going to be dicey," he said, adding, "I like to be optimistic, but this is not the time. It's time to be realistic."

Some caution it's too soon to know for sure. "Assessment of damage to the areas affected by the most recent wildfire are still ongoing," said Teresa Wall, senior vice president of marketing communications for Napa Valley Vintners (NVV), a trade organization. "Some Napa Valley wineries have made announcements about their 2020 vintage, yet many are still in the process of evaluating the potential impact of smoke on their grapes. It is still too early to predict the overall impact that smoke and wildfires will have on the 2020 vintage."



The fire scorched vines at Bremer Family Vineyard near Calistoga. But even vines that escaped the flames have suffered from smoke in the air for weeks this year. (Jane Tyska/Digital First Media/East

Bay Times via Getty Images)

If it's not fire, it's smoke

While the country sees the destruction that the Glass fire has caused, including scorched vines and more than a dozen burned wineries, many vintners point to the LNU Complex fires that began Aug. 17 as the more significant factor behind all the damaged grapes.

Pete Richmond, founder of Silverado Farming Company, which farms grapes for Melka and dozens of other top-tier Cabernet-focused wineries in Napa, says that of the roughly 800 acres his company manages, they typically harvest 3,500 tons annually, but this year, around 1,300 tons will go unpicked.

"During the first fire, we did analysis on all vineyards, and 98 percent came back without smoke issues," Richmond said. But those samples were taken Aug 23 and 24. "Then the grapes sat in smoke for another two weeks." He's still waiting on some smoke taint results from testing lab ETS.

Tegan Passalacqua, winemaker for Turley, said the winery's Howell Mountain estate vineyards tested positive for smoke taint, and the Glass fire only made matters worse. "We dropped 100 tons," he said, noting

that he's still assessing the extent of smoke damage. "When I drove up to Howell Mountain the first time, it literally turned my stomach. We picked 5 tons to process it and see how it goes, but I'm pretty sure it's smoke-tainted."

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Emma Swain, CEO for St. Supéry, thought their Dollarhide Vineyard in Pope Valley was spared, but ultimately determined that they would not be able to harvest grapes from its 500 acres. "We're committed to producing only the very finest wines, and our analysis has shown us that the proximity to fresh smoke has damaged the harvest at the Dollarhide Vineyard." Swain said that they had begun harvest of Sauvignon Blanc just before the fires and she expects to have a small amount of that wine.

"Pretty much all of the [Napa] appellations have been affected—even Carneros, but a little less," said Melka. He characterizes this year as one big scientific experiment

gauging the effects of smoke taint. "We realized that we might have been OK after three, four or five [smoky] days. But after 10 days, there's no question that there will be smoke damage."

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"There seem to be three groups of people out there: folks in full denial of smoke taint, those who are hopeful something will work out, and the all-is-lost crowd," said Brown, noting that he'd be surprised if any high-profile wines were bottled this year. He said none of his ferments have been smoky, but noted it's on the back palate where you see the damage in the form of an acrid, bitter, charry finish. "We have lots in a tank that won't make it to bottle, but we will be watching closely and evaluating wines over the next year to see."

For those who chose to harvest while waiting for ETS results, it may still be another four to six weeks before they have any certainty. "There was some optimism ahead of the Glass fire," said Richmond. But he said the smoke from that wildfire was much more intense on the

valley, despite the shorter exposure. "It reminded me of 2017: thick and bad smoke. The inside of my truck still smells."

Venge concurred. "The smoke from the fires early this summer was not as pervasive and not an issue, but the current onslaught of smoke is oily and almost resinous," he said. "The harvest had a chance before, but this smoke is all the houses and barns that burned."

Brown said the only comparison to the devastation of this year he can think of is the valley's bout with phylloxera in the 1990s. "I don't think anyone alive today has seen anything quite this significant in a single year," he said, noting that while phylloxera caused a significant drop in wines made, it was spread out over a decade.

Countless Napa wineries have chosen not to make wine in 2020, but they're not alone. Many suspect that large swaths of Sonoma County grapes may also be damaged by smoke taint. Richmond said a vineyard he farms two miles from the coast had smoke taint. And vineyards in Monterey, Santa Cruz, Oregon and Washington may also be victims of smoke damage due to fires there.



Thomas Rivers Brown believes the fires and smoke are Napa's most traumatic event in almost three decades. (Tai Power Seeff)

Outlook

In March, just as the grapegrowing season was budding, vintners thought the viral pandemic might take the most significant toll on the industry, as sales and tourism plummeted. Now that fires have burned a historic 4 million acres in California, bright spots for 2020 may be few and far between.

Brown said many people would choose not to make wine this year for various reasons, the most obvious being the smoke-taint concerns but then there are corollaries. "How

are we going to sell wine, even if it is good, in such a maligned vintage?" he asked.

Then there's the other wine in the market. Coming into 2020, wine inventories were backing up supply chains to the point where some experts suggested California should remove thousands of acres of vines to help alleviate the glut. "It feels prudent to take this year off, especially with 2018 and 2019 being so big. Also, just the fear of not knowing the damage to the grapes and not wanting to incur additional costs could be enough to pull the plug," said Brown.

But there's more to the devastation than just the lost grapes and burned buildings and inventory. "You have to look downstream," said Richmond, who said one of his biggest concerns is keeping his 100 full-time employees busy now that harvest has ended a month early. "We're working on small things like replacing fencing. And development work, which was scheduled for the first quarter of next year, is being moved [up]."

Richmond said some grapes were picked despite unknown test results, with the understanding that damaged grapes would not command full price. "Our wineries are working on sliding scale, meaning they'll pay

the full amount if the grapes are OK, and if not, they'll pay less."

Richmond said the wineries have also agreed to pay \$1,500 per ton to leave grapes on the vine. "Paying growers not to pick is pretty innovative and helps maintain relationships," he said, noting that both parties have a shared set of risks and values. "We're in this together."

Wall and the NVV are determined to uphold the region's reputation. "We know there are beautiful wines already underway. While the harvest will be smaller than usual, the 2020 vintage will not be absent from the history books."

—*With reporting by Tim Fish and Kim Marcus.*

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