



napa valley vintners

Napa Valley Vintners Expect Outstanding Wines from 2009 Vintage

A perfect growing season leaves winemakers “all smiles”

In Napa Valley Mother Nature is once again a super-hero, providing winemakers lush, beautiful grapes for great wine. The news all year has been so focused on the woes of the world, that many outside of Napa Valley didn't realize that the 2009 vintage in America's most renowned wine growing region is producing outstanding fruit that looks and tastes to be a spectacular vintage. Initial reports all the way around are finding vintners and growers delighted with 2009—from Albarino to Zinfandel to everything in between, as presented by the Napa Valley Vintners (NVV) non-profit trade association representing 370 wineries in the appellation.

*“We are rocking and rolling, having a great time making wine in the Napa Valley,” said **Doug Shafer of Shafer Vineyards**, continuing, “The pace of the 2009 harvest has been terrific—even, steady, time for you and your crew to spend time with family—this has been a phenomenal year in the vineyard and in the cellar.”*

Notes from the Field

Though rainfall was little more than two-thirds of normal for the third year in a row, the timing of the precipitation was on the vine's side. Couple that with the lack of frost and the mild, relatively cool growing season, Mother Nature managed to have it all work in unison to give vines and grapes the best scenario possible.

Judd Finkelstein of Judd's Hill in Napa said, *“From our freshly pressed wines and the many winemakers I talk to each week, we are unanimous in our tasting of exceptionally bright flavors across all varieties this year. Neither the grapes nor the vines experienced any stress—no raisining, no sunburn—just great hang time, balanced sugars to acid all around.”*

*“We are really excited about the early flavor development, and are finding developed and concentrated flavors, the disappearance of green flavors, resolved tannins, and brown seeds at lower Brix than recent years.” **Remi Cohen, Merryvale Vineyards***

Compare the nearly thirty days of intense frost from spring 2008 to the fewer than five frost incidents in 2009, the start to the vintage was much less eventful for growers who were able to sleep nights not worrying about the threat of frost—or the lack of water to combat it if it came. Late spring rains delayed irrigation needs and the warm spell in June helped curtail excessive canopy development. The nearly 14 days of 100°f plus temperatures that mark a typical growing season, 2009 counted perhaps only four or five overall, again helping to reduce demand for water when the resource was relatively scarce.

As of early October, there are still some unsold wine grapes and prices are reduced somewhat across all varieties. Final numbers will not be available until the Ag Commissioner's office releases the 2009 Crop Report in the spring.

Napa County Ag Commissioner Dave Whitmer said, *“This year's crop looks to be normal, based on a ten-year average. It is up over 2008, but the comparison is made over the longer span, not year-to-*

year.” He went on to say, *“Fruit set, based on timing and temperature at bloom, by in large, looked to be quite even, though there is always some variation based on specific sites.”*

“One challenge of a mild season is that there has been nothing forcing the picking decision...not too hot, there are tanks available...so it just means lots of sampling and mulling things over, checking out the moon phase or my horoscope,” said **Honig Vineyards Winemaker Kristin Belair** with a smile.

Overwhelmingly, comments from winemakers note the presence of forward, bright fruit with pure varietal character and the much-favored extended hang time has not come with excessive ripeness. **Finkelstein** says, *“Because we had no real heat spikes, we are seeing phenolic maturity and ripeness without excessive sugar.”*

Charles Thomas, of Quintessa notes that their Cabernet Sauvignon harvest was about two weeks later than normal, and growers in the Carneros District are reporting picking up to a week and a half later for Pinot Noir.

“The predicted rain in mid-October should not pose a problem,” said **Shafer**, *“It’s not uncommon for cool rains to fall this time of year. The same timing of rain to harvest came as recently as 2007 and the crop weathered just perfectly. It’s generally only the thicker-skinned reds like Cabernet Sauvignon that are yet to be harvested, but the cool spell is like putting them in the refrigerator for a moment, keeping harvest on an even, steady pace.”*

Vintner Comments

“2009 has been on the later side for harvest, which considering the dry spring has been good news. It was an easy summer, no shriveled fruit, textbook fermentations, a really good harvest overall,” said **Raymond Vineyards Winemaker Kathy George**

She continued, *“Estimated tonnage from growers is right on the money, so no over or under on crop size. Valley-wide our vintners are telling me that Sauvignon Blanc is about two-thirds dry, and one-third still fermenting--really nice, crisp, clean, mineral, a little grass, really bright. Our estate Chardonnay from Rutherford is fermenting, at about 11 Brix right now.”*

“We are very happy with the condition of the fruit that has come in, especially with our whites (sauvignon blanc and chardonnay). The cool season has left the vines in prime condition and the fruit is in remarkable shape with very little disease pressure or sunburn. Overall, we are seeing good flavors at very desirable chemistry as we have been able to reach a high level of maturity at very modest brix levels.

Looking forward, we expect this trend to continue as the phenolic levels in the red grapes look very good as does the weather outlook.” **Toby Halkovich, Viticulturist, Cakebread Cellars**

“What I’m seeing and hearing so far is that Cabernet is looking really good, lovely mature flavors and tannins...lots of black fruit flavors and aromas, reminding me a bit of the 07’s,” said **Belair**

Final Notes

Every vintage has its challenges and opportunities and today Napa Valley’s winegrowers have far more tools at their disposal—from new technologies and green initiatives to better understanding of clones and rootstocks, while farming in the most responsible manner of any region—winegrowers can adapt to conditions in the field on a day to day basis. It has been said that vintners in Napa Valley have elevated agriculture to horticulture in how each vine, each vineyard block is nuanced to grow the highest-quality wine grapes.

Growers say that thirty, or even as recently as twenty years ago, crews would work through the vineyard three times per year--prune, sucker and pick. Today viticulturists say a minimum of twenty passes is the

norm, individually managing each vine's canopy for optimal sun to shade exposure, positioning only the finest clusters to continue through veraison to ripening, and pre-selecting from the vine the best to be taken to the winery for crush.

While other winegrowing regions are bringing in 10, 12 or even 16 tons per acre, Napa Valley vintners are keenly selective bringing in only the best, averaging not more than 4 tons per acre—half the statewide average--and in many cases far less.

Of note, Napa Valley continues to account for just 4% of California's harvest, yet its wines provide for more than a third of the economic impact of the state's wine industry to the U.S. economy.

The demographics of the region show that 95% of the appellation's wineries are family owned, and 70% of the approximately 400 producers produce fewer than 10,000 cases annually—60% of that total, produce fewer than 5,000 cases annually.

Laurie Claudon, Co-owner of Clark Claudon Vineyards wrote on the NVV's harvest blog, *Unfiltered*, "This, my 36th Napa Valley harvest, has filled me with memories of all those stories. Best of all, watching my grand children 'working' and playing in the vineyard and the winery has made me reminisce about my children doing the same. What a wonderful way to raise a family as well as the next generation of grape growers & winemakers!

Our valley is full of second & third generation kids who have been raised the same. For all of the adults, harvest, though joyful, is also a time of chaos, hard work & finger crossing. Yet, for the children it is a magical time of getting up before the sun, having a breakfast of ripe grapes, playing in the picking bins, joking with the vineyard workers, & running through the vines."

Check out ***Unfiltered*, the Napa Valley Vintners' Harvest Blog** featuring reports from nearly fifty winemakers, vineyard managers, owner, interns and more: <http://napavintners.blogspot.com/>

Galleries of harvest photos and more:

http://www.napavintners.com/photos/Napa_Valley_photo_gallery/index.asp

About the NVV

The Napa Valley Vintners is the non-profit trade association responsible for promoting and protecting the Napa Valley appellation as the premier winegrowing region. The organization celebrates its 65th anniversary this year. From seven founding members in 1944, today the association represents 370 Napa Valley wineries and collectively is a leader in the world-wide wine industry. To learn more about our region and its legendary American wines, visit www.napavintners.com