



California in Flames: Saving vintage 2017

Wine is the economic lifeblood of California's north coast. With deadly October wildfires raging around them, Napa Valley winemakers and their crews overcame electrical blackouts, roadblocks to their cellars, severed communications, and choking smoke to rescue the 2017 vintage, even as their own homes and families were in harm's way. Roger Morris tells their story

Photography by Robert Sinskey

Another hot Sunday in early October. A summer of high temperatures and drought has accelerated the grape harvest in Napa Valley and across northern California, so perhaps 85 percent of Napa's crop has already passed through final sorting at the crush pad and is in cold soak or fermenting in the cellars. But Napa's signature grape—Cabernet Sauvignon—is a notoriously late-ripening variety, so there are still tons of it waiting to arrive at that magical combination of phenolic and sugar ripeness in vineyards that, were it not Napa Valley, might better have been planted to earlier-ripening fruit.

The valley's tasting rooms are packed with weekend tourists and those just arriving to spend a few festive days, October being an ideal time for wine-country visits. Additionally, the area east of Napa town is experiencing extra-heavy late-afternoon traffic as golfing fanatics make their way home from the Safeway Open tournament at Silverado Resort and Spa, an outing won by Brendan Steele, a middle-of-the-pack player experiencing a good weekend.

As day mellows into night, the winds begin to pick up, east to west.

Nocturnal inferno

Remi Cohen and her boyfriend were calling it an early evening. His house was across the western mountains in Sonoma County, so they were staying the night at her place on Napa's west side, as she planned an early morning at Cliff Lede Vineyards, a few miles up-valley along Silverado Trail in the prized Stags Leap District. Cohen, who received a degree in cellular and molecular biology before deciding she really wanted to make wine, is vice president and general manager at the showcase winery. Although Monday is Columbus Day—an American semi-holiday that has fallen out of fashion due to the current unpopularity of the colonial past—there would be no time off for wine growers, with fruit still coming in and critical decisions still to be made in the cellars, as well as in the vineyards.

For the same reason, Jean Hoefliger, a Swiss-born winemaker who is a partner at Alpha Omega Winery on the valley floor in St Helena, was staying at his girlfriend's house in Napa rather than driving back to his place in Marin County near San Francisco. The flow of fresh

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fruit had been steady, and Hoefliger had two shifts working back to back.

Peter Heitz, the winemaker at Turnbull Wine Cellars, located along Oakville's "Winery Row" on Route 29, was at home at the head of the valley in Calistoga with his wife Meg, their two teenage children, and assorted pets and farm animals. Valley-born, Heitz is a fourth-generation winemaker, his family roots dating back to winemaking in Alsace. "Because it was harvest, I had been going to bed around 9:30," he recalls sheepishly.

Robert Sinskey, owner and winemaker of his eponymous winery in Stags Leap, had no such plans to be in the cellar or the vineyards come morning. He and his wife, Maria Helm Sinskey, a noted chef and cookbook author, were on the East Coast, first to attend parents' day at their younger daughter's boarding school, St George's in Rhode Island, and then to spend Sunday with their older daughter, a student at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Unbeknown to any of them, in the late evening hours, fires were breaking out across Napa Valley—fires that would change everything there and throughout neighboring counties.

"Around 11:30, my boyfriend's cell phone started ringing," Cohen says, "and when I looked, I had 18 text messages on mine." The most urgent were from Sarah Del Campo, Cliff Lede's director of consumer sales:

- "Any updates? I am getting quite a few texts and photos about the fire need to let my staff know?" (sic)
- "Many evacuations all the way through Soda Canyon and near the Atlas Peak area by Silverado country club where they had the golf tournament."

"I didn't sleep, watching from my window as the fire moved along the ridge," Cohen says. "There was no one at the winery, and I was on Twitter trying to contact co-workers."

In Calistoga, Heitz says, "My daughter woke me around 10, saying she saw fire from her bedroom window. When I looked, I saw 200ft [60m] flames. Turnbull has a vineyard across the road, and I know the people who live beside it, so we needed to warn them."

"I woke up about 1 am and saw it snowing outside—large white flakes of ash," Hoefliger says. "I turned on the news and heard there was fire on Atlas Peak. I looked out again and saw the blaze on top of the peak, and I thought we would probably be safe." He awoke a second time at 3:30, looked outside, then quickly drove through the night to Alpha Omega. "The wind was sweeping east to west across the valley," he said, "and there was a lot of smoke."

"My GM, Phil Abram, received a note on social media that there was a fire in the Stags Leap District," Sinskey says. After contacting his boss in New York, Abram raced to the winery to retrieve the Sinskey dogs and alert people staying in the winery's guesthouse. "Roads around the winery were closed shortly thereafter," Sinskey says, "and everyone was evacuated."

In fact, there was not only one fire that sprang up in Napa Valley during that evening of October 8, but several, all with towering flames and traveling at high speeds, whipped on by winds of more than 50mph (80km/h) and gusts much stronger than that. One fire was traveling from Calistoga across the mountain into Sonoma County, a second was on Atlas Peak heading toward Stags Leap, and a third near the Carneros region was moving west. Because there were reports of electrical outages about the same time as the fires broke out, there was speculation that winds had blown over towers carrying electric lines, setting fires all across the wine region that extends north and east of San Francisco.

That night and over the next few days, the fires would cause dozens of deaths, some people not even having sufficient warning to escape their homes. Hundreds of residences and businesses would be burned to the ground, several wineries among them.

And in Napa Valley and the nearby Sonoma, Lake, and Mendocino counties, winemakers and winery managers, such as Cohen, Hoefliger, Heitz and Sinskey, along with their crews, would make

heroic efforts, against great odds, to save the 2017 vintage. After all, wine is the economic lifeblood of the region, and saving the millions of dollars in sales from the vintage would be crucial to resurrecting the region after the fires had died out and the residents had waited through the winter for spring to bring new life.

A chaotic first day

Early Monday was helter-skelter. The morning light slowly seeped through the smoke to join the fire's illumination, and the valley's normal October perfume of fermenting grapes was blanketed with the acrid smell of burning trees and buildings.

"Chris [winemaker Christopher Tynan] went to the winery first thing Monday morning," Cohen says, while she decided to work from home. With the power out, Tynan went back to basics, as winemakers were doing across the region, doing manual punch-downs instead of machine-generated pump-overs.

Because of the multiple fires, blankets of drifting smoke, power outages, and limited cellular services, it was difficult for anyone in the valley, or on the outside, to know exactly what was happening. Some wineries, such as William Hill on Atlas Peak, were reported on social media to have been destroyed but, when the smoke lifted, proved to be only damaged.

Unfortunately, there was no doubt that Signorello, a premium winery on Silverado Trail between Napa and Stags Leap, had burned to the ground in the pre-dawn hours. As winery workers fought to save it, TV camera crews and photographers transmitted graphic images. The heart of the Stags Leap District itself, about a mile (1.6km) north, where the foothills come down and cross Silverado Trail, is a warren of famous wineries. On the fire side is Shafer, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Robert Sinskey, Clos du Val, Chimney Rock, Stags' Leap Winery, and Odette. Across the narrow highway on the western side are Pine Ridge, Silverado, and Cliff Lede.

On a steep hillside on the more endangered side, owner Cliff Lede also had his famed Poetry vineyard, as well as Poetry Inn, an elegant small hotel. "There were flames all around Poetry, and smoke was over Robert Sinskey's



winery," Cohen relates. "I talked to Chris while FaceTiming with him, and I could see the smoke and flames. I was at home sobbing. I had put so much love and energy into Poetry Vineyard." Soon, Tynan was forced to vacate the winery.

Meanwhile, Turnbull's Heitz, concerned about the blaze at the north end of the valley, had not yet realized that there were fires elsewhere. Early Monday, he called his vineyard foreman, who had lined up a 40-person crew to pick a large section of grapes on the valley floor. "Hey, I'm not going to be able to be there to get you started," Heitz told his foreman. The reply back was that there would be no picking

anyway: Roads were blocked, and the crew couldn't get near the grapes.

"I told him to send everyone home to look after their families," Heitz says. Already some crew members had been forced to flee their own homes, and their families were at hastily designated evacuation centers. With the electricity now off at the Turnbull winery, Heitz gave silent thanks for having purchased in advance a backup commercial generator, which was now powering the winery's cooling systems, as well as other equipment.

Above: The 100-year-old Sinskey building destroyed. Overleaf: Joy as wine is made against all the odds.

Alpha Omega had not taken such precautions. Still, Hoefliger knew the right people and ordered a rental generator, but it wouldn't be delivered until sometime Tuesday. Meanwhile, he and his crew donned miners' head lamps, normally used for nighttime picking, and began doing punch-downs in the darkened cellar. "We went back to making wine the old-fashioned way—by taste," Hoefliger said. "I was tasting in the dark, thinking, 'Damn, these wines are beautiful.'"

Hoefliger also spent the early hours contacting growers on Atlas Peak, where Alpha Omega still had grapes to pick. "Are you okay?" he asked them. "What can I do to help?" But by this time, roads around Atlas Peak and Stags Leap were blocked for several reasons. First, firefighting crews—who were uniformly praised for their hard work and valor—needed room to operate. Residents and relatives, anxious to check homes, neighbors, and animals, still had to be kept out of endangered areas. And as the week wore on, police also used the roadblocks to prevent looting. For now, not only was it virtually impossible to communicate by phone or email, it was almost impossible to move up and down the valley, especially along Silverado Trail. Quickly, smoke-protection masks became standard headgear for anyone venturing outside.

On the East Coast, a worried Sinskey was searching social media and watching a remote camera at his winery. "The winery was completely surrounded by flames that towered over the mountains," he says. "I feared we had lost everything—and social media was saying we sustained a total loss." The remote camera went dark.

Ongoing doubts and threats

By Monday night, there were preliminary reports that already ten people had died and hundreds were still missing as fires raced across Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, and Lake counties.

More than 1,500 residences and businesses had been destroyed. Worst hit was Santa Rosa, where fires wiped out whole neighborhoods—from upscale Fountain Grove, to a trailer park across Highway 101. A Hilton hotel and other small businesses were razed, hospitals were cleared out, and several evacuation centers were opened.

The situation was so chaotic that often not even the owners knew whether their wineries were still standing or not. If there was one bright point, vineyards are difficult, though not impossible, to burn

The fires would continue well into the following week. New evacuations would be ordered. More bodies would be found in the rubble. As for the wineries, the situation was so chaotic that often not even the owners knew for hours or even days whether their wineries were still standing or not. If there was one bright point, vineyards themselves are difficult, though not impossible, to burn; in fact, they often served as firebreaks that protected properties.

On Tuesday, power was gradually restored in many sections of the valley, though not until a couple of hours after Alpha Omega received its new generator. "We started to pick massively on Tuesday," Hoefliger says, even though normally he would have tasted, tested, and waited. "We were bringing in 50 tons daily the next few days, trying to get everything off the vines." Grapes on Atlas Peak were still off limits, and even their status wasn't sure. Hoefliger decided to hold onto the generator for a few more days as a precaution.

In Calistoga, Turnbull's vineyard had survived. "The wind was so severe that it looked like the fire swept through the vineyard horizontally," Heitz says. The thin cover crop was burned, but the vines above it, even the leaves, were not damaged. However, a tractor shed that Turnbull owned adjacent to the vineyard and all the equipment in it were destroyed.

By midweek, things were getting back to normal at Cliff Lede, though the offices remained closed, and winemaker Tynan decided he would sleep for the rest of the week at the winery. But because access to the Stags Leap wineries across the road was still forbidden, Rob Sinskey went to sleep Tuesday night not knowing whether he still qualified as a winery owner.

Wednesday, the fires still raged in wine country. Areas that had once been spared were now being threatened. The death toll continued to rise, and more residences and wineries were destroyed. But there was some good news in Stags Leap. "We had one small vineyard that was destroyed, but Poetry was not damaged, and neither was the inn," Cohen says.

And as for the worried Sinskey, "Some of my crew sweet-talked the guards blocking the roads and hiked in on Wednesday to do pump-overs," he says. "I was not able to get in legally until Thursday." There was damage to systems, but the winery was still standing, and the wine was still fermenting. A 100-year-old building, waiting to be converted into offices, was destroyed, and about 5 acres (2ha) of 30-some-year-old vines were badly burned. "The wines," Sinskey noted poetically, "were doing their magic unattended."

Still ablaze a week later

Thursday, things seemed to be getting back to normal on the valley floor, but by Friday there were alarms again, as fires flared in Calistoga, as well as in the hillsides behind the iconic Robert Mondavi Winery, just across the road from Turnbull in Oakville. Heitz, who had on Wednesday evacuated his family from Calistoga to camp out on the winery's crush pad, was worried as Friday evening wore on. And not just about whether his home was still standing.

"I saw the fire coming down the mountain, and I was afraid it would cross the road [Highway 29] through To Kalon Vineyard," he reported on Saturday morning. "I slept in 20-minute segments." While relating this update, Heitz suddenly became excited. "I can see about seven Sikorsky helicopters swooping down across the road to get water from the pond behind the To Kalon Vineyard." Six days after the fires had started, the danger was still not over.

By Sunday, a full week after the outbreak of the blazes, fires still burned, but weary firefighters were beginning finally to get the upper hand. The official death toll had risen to more than 40 and almost 6,000 buildings had been destroyed, including about 20 wineries destroyed or seriously damaged.

And late Sunday, Heitz joined a slow-moving caravan of cars moving



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north on Route 29, as residents were being allowed by authorities to return to their homes—or what was left of them—in Calistoga. The Heitz residence was still standing, and their pet cats were waiting for them. “Eclipse & Slinky are both safe and, as usual, in charge already,” he texted.

By the following Monday morning after the fire, some tasting rooms were opening their doors. Whether customers were coming to the valley out of disaster curiosity or to show support is hard to say, but Napa Valley’s now-tattered wine business was slowly getting back to its feet.

A community united

There is an article of faith in California wine country that winemakers are neighbors first and competitors second, and during the wildfire crisis there were many acts of kindness. Turnbull, like other wineries, took in fruit to be processed and stored from people it barely knew who couldn’t get to their own wineries. While Silverado Trail was closed off, Cliff Lede welcomed other winery crews to use its parking lot, as they tried to talk their way past guards

or sneak in through the hills. Indeed, there were already many stories about how winemakers desperate to get to their cellars had surreptitiously breached the blockades. Restaurants, some with Michelin stars, were donating gourmet food to those in evacuation centers.

As far as the wines are concerned, the uniform evaluation was that 2017 will be a superior vintage, if a little short on quantity. Rob Sinskey echoed what was being said throughout the valley: “They are awesome, with good acidity, moderate alcohols, and ripe flavors.”

There was still some debate about potential smoke taint on grapes harvested during and after the fire, mainly because the valley has virtually no experience of the problem. Most winemakers believed the late grapes would be fine, as the pokey-ripening Cabernet has thick skins. But Sinskey doubted that he could use any of his, not wanting, in his words, to “heavily manipulate” grapes affected by heat and dense smoke.

“I’m still going to have my grapes picked on Atlas Peak, whenever I can get in there,” Hoefliger said a week after the

fatal Sunday. “I feel I owe it to the owners. If the grapes have too much smoke or are not in good condition, I can declassify them to bulk wine.” Heitz agreed. “Smoke taint isn’t a concern for this vintage,” he said. “At worst I would have to declassify some grapes—and I budget 5 percent crop loss into any vintage, no matter what might happen.”

Hoefliger also had an admirably philosophical take on the whole horrendous experience. “Despite the deaths and the damage, it is in moments like this that people bond. After my crews made sure their families were safe, they came back to work. A situation like this leaves you with moments you will never forget.”

For those who wish to donate to recovery and relief efforts, Napa Valley Vintners recommends the reactivated Napa Valley Community Disaster Relief Fund, which it established in 2014, immediately following the South Napa earthquake. NVV distributed \$2 million to the fund during the week of the fires, and the Napa Valley Community Foundation made \$565,000 in grants to local nonprofits supporting fire relief and recovery efforts on October 13.