



CHALLENGING 2020 HARVEST WILL YIELD HIGH QUALITY CALIFORNIA WINES

With California's 2020 harvest season—marked by the dual challenges of COVID-19 and record wildfires—behind them, vintners across the state are expressing excitement about the quality of the vintage. Following a cool, mild growing season, an August heat spell accelerated ripening, resulting in an early start to harvest—one to two weeks ahead of normal in most regions. The crop is expected to be smaller than average.

While the wildfire season impacted many individual vintners and growers in some regions, the blazes affected a small percentage of the industry overall. Of the 4,200 wineries in California, fewer than 20 reported significant damage to wineries. In regions that experienced wildfires, growers and winemakers are working together to assess and mitigate any smoke exposure issues.

“A dry winter with just half of the region’s typical rainfall, was followed by a warmer-than-average summer. Berries were small, with concentrated flavors. “That’s typically a good recipe for quality,” said Jon Ruel, CEO of **Trefethen Family Vineyards** in Napa.

Napa Valley’s white wines fared especially well. “The Chardonnay has wonderful fruit character and great stone fruit flavors,” he added. “It’s a little lower in acid than normal, reflecting the warmer vintage. I also think this is going to be a classic vintage for our Riesling.” Ruel decided not to pick some later-ripening reds due to smoke concerns, however other Napa wineries are assessing their red wines and will produce Cabernet Sauvignons and other reds. “I’ve had a chance to taste our Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc,” he said, “and they taste great.”

Corey Beck, CEO and head of winemaking at **Francis Ford Coppola Winery** in Sonoma County, is also optimistic about the vintage. Based on small-batch fermentation trials, he said, “It was like, ‘Oh my god, these wines are terrific.’ The bones and the quality of the vintage are there. What we picked and what the consumer is going to see is going to be absolutely incredible.”

The 2020 harvest is the topic of “The Winemaker Sessions,” a webinar held Nov. 17, 2020. A panel of internationally recognized vintners and winegrowers from across California cover trends, challenges and opportunities in 2020. See Wine Institute’s [YouTube channel](#) to view the webinar.

Photos by George Rose



Winemaker Comments from Across the State

For **Kosta Browne Winery**, which produces wines from five coastal appellations, growing conditions were nearly ideal, with the exception of some spring frost in the Russian River Valley that reduced yields, said winemaker Julien Howsepian. In the Sta. Rita Hills in Santa Barbara County, the vines enjoyed a long, leisurely growing season. “I found the flavors in our Pinot Noirs to be sensational at a very early stage.”

In Lodi, vintners overcame challenges stemming from mid-season heat spikes and wildfire smoke. “While Lodi sustained many days of poor air quality,” said Markus Bokisch, owner/winemaker at **Bokisch Vineyards**, “sensory analysis coupled with lab results showed no smoke impact to the wines. Despite the heat spikes, he added, “The fruit retained its acidity. Phenological ripeness was excellent, leading to fully flavored wines at lower Brix. We are very pleased across the board, but I would say that the later-season reds, such as Tempranillo, Cabernet and Petite Sirah, will be exceptional in our area.”

For vintners in the Sierra Foothills region, warm weather signaled an early start to the season, followed by a mild summer with only one or two heat spells.

“I’ve rarely seen the fruit come in so balanced at relatively lower Brix levels,” said Justin Boeger, winemaker at **Boeger Winery** in Placerville, El Dorado County. “Our Italian varietals, Negroamaro and Aglianico, really stood out, with the Barbera making a strong showing as well. Not to stray into hyperbole, but I think 2020 will be one of our best vintages of the last decade.”



In the Central Coast, a cool spring and mild summer temperatures extended the growing season. Harvest timing was average, and yields were typical.

“I think it will be more of a balanced year,” said Nicholas Miller of Miller Family Wines, owners of the **Bien Nacido & Solomon Hills Estate Wineries** in Paso Robles and Santa Maria Valley. “In Paso Robles, Cabernet came in short in several areas as did our Chardonnay. With no immediate fires around our vineyards, we have felt good so far about the quality of that wine and tests have supported that,” said Miller. “In Santa Maria Valley, we’re pretty excited about what we’re seeing with Pinot Noir. We see potential for some great wines from 2020.”



Chad Melville, head winegrower at **Melville Winery** in Lompoc, Santa Barbara County, reported a near-perfect growing season. “This year’s fruit was intense, vibrant and beautiful,” Melville said, “Generally speaking, the Pinot Noirs have been darker than usual and they’re more vibrant. We haven’t started fermenting the Syrah yet, but it looks and tastes really good. And Chardonnay has more intensity.”

In Temecula, April brought record rains that challenged vintners with increased mildew pressure. Triple-digit temperatures in late August and early September caused some desiccation and sunburn for later-ripening varieties. “Fruit quality overall was very solid, and while the vintage might be a riper year due to the heat, I believe we managed it well,” said Jon McPherson, master winemaker at **South Coast and Carter Estate wineries**. I would say 2020 is better than 2019 in respect to richness and depth of character.”



Regional Harvest Reports

AMADOR COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 3,635

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Zinfandel and Barbera**

This was a picture-perfect year for the region's vines and grapes. Evenly paced, the growing season began with an early bud break and continued with no frost, prolonged cold spells or heat spikes. Harvest began about two weeks earlier than normal, with average to slightly below average yields. The region experienced little, if any, impact from wildfires, which were far from Amador County. The pandemic situation presented some challenges during harvest, due to social distancing logistics and staffing issues. Quality across all grape varieties looks excellent, with good acid balance and strong color. Many winemakers feel that 2020 was one of the best harvests of their careers.

CALAVERAS COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 721

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon**

Similar to 2019, the 2020 growing season in Calaveras County was smooth, with a later than normal start to the harvest. Wildfires led to some concern about smoke impacts, but vintners and growers are closely monitoring fruit through lab testing

to ensure quality. All varieties appear to have fared well in the region, and quality is very high. Yield sizes appear to be nearly identical to those of 2019.

EL DORADO COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 2,205

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah**

Vintners are reporting very good quality from the 2020 harvest. The growing season was steady, with no frost damage and very few temperature swings or storms. Temperate weather in the early part of the season set up good flowering, and moderate temperatures after set facilitated easy, well-paced fruit maturation. While two August heat spikes led to a somewhat compacted harvest, temperatures were mainly moderate during picking, allowing crews to breathe a bit after a busy start. Picking began in early September and finished a bit earlier than normal. The region experienced a few smoky days from wildfires in other regions, but so far there appear to be no impacts in the wines. Red varieties are showing incredible color and fruit intensity, with mature character. Cabernet Franc has great depth and structure, Zinfandel is displaying depth and Syrah looks promising. Yields for Riesling and Chardonnay were a little

light for some vintners, but the resulting wines are elegant with good acid levels.

LAKE COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 10,014

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc**

White wines are showing especially well for the 2020 vintage, with lighter yields than normal. Weather during the growing season was mild through most of the season, followed by a manageable heat spike in September. Harvest began slightly earlier than normal due to the September heat and finished rapidly. The region did experience some smoke impacts from fires in surrounding counties, and lost some crop. Overall, vintners are reporting great quality in the harvested fruit—especially Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc—and are expecting an exceptional year for white wines.

LIVERMORE VALLEY

Total winegrape acreage: 4,000

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Merlot**

The 2020 vintage produced high-quality, well-balanced fruit. The growing season began uneventfully, with typical temperatures and

average timing for bud break and flowering. As summer progressed, heat waves caused sunburn in some vineyards, leading to dropped fruit and some delayed maturity. The region experienced poor air quality during the fires, but the smoke wasn't heavy or close enough to the Livermore Valley to have much of an impact. So far, vintners are very happy with the quality of the fruit, which is showing no signs of smoke issues. Balance of sugar, acid and pH look good, and yields were average to slightly below average.

LODI

Total winegrape acreage: 100,000

Most-planted grape varieties: Cabernet, Chardonnay and Zinfandel

Excellent quality and vibrant character define Lodi's 2020 vintage. The season got off to a slightly later start, with a delayed and slow bud break across the region. Weather impacts on bloom contributed to a lighter crop for some varieties. Fortunately, Lodi was not directly impacted by the wildfires, the closest of which was 70 miles away, although air quality was poor for several weeks during harvest. Vintners across Lodi are reporting excellent quality for the young wines, with great freshness and vibrancy, and good flavors at lower sugar levels. Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and other white varieties look very promising. Zinfandel quality continues to increase, displaying vibrant character and lower alcohol levels. Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah and

other later-ripening varieties are showing good concentration. Yields were down quite a bit across the region, with some older field blends off 15% to 25% from last year.

MADERA COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 30,007

Most-planted grape varieties: French Colombard, Grenache and Chardonnay

Vintners are reporting good quality and a light yield for 2020. The weather was good for bud break in spite of a few heat waves. The season was mellow overall, and ideal toward the end of harvest. For many vintners and growers in the region, 2020 was the latest harvest they've ever experienced—starting around three to four weeks later than usual. Although tonnage is about a third lighter than average this year, winemakers are very pleased with quality. Tempranillo, Syrah and Viognier did especially well. So far there is no sign of smoke exposure issues.

MENDOCINO COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 17,470

Most-planted grape varieties: Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir

White wines are looking especially good for the 2020 vintage. The growing season was mild to moderate overall, with bud break and flowering occurring a week earlier than in 2019, and more spring frost events than typical. Mendocino County saw some impacts from the recent wildfires, with certain

sub-appellations more affected by smoke than others. Even so, smoke impacts were very low, considering the size and duration of the fires. In spite of the challenges, overall quality is very good, especially for whites. The region's major varieties performed well, particularly Chardonnay, as well as Cabernet Sauvignon from sub-American Viticultural Areas outside of smoke-affected areas. Compared to 2019, yields were down 30% or more for Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon. The Chardonnay yield was slightly higher than normal.

MONTEREY COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 46,139

Most-planted grape varieties: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon

The growing season started out great—with mild weather and normal timing for bud break—but wildfires took a toll on the year's crop that has yet to be fully determined. In keeping with a more normal Monterey Bay coastal harvest cycle, picking began in some areas during the third week of August, but in September, wildfires occurred in the region. A majority of the county's fruit was impacted by smoke from the fires, and yields were severely diminished due to smoke issues. However, depending upon a vineyard's microclimate, variety and direction of winds, quality fruit was harvested from some locations. Despite the challenges, vintners remain committed to only putting wines of quality in the bottle.

NAPA VALLEY

Total winegrape acreage: 45,342

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay
and Merlot**

The 2020 growing season in Napa Valley was cool and mild for most of the spring and summer. The heat spells in early August, over Labor Day weekend, and again in late-September, sped up ripening. Due to the accelerated growing cycle, many wineries brought in white grapes prior to or in the early days of the LNU Complex Fires, and the white wine harvest looks very promising. Many red wine grapes were also harvested earlier than typical this year, with some picked prior to the start of the Glass Fire, and wineries are conducting a thorough analysis for smoke impacts. While a number of individual Napa Valley wineries have made announcements about their 2020 vintage, many wineries plan to make wine and are optimistic about the potential. While the harvest will be smaller than usual, the 2020 vintage will not be absent from the history books. The region's vision to produce world class wine is unwavering, and only wine worthy of having Napa Valley on the label will make it into the bottle.

PASO ROBLES

Total winegrape acreage: 40,000

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and
Syrah**

Despite this year's challenges, 2020 should be a great vintage for Paso

Robles wines. In late August, wildfire smoke found its way to the Paso Robles region. It was mostly limited to the upper atmosphere, but some higher-elevation areas experienced smoke at the surface. Fortunately, it was limited in duration and overall exposures. Fire impact was entirely dependent on the location of the vineyards within the appellation. At this point, overall quality looks excellent, with intense flavor development in the fruit and very little to no pyrazine (bell pepper aroma) issues. Sugar and acid levels are similar to those of 2019. Some of the region's older Cabernet Sauvignon lost as much as 20% of its yield due to the heat waves, and most later-ripening varieties were down around 10%. Yields for earlier-ripening grapes are flat or slightly up. Thanks to the overall high quality of the 2020 fruit, Paso Robles should be a bright spot in the state's 2020 vintage.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 693

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah**

The growing season kicked off with a wet spring, followed by normal timing for bud break and flowering. Temperatures were very warm during veraison, followed by a typical start to harvest and an early finish. Fruit quality is excellent, with lots of flavor. As long as growers paid attention to weather forecasts and pre-watered before the heat spells, all varieties fared well. Yields were about 20% lower than normal this year.

SANTA BARBARA

Total winegrape acreage: 15,750

**Most-planted grape varieties: Pinot
Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah**

Yields were higher across the board this year, with most varieties showing good quality. Bud break and flowering were strong, and optimal temperatures and a lack of spring rain and wind led to promising fruit set. Set was heavy compared to previous years, with full clusters and a high juice to skin ratio. Harvest was impacted by wildfires, plus four unusual heatwaves that were managed with appropriate watering. There is concern about smoke damage in some of the grapes, but all of the fruit was harvested and vintners remain optimistic, since the fires were not located within the region. Acidity is lower this year due to the heat waves, but the quality and character of the fruit were maintained. Pinot Noir fared well and Chardonnay quality is good. Despite some heat impacts, Syrah is showing good complexity and looks promising.

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

Total winegrape acreage: 1,526

**Most-planted grape varieties: Pinot
Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and
Chardonnay**

The 2020 growing season brought ideal spring weather, with optimal bud break and flowering. A summer heat spike affected vines in pockets of the appellation, causing a reduction in yields in some vineyards. Otherwise, fruit looked excellent. The CZU Complex fire

combined with the River fire in Monterey brought in quite a bit of smoke, and vintners are awaiting test results to determine how widespread the impacts will be. Grapes that have tested clean show amazing quality. Yields were lower this year due to the heat spikes and potential smoke issues.

SONOMA COUNTY

Total winegrape acreage: 59,326

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and
Cabernet Sauvignon**

Although the 2020 growing season enjoyed near-perfect growing conditions, a mid-August lightning storm resulted in a dramatic turn for Sonoma County's winegrapes. It was estimated that between 25% and 30%

of the county's grapes went unpicked this year, and it remains to be seen which wines will be made in 2020. However, many vintners are optimistic about the quality of the harvested fruit. Fortunately, as a result of this year's early harvest, more than 15% of the region's grapes had been picked before the LNU Complex fires began and 90% had been harvested by the start of the Glass fire. Many growers, vineyard workers and their families were forced to evacuate their homes and ranches, and in response, the Sonoma County Grape Growers Foundation reopened its Resiliency Fund in August to raise funds to support local farmworkers impacted by evacuations or loss of work.

TEMECULA

Total winegrape acreage: 2,500

**Most-planted grape varieties:
Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and
Petite Sirah**

This will be an exceptional year for early-ripening varieties. The growing season brought early and late rains, with a dry spell in mid-winter. Timing for the start of harvest was typical for the past 20 years, but later than the last five years. Record temperatures in late August and September caused some heat damage in later-ripening varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, but quality for early varieties looks to be exceptional. Viognier, Muscat and Roussanne are showing excellent quality, and Petit Sirah looks very good. Yield size was about 20% lower than in 2019.

WINE INSTITUTE

425 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94107

www.wineinstitute.org

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Nancy Light or Gladys Horiuchi

communications@wineinstitute.org