



# VINTNERS REPORT OUTSTANDING QUALITY FOR 2021 CALIFORNIA HARVEST

Winemakers across California predict that the 2021 vintage will be one of the best in recent memory, while the Golden State's winegrowers enjoyed a smooth harvest following a moderate and consistent growing season.

Picking began early in many regions, including the North Coast — ranging from a week to several weeks ahead of average. Central Coast appellations experienced a cool year that prompted a later-than-average start.

Grapes for sparkling wines are typically the first to be picked in California, but this year, some varieties for still white wines, such as Sauvignon Blanc, were the first to ripen. In addition, varieties that do not normally reach maturity at the same time ripened simultaneously, resulting in vineyard crews in some regions picking multiple varieties at once.

The ongoing drought presented challenges for winegrowers, resulting in reduced yields, but vintners are reporting outstanding quality and great concentration in the fruit.

California produces about 80% of the nation's wine, making it the world's fourth-largest wine producing region. More than 80% of California wine is made in a Certified Sustainable California Winery and over half of the state's 637,000 vineyard acres are certified to one of California's sustainability programs (Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing, Fish Friendly Farming, LODI RULES, Napa Green and SIP-Certified). Along with preserving the land for future generations, many of the sustainable practices used by the state's vintners help make the harvest and growing season run more smoothly and increase wine quality.

# Winemaker Comments from Across the State

“The weather was excellent this year, with mild temperatures at the end of the growing season,” said Ted Henry, director of winegrowing at **Groth Vineyards** in Oakville in Napa Valley. “We got a little more time to mature flavors before pulling the fruit off the vine.” Yields were on the lighter side due to smaller clusters and berries, but otherwise, the vintage was free from significant issues. “I think 2021 will be a top vintage in the Napa Valley,” Henry said. “Reds are very dark and extracted, with nice balance and freshness. Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon stood out as exceptional, and whites were bright, fresh and full flavored.”

**Rodney Strong Vineyards** in Healdsburg in Sonoma County began picking about a week earlier than normal, on Aug. 8. The season progressed without heat spikes or cold snaps. “What was crazy was the condensed ripening of all of the different varieties at once,” said Justin Seidenfeld, director of winemaking. “I had one day where I picked Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet, Merlot, Grenache Blanc and Zinfandel. That’s not a normal kind of day for us.” Yields were down about 14% overall, while Chardonnay and Pinot Noir came in around average. “The quality and the color of the wine, and the tannin development are some of the best I’ve ever seen,” Seidenfeld said. “Our Bordeaux reds are amazing. It’s going to be an off-the-charts vintage for sure.”

Corey Beck, executive vice president of production and chief winemaker at **Delicato Family Wines**, also noted a decrease in yields. “We had to deal with drought conditions across Napa and Sonoma County, leading to lower cluster weights,” he said. “The good news is that we see a fantastic concentration of flavors and color in our reds. Our Lodi and Central Coast vineyards share a similar story as a result of the moderate summer and drought conditions — resulting in lighter grape structure.” Beck is particularly excited about Chardonnay, which is showing vibrant flavors, as well as Cabernet Sauvignon. “Wines in the fermenters at all sites have very nice, mature flavors and good concentration,” he said. “Acids are a bit higher than typical, so the wines are very bright. The concentration and cleanness of the fruit are two pillars that make 2021 such a stand-alone harvest.”



In Livermore Valley, **Wente Vineyards** began picking earlier than normal, around the second week of August. Harvest in the winery's Monterey County vineyards began about two weeks earlier than average due to cold temperatures throughout the season, while grapes from the winery's Arroyo Seco vineyards weren't ready until the last week of September. Growing conditions in Livermore Valley were ideal, with few heat spikes noted viticulture manager Niki Wente. Strong winds during flowering caused some shatter in the reds, but whites were not affected. Though yields were down about 15% for red varieties, quality increased as a result.

"There's a lot of flavor concentration and really small berries," Wente said, particularly for Cabernet Sauvignon and red Bordeaux varieties. This will also be a solid vintage for whites. "They're going to be really beautiful and floral."

**J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines** saw a good amount of pre-season rainfall for its Paso Robles vineyards this year. However, most of the precipitation arrived during a single storm event, causing runoff that prevented much of the water from penetrating the soil. "No matter how you irrigate, the vines love rainwater more than anything," said director of winemaking Steve Peck. "Canopies and vines were a little bit smaller this year because of that lower rainfall total."

Even so, he added, yields came in around average, with fruit showing more structure and higher tannin levels than typical. "For people that really

like that intense mouthfeel," he said, "I think they're going to be very pleased with 2021."

Hopland-based **Fetzer Vineyards**, which grows grapes all over California, began picking several weeks ahead of historical averages. Minimal rainfall and a warm summer led to lower fruit volumes and smaller berries. John Kane, Fetzer's vice president of winemaking and winery operations, notes that impacts on the 2021 vintage began with unusually cold and dry post-harvest weather in 2020, putting the vines into protective mode. "As soon as the weather warmed in March, the vines did not hesitate to set buds," he said, "but not as many as they would after a winter with normal rainfall. Early bud break was followed by a spring and early summer of high heat, which added more stress for the vines."



Low water availability coupled with a warm growing season meant growers had to be precise with irrigation and canopy management. Smaller berries and lower yields brought intense concentration to the wines, with notable vibrancy. “Monterey Sauvignon Blanc is crisp and bright,” Kane said, “and Cabernet Sauvignon from all over the state has great variety typicity without green characteristics.”

Marty Spate, vice president of winemaking and winegrowing at **O’Neill Vintners & Distillers** in Parlier, Fresno County, said the season progressed without extreme heat events or impacts from wildfire smoke. Not only that, but fruit quality is excellent across the board, and especially for Petite Sirah. “We source grapes from up and down the state, and the most consistent item of note this year is how good the fruit looked and tasted,” he said. “We are seeing intense levels of fruit

characteristics, fine quality of tannins and well-balanced chemistries and acidity. I can say with confidence that our 2021 vintage is shaping up to be one of the best in the past decade.”

In Santa Barbara, winegrowers experienced a moderate growing season, with harvest timing in line with, or a bit behind, the historical average. “Weather during the ripening period was about as ideal as you could ask for in Santa Barbara County,” said Tyler Thomas, winemaker at **Dierberg Vineyard** in Lompoc. “We had cool mornings and ample fog, with little-to-no heat events.” Other than some canopy variability early in the season, the vintage proceeded as normal and yields came in at or just below historical averages. Wines are showing great depth of flavor at lower potential alcohol levels and higher acidity. “We are very excited about the ability to promote energy in wines with terrific depth and generosity,” says Thomas. “The Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir wines especially seem to display this quality.”



# Regional Harvest Reports

## AMADOR COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 3,644**

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

Amador County vintners reported extremely good quality and smaller-than-normal yields. After a dry winter, bud break and flowering happened as normal, followed by a hot summer. The start of harvest was not particularly early, but once it began, ripening accelerated for all varieties at once. Rather than spanning from the end of August to the end of October or early November, harvest wrapped up by the end of September — the earliest-ever finish for Amador County. Due to the drought, clusters and berries were small, and yields were down dramatically for growers that did not make up for the lack of winter rainfall with irrigation. Yields ranged from normal to 50% to 60% less than average. Fruit came in beautifully ripe, concentrated and dark, with great complexity and tannin structure. Acidity levels are moderate, with fruit showing lower pH and higher total acidity levels due to smaller crop sizes. Winemakers are seeing phenomenal quality for Amador's signature red varieties, including Zinfandel, Barbera, Syrah, Grenache and Tempranillo.

## EL DORADO COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 2,219**

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

The 2021 growing season in El Dorado County kicked off with great

promise that had vintners excited about quality. The region experienced no spring frosts, and bud break and flowering occurred at the normal times despite warmer temperatures. Summer weather was warm-to-hot, with warm temperatures persisting into the night. This had vintners preparing for an early harvest during July and August until the Caldor Fire started in mid-August, altering schedules and priorities. The fire presented many challenges, including evacuations for some areas, labor issues and smoky conditions that lasted for several weeks. The timing of evacuation zones hindered growers' ability to irrigate vineyards. Yields were down about 15% overall, as some fruit was left on the vines due to smoke exposure impact.

Prior to the fire, vintners reported fantastic fruit quality, with beautiful color extraction, deep flavors and great balance. While it's still too early to determine the full extent of smoke exposure impacts, white varieties are tasting particularly good, and Mourvèdre is showing good pH and acid profiles. Vintners will re-evaluate the wines in a few months, once they have had a chance to settle.

## LAKE COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 10,009**

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

Lake County wineries reported amazing promise for the 2021 vintage. Spring growing conditions in this high-elevation region prompted

bud break a few days to a week earlier than average. Wind and light rain during flowering may have contributed to the lighter-than-average crop for some growers. Almost all areas reported very light clusters, which facilitated steady ripening and an early harvest. Generally, growers in Lake County see a short break between the harvest of white and red varieties. However, this year the harvest for reds followed immediately after whites with no break. Harvest around the county was almost complete by early October.

## LIVERMORE VALLEY

**Total winegrape acreage: 4,000**

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

Livermore Valley vintners are excited about the quality of the 2021 vintage, with both reds and whites showing beautifully. With steady, warm days and few extreme heat events, the growing season was similar to 2019 in terms of growing degree days and heat accumulation. Flowering was extended due to cold, windy weather, which caused shatter in red varieties. Harvest began earlier than normal, but was elongated due to temperate weather. For those who had not completed harvest by Oct. 17, a week of heavy rain created challenges at the finish line. The drought impacted berry size in red varieties across the board. Yields were moderate, with white varieties at just about average or a bit above, and red varieties at about 85% of expected yields. Cabernet Sauvignon,

Cabernet Franc and Merlot are especially impressive this year — fruit-forward, with great acidity and beautiful structure.

## LODI

**Total winegrape acreage: 100,000**

**Most-planted grape varieties: Cabernet, Chardonnay and Zinfandel**

The 2021 growing season in Lodi was characterized by the drought's effects on vineyards, and a compressed harvest. Impacts began in November 2020 with an early deep freeze that led to uneven growth and dieback in some vineyards. These conditions did not reveal themselves until spring, when stunted or lack of growth became apparent — causing uneven growth and reduced yields. Harvest began in early August, but by the beginning of September all the major varieties began to ripen simultaneously. This led to high sugars as growers and vintners struggled to keep up.

The drought continues to impact all of Lodi's farmers. Although most vineyards have access to water for irrigation, they did not receive the benefits of a good winter soaking. Drought conditions led to reduced yields, particularly in older vineyards, as well as some vine death. Growers reported average to light-average yields across the region for the major varieties. Labor shortages affected all aspects of the business. Vintners struggled this year to find and retain machine operators and tractor drivers to machine harvest grapes, and shortages extended into trucking and winery operations. All of the region's major varieties fared well,

and quality looks excellent. Reds such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah ripened earlier than normal, allowing them to retain more natural acidity.

## MENDOCINO COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 17,379**

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

Mendocino County reported very good quality and lower yields as hallmarks of the 2021 vintage. After a dry winter, spring brought dry, cold conditions, with a higher-than-average number of frost days. Bud break happened earlier than normal while flowering and fruit set was uneven in most varieties, resulting in poor yields. Harvest began two to three weeks ahead of normal, depending on the variety and region. Labor was a significant challenge for wineries, with many running at half capacity for the 2021 harvest and relying more on automation.

The drought had a major impact on this year's crop, leading to very low yields for many varieties — especially Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. However, the smaller crop size helped to enhance quality. White varieties are showing good sugar accumulation and a high amount of natural acidity. Reds have lower-than-normal Brix levels and higher levels of natural acidity, as well as good tannin structure compared to other warm vintages. Early ripening varieties such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir have excellent potential across many sub-appellations while Syrah, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon are showing well in the county's inland areas.

## MONTEREY COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 45,915**

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

The Monterey County region experienced a compressed harvest in 2021, following a cool, long growing season. Set was average to average-plus depending upon the location and microclimate. Approximately two-thirds of the region's rainfall occurred in a 72-hour period, which placed some stress on the vines. Growers monitored the stress and water levels and responded with drip irrigation. While other areas of the state were baking in heat, Monterey County was covered in a marine layer — particularly in the summer. The extended coolness and lack of summer degree days resulted in high acids and low sugars, which took time to balance out. The two did come together when the long summer marine layer moved off the coast in September, providing sunshine and heat.

The 2021 harvest didn't get fully underway until mid-September, and multiple varieties that don't normally ripen at the same time were ready to be picked simultaneously. Vintners managed to stay on top of the situation despite the stress on tank space and people power, and wineries brought in more fruit than initially expected. Vintners are reporting good quality overall, with lower pH levels for reds. The season's long hang time resulted in refined phenolic development.

## NAPA VALLEY

**Total winegrape acreage: 45,511**

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

Napa Valley's vintners are extremely excited about the quality of this year's vintage. All in all, the growing season was mild and free from issues, though lack of rainfall and a low water table throughout the valley presented challenges. In most cases, harvest began earlier than normal. Due to the drought, berries were very small compared to previous years, and yields in some areas were down 20% to 30% from 2019. Labor issues persisted across the region, with many positions unfilled and winery teams making good with what they had. Fruit quality is great across the board, showing dense, ripe berries.

## PASO ROBLES

**Total winegrape acreage: 40,000**

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

Paso Roble's 2021 growing season was kind to the region's vintners and growers, bringing little-to-no spring frost and a warm summer. As in many regions, Paso Robles experienced a lack of rain. For vineyards that rely on irrigation, watering began early. Heavy winds between bloom and set contributed to loose clusters and shatter, leading to reduced yields. Bud break began for earlier-ripening varieties in late March, followed by later-ripening varieties in mid-to-late April. Vineyards in the western hills saw some extreme heat events earlier in the season, so with naturally low

yields and little-to-no irrigation resources, it became a race to pick many vineyards. Some growers thought that harvest would finish early, but fluctuations between warm and cool spells slowed the maturation process. In Paso's eastern region, grapes took their time and came into balance nicely. The drought had significant impacts in 2021. Average cluster weights decreased 30% to 40% and canopies struggled through the heat with a mature crop. Across the county, yields were down 30% to 40% for most varieties, especially Cabernet Sauvignon. Small berries resulted in high concentration in the fruit and very good quality. Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah struggled this year, while new plantings of Cabernet Franc are doing exceptionally well.

## SAN DIEGO COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 682**

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

The San Diego County 2021 crop was lighter than normal, but with the potential for great quality. Weather during the growing season was drier than average, which led growers to begin irrigating earlier in the season and resulted in less pressure from powdery mildew. Bud break and flowering occurred as normal, with few wind or heat episodes. Harvest began neither early nor late. San Diego vintners engaged in less cluster drop this year while maintaining the same yields. Grapes are showing good color and lower pH levels, along with highly developed color, higher Brix levels and great quality. White varieties ripened quickly, while reds matured on a more normal curve.

## SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 34,685**

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

San Luis Obispo's vintners reported a "dream vintage," characterized by a cool growing season and only one heat spike in mid-June. The lack of winter rainfall led growers to irrigate early; however, there was less evapotranspiration as a result of the cool summer, so less irrigation was needed. The lack of heat events and moderate, cool weather in September and October made the window of opportunity much longer for picking at optimal grape maturity. Due to the cool growing season, 2021 was one of the latest harvests in recent memory. Yields were average to above average in size. Long hang time on the vines resulted in concentrated flavors and above average acidity — especially for Pinot Noir — and quality is outstanding.

## SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 15,452**

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

All signs point to a superb 2021 vintage for Santa Barbara County. The growing season was mild, slow and steady, with consistently mild weather from bud break to harvest. Spring winds and rain were scarce, which allowed for favorable set for all varieties. The season brought little in the way of heat spells and extreme weather, and there were no frost issues. A period in mid-September of extremely wet, drenching fog caused some Botrytis issues in Chardonnay, but precise vineyard management and careful

harvesting prevented it from becoming an issue. Grapes developed slowly, with smaller berries than normal, smaller cluster weights and lower yields. The berries came in with great flavor and acidity, with beautiful dark color in the reds. Harvest began in mid-August, about a week behind historical averages. Ripening patterns for different varieties and AVAs were atypical; Pinot Noir in the Sta. Rita Hills was at least two weeks behind, while Bordeaux varieties in Happy Canyon matured early. This led to a big harvest crunch, with many varieties ready for picking at the same time. The biggest challenges came from the lack of available trucks and drivers during harvest. In a few distinct locations, Pinot Noir yields were down drastically, whereas in the Sta. Rita Hills they were above average. The stars of 2021 are Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, which came through in both quality and quantity. Reds — especially Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon — look promising at this early stage.

## SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

**Total winegrape acreage: 1,526**

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

Winemakers in the Santa Cruz Mountains are expecting an exceptionally good 2021 vintage. In the region's coastal areas, heat during flowering caused a mixed fruit set, but mild, even weather conditions persisted post-veraison and all through the ripening period. This resulted in longer hang times at above 20° Brix, which is great for flavor development without high sugars. In eastern areas, weather

during the growing season was nicely consistent and even, with low mildew pressure. The heat events that did occur in eastern vineyards were not drawn out. Harvest began late in coastal areas and early on the east side of the appellation. Yields came in at normal levels at the coast, and 15% to 40% lower than normal on the east side. Both the eastern and coastal areas of the Santa Cruz Mountains reported incredibly good quality, with fruit from coastal regions showing great phenolics at lower alcohol levels. Fruit from eastern vineyards is very intense and powerful, though Cabernet Sauvignon had some challenges due to heat events.

## SONOMA COUNTY

**Total winegrape acreage: 58,873**

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

Sonoma County experienced an excellent growing season overall, getting off to a cold start and progressing to a warm and fast finish. Though 2021 was free from long, lingering heat waves, grapes in Sonoma's warmer regions matured slightly earlier due to the lighter crop. Grapes from cooler regions ripened at a more normal rate. Harvest started slightly early this year and progressed quickly. The drought brought lower yields, but created intense flavors in the fruit. Since there were no wildfire or smoke exposure issues in 2021, the crop sizes for Pinot Noir, Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon will be larger than in 2020. Vintners are reporting exceptional-quality fruit across all the major varieties, with great intensity and concentration of flavors.

## TEMECULA

**Total winegrape acreage: 2,500**

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

Winegrowers reported very good quality across varieties. A relatively cool spring with later-than-normal bud break was followed by a hot summer, but without long stretches of triple-digit temperatures. The growing season was nice and long, which allowed the grapes extra hang time on the vines. While harvest timing was average for whites, reds came in late ranging from a week to three weeks later than typical. For many winegrowers, patience was the year's biggest challenge in waiting for the red varieties to reach maturity. Labor issues this year were exacerbated by the pandemic, as wineries struggled to find harvest staff to handle daily workloads. Grapes came in with great chemistry, showing lower-than-usual pH, good overall acidity, and Brix levels within a nice range. Fruit looked impressive across varieties, with Zinfandel showing beautiful color and aromas. Yields were good overall compared to the last few years. Wines are showing good varietal character and great color across the board, and winemakers are excited to see how they develop.

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