



# CALIFORNIA WINE 2017 HARVEST REPORT

STRONG QUALITY ACROSS THE STATE  
AS AMPLE RAIN ENDS DROUGHT

SAN FRANCISCO – California’s 2017 wine harvest wrapped up early this fall following summer heat spurts and a growing season that saw significant rain throughout the state ending a five-year drought. While October wildfires in North Coast wine communities made international headlines, the state’s vineyards and wineries were not significantly affected. Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties, the regions most impacted, grow 12 percent of California’s winegrapes, and 90% percent of the harvest in Napa and Sonoma and 85% in Mendocino were already picked and in production at wineries before the fires.

“The vast majority of California’s 2017 winegrape harvest was unaffected by the wildfires and the vintage promises to be of excellent quality,” said Robert P. (Bobby) Koch, president and CEO of Wine Institute. “The outpouring of support locally and from around the world for people in the impacted communities has been phenomenal. We are saddened by the loss of lives and homes and this will truly be remembered as a harvest of the heart. Wineries are at work making their 2017 wines and welcoming visitors during this beautiful late fall/early winter season.”



*Harvesting in the cool of night preserves fruit quality, is easy on workers and saves energy.*

## The Growing Season

With all but late harvest grapes in, vintners are looking back at the 2017 growing season throughout the state. The drought is over with the season beginning with rainfall that refilled reservoirs and replenished soils. Harvest began early at a normal pace in many regions, and then progressed rapidly during a heat wave in late August and early September. Temperatures cooled mid-September, slowing the harvest pace and allowing red grapes to ripen gradually. Many regions are reporting reduced yields due to the heat spell, but vintners are reporting strong quality for the 2017 vintage.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture estimated in early August that the state's overall crop size would reach 4 million tons, down slightly from 4.03 million in 2016 and above the historical average of 3.9 million tons. The heat wave will likely lower this prediction.

"We had above average rainfall this winter on the Central Coast, but not as much as areas that saw flooding," said **Steve Lohr**, CEO, J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines. "It was wonderful because it helped fill up the reservoirs and bring new life to cover crops that had been parched after several years of drought. It has been a good year for us, all in all, on the Central Coast," Lohr said. "From the 30,000-foot perspective, I would say that these wines are going to show particularly nicely in their youth but will have the capacity to age."

According to **Neil Bernardi**, vice president of winemaking at Duckhorn Wine Co., the increased rainfall also brought vine-vigor challenges. "It required special focus on cover crops and tillage and closely managing canopies. Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in Napa Valley and Alexander Valley look especially healthy," he said. "Our Pinot Noir, Zinfandel and Merlot have excellent color, extraction and flavor, and Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay are showing excellent aromatics and great acidity."

The rainfall helped vines in the Santa Cruz Mountains rebound from the drought, but also caused some problems during flowering. "Zinfandel got caught by spring rain during bloom and most of our Zinfandel sites are down in tonnage anywhere from 15% to 40%," said **Eric Baugher**, chief operating officer and winemaker, Ridge Vineyards Monte Bello Winery. "It does appear that the Zinfandel



*California Zinfandel is ready to pick, while the crusher destemmer goes into action on Chardonnay grapes.*

vintage will be an extraordinary one, similar to 1999. I expect similar excellent quality out of Chardonnay since the fruit had such great intensity of flavor from the petite-size clusters and berries."

A heat spell impacted many California regions in late summer, speeding up harvest schedules and requiring extra vigilance. "Some vineyards that had exposed fruit showed desiccation," said **David Hayman**, vice president of winegrowing for Delicato Family Vineyards, which farms grapes across the state. "Ripeness was accelerated and a lot of fruit became ready all at once. Flavors across the board look good."





# Wine Region Reports



## AMADOR COUNTY/ SIERRA FOOTHILLS

Vintners are reporting good quality fruit after a challenging season. Harvest began a week earlier than normal, then quickly picked up speed due to September heat. Cooler temperatures followed, slowing the harvest pace to a more normal rate. High temperatures caused raisining in some vineyards, which required additional sorting, and heavy rains brought some mildew issues. Zinfandel, Barbera, Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre fared well, and the region's overall yield was smaller than normal.



## LAKE COUNTY

Generous yields and excellent quality have the region's vintners excited about 2017. Harvest began slightly later than normal and was still in full swing in early October, with a few final picks happening into late October. The winter rains replenished ground water and fed abundant cover crops, particularly valuable in helping the land heal in areas recovering from 2015 and 2016 wildfires. A late summer heat wave had minimal impact on Lake County vineyards as growers prepared with advance irrigation to avert vine stress, so fruit was not subject to shrinkage or raisining. Vintners were able to give the fruit longer hang time into the cooler days of October, and winemakers are very optimistic about quality.



## LIVERMORE VALLEY

Quality looks excellent for the 2017 vintage. Heavy rains early in the year flushed soils and improved vine health, and the growing season progressed smoothly. Heat spikes, including extreme temperatures over Labor Day weekend, stalled fruit development, but the grapes did not suffer heat damage. Harvest began in late August, as is typical. Yields are average except for Chardonnay, which is down as much as 20% in some vineyards. Petite Sirah is showing very well and Cabernet Sauvignon quality is exceptional. This year's grapes generally have higher acids and lower pH at desired sugar levels.



## LODI

Vintners described 2017 as a "very strange year" from a weather perspective with good quality and lower yields. An incredibly wet winter and spring created issues for growers, including flooding that delayed pruning and limited cultural practices in some vineyards along streams and rivers. Mildew pressure increased with the rains and canopy management was necessary to restore balance. An unprecedented heat wave that lasted from late August to mid-September resulted in some dehydration—especially in own-rooted old vine Zinfandel—and increased the pace of harvest. Many of the red varieties matured quickly after the early whites, but a cool stretch in mid-September allowed growers to wait for late season reds to fully ripen fully. Yields are down 10%-20%, but overall quality has been strong. Early season whites came in bright and fresh with good levels of acidity. Reds are showing good intensity and concentration.





## MADERA

Yields were up slightly due to the heavy rainfall—more than 55 inches—that fell during the growing season. The region's worst hail storm in 20 years shredded leaves on the vines, but the fruit was unharmed because the hail was relatively soft which mitigated any severe damage. Vines had more bunches than usual, and fruit was characterized by loose clusters, thick-skinned small berries and good pH retention. Stems and seeds matured at lower Brix than normal. High temperatures caused vines to shut down early. Red Bordeaux varieties fared well, and fruit overall is showing great color and aromas.



## MENDOCINO

Harvest came a bit early in 2017, but closer to the average starting time than in many years. Vintners welcomed heavy winter rains, which fortified vineyards and resulted in big, healthy vines. Bud break timing was normal, and no major frost events or uneven weather occurred during that period. A late August heat wave caused major concern for white grape varieties, triggering premature ripening, rushing picks and necessitating triage on the crush pad. Because the heat wave occurred pre-harvest for the reds, ripening progressed at a leisurely pace after temperatures cooled. Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel are looking great and yields should be around average. Chardonnay may be a little light.



## MONTEREY

Vintners saw a more typical, temperate growing season in 2017 than in recent years, resulting in healthy vines. Winter rains produced excellent root flush and mild spring weather brought good bloom. Warm temperatures in late July helped the grapes transition to full ripeness. The harvest for sparkling wine grapes began the second week of August, and in mid-September for still wine production. Record-breaking heat in early September caused Brix levels to jump, speeding up the harvest and causing log jams at some smaller wineries. The weather soon cooled and harvest slowed to a more normal rate. Yields were light to average, estimated at approximately 170,000 tons. The fruit looks very good overall, with especially high quality in Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot—all showing rich flavors.



## NAPA VALLEY

Abundant winter rains thrilled vintners and helped recharge reservoirs and groundwater. Spring weather was cool to mild, with increased vine vigor and extended flowering in some areas, but few reports of shatter. A freak June hail storm caused isolated damage, but left the crop mostly unscathed. Initially, harvest seemed like it would proceed at a leisurely rate, but that changed with the Labor Day weekend heat wave. High temperatures kicked harvest into high gear until mid-September, when cooler weather arrived to give red Bordeaux varieties some extra hang time. Vintners are optimistic about quality. Reduced yields are expected for some varieties due to discarding fruit damaged by heat and the wildfires. The whites have bright, fresh flavors and the reds are intense and rich. Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and Zinfandel are showing especially good quality.



## PASO ROBLES

Vintners are predicting a very good vintage despite hurdles during the season. Spring was mild and wet, followed by a period of unusually warm and humid weather that resulted in sporadic downy mildew on Central Coast vineyards. Warm weather during most of the growing season, coupled with drought-busting rains, created vigorous growth and more clusters per vine. An extended cool period during bloom caused shatter in some varieties, but also created loose, open clusters that allowed beneficial air and light penetration. A nine-day heat spike that began late August pushed picking decisions ahead of schedule and dramatically reduced crop sizes for some vintners. Heat damage was seen throughout the region, with certain areas faring better than others. Even so, vintners are optimistic about quality. The fruit is showing great intensity, with lower Brix levels and higher acids than normal.



## SAN DIEGO COUNTY

With good winter rains and a cool spring, San Diego County experienced back to “normal” bud break dates in March. Fruit set was quite good. Harvest for whites and sparkling began in mid-July with white varieties coming in throughout August. A heat wave in early September pushed some red harvests early as sugars jumped. Those varieties that remained were harvested through October. In fact, some varieties still hanging in early November showed overall good physiologic maturity. Additional heat spells mitigated by cooler spells kept vintners guessing, with heat taking its toll in some cases, but overall crop yields were up by 25% with good to excellent quality fruit. The 2017 vintage will be excellent for San Diego County wines.



## SAN LUIS OBISPO

Harvest began on August 21, a few weeks later than recent years, but in more in line with pre-drought start dates. Overall, the season ran two to three weeks later than 2016 due to heavy rainfall which delayed bud break and other key season milestones. Heavy rains resulted in increased botrytis and mildew pressure, but also provided vigorous shoot growth that balanced the crop load and canopy. Vines fared well during the Labor Day weekend heat spike, which had a shorter duration in SLO than in many other regions. Good soil moisture helped mitigate the effects of the heat and vintners are optimistic about the vintage. Chardonnay yields are a bit higher than average and Pinot Noir is just below. Both are showing good flavor development, with a little less acidity than usual.



## SANTA BARBARA

The growing season got off to a good start, with generous winter rainfall and warm spring temperatures that prevented spring frost issues. The winter rains contributed to strong canopy growth and reduced the need for irrigation. High temperatures and humidity in late August and early September contributed to increased fungal pressure, but vintners reported no significant fruit damage. Harvest began in the third week of August. Fruit quality was above average, characterized by small berries with good color and concentration in the reds. Clusters were also smaller than normal, resulting in yield reductions for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Yields were average to nearly 50% of normal.



### SANTA CLARA VALLEY

The Santa Clara Valley experienced a very wet winter, almost three times normal. This led to large vigorous growth of the vines. Additional shoot thinning and leaf pulling were required but set was normal to slightly above normal for most varieties. The summer heat waves, especially the soaring heat over Labor Day weekend, hastened the harvest of early ripening varieties. With the cooler temperatures in September, the later ripening varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah could continue to evolve on the vine and deliver excellent quality grapes.



### SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

The region experienced a remarkably wet winter with as much as 100 inches or more of rainfall on the ocean side. This brought healthy vigor to the vines, along with the need for additional canopy management, floor management and weed control. Bud break began in early to mid-March and bloom followed in late May to early June. Harvest came at the end of August, spurred by a heat wave that sent temperatures into triple digits for several days and quickly spurred harvest into overdrive. Some vineyards were affected more than others, depending on microclimates and farming practices. Crop loads were very good and quality looks fantastic for the varieties that were able to ride through the heat spell—especially Cabernet Sauvignon.



### SONOMA COUNTY

Record-breaking winter rainfall kicked off the season, filling the water table to capacity and replenishing soils. A mild spring brought bud break at the normal time, and vintners reported small berries with excellent color. A hot summer culminated in a Labor Day weekend heat wave that caused some vintners to move up their harvest dates by a week or so. The grapes endured the heat and once cooler weather arrived, fruit was able to mature at a gradual pace. Mid-September rain forced growers open up canopies, and in some instances, use blowers to dry out certain varieties prior to harvesting. Early estimates predicted an average yield, but some vintners reported weight loss in the grapes after the heat wave. Because most of the fruit was picked prior to the October fires, vintners have a positive outlook on the 2017 wines, comparing the vintage to 2003, 2013 and 2014. The fruit has excellent color, pronounced flavors and high quality across varieties.



### TEMECULA VALLEY

Early season rains brought yields back to normal levels this year, increasing 20%-25% over 2015 and 2016. A cool spring resulted in normal timing for bud break, in late March. Temperatures remained fairly cool in May and June, but high temperatures in July triggered an early start to harvest—around mid-July for sparkling wine grapes. A heat wave in late August and early September drove up sugar levels and stunted physiological ripening in some varieties, but early whites looked very good and acid levels were higher than expected. Rhone, Italian and Portuguese varieties fared well, and quality was solid for the vintage overall.

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