

Vine Talk. Harvest 2011. Frost, shatter, mildew, botrytis, blight, disease pressure, great flavors, balanced acidity, low sugar, low tonnage, low degree days. Unseasonable heat, unseasonable rain, unseasonable humidity, Unseasonable Season. 2011.

Most vineyards experienced lower than normal harvest numbers on brix and weight. September and October proved to be just as fickle as summer, switching between rain, fog, sun, and humidity. Just as one was sure the season was done, Fall finished out with the finest Indian summer in decades. Even the whales loved it, swimming into the bay and joyfully fishing and cavorting despite the exuberance of their kayak jockeying fans.

In the end those vineyards that did bring in a harvest experienced reserved flavors and balanced numbers resembling more the revered Burgundian elegance rather than the overdone wild west California swagger we have grown accustomed to.

It was a year where winemakers learned to appreciate the vintage. Some looked at the unusual season as a gift and an opportunity to expand their vision. They eagerly see a potentially stellar vintage with low alcohol, balanced acidity, and the subtle flavors reminiscent of our ancestors across the pond. Winemakers that were looking for another big fruit year and heavy weight wines were for the most part disappointed.

Take away lessons for this challenging growing season were as follows: canopy management and a sound spray program proved essential to harvesting any crop. Chardonnay was especially demanding in its insatiable need to keep the canopy dried out and active as it struggled to gain those last sweet brix. Pinot Noir was really picky about when and where to set, living up to its reputation as the "heartbreak grape". Vineyard blocks planted side by side experienced near normal sets adjacent to rows with virtually no fruit. Successful set was determined by vine health, timing of flowering in relation to rain events, and canopy density. Vintners were required to keep vigil to the very last in an effort to stave off rain-induced botrytis as fruit reached final maturity. Late leaf removal, dry fruit zones and late season sprays all played a part in the effort to shepherd the precious fruit to its great potential and to keep it from the threat of calamity.

The cold summer temperatures delayed every harvest. Even the summit vineyards had to wait sometimes into October, well off the usual Labor Day harvests. Expect the unexpected was the mantra of this year. Late rains in spring and summer played havoc with fruit set and ripening.

Growers would do well to review their spray programs and canopy management practices to determine what worked and what failed in this trying season. Any vineyard that experienced significant disease pressure must include at least one dormant spray of Lime Sulfur or equivalent product this winter. Overwintering spore pressure is sure to be high and there is little incentive to be complacent after a year like this.

Good effects from the rain were increased late season canopy growth and consequent soil flush and root development in sandier soils. Non-irrigated vineyards were sure to benefit with long term deep root growth and extra carbohydrates brought down from heavy active canopies.

Now would be a good time to take a soil sample and compare it to a recent petiole analysis to see how well your vines are functioning. If your soil has a low pH this is an excellent year to apply agricultural lime or oyster shell powder. If your soils need magnesium use dolomite for a combined pH adjustment and magnesium boost. Watch the ratio of calcium to magnesium and make sure that the calcium levels in your soil stay well ahead of magnesium. Gypsum is a great source of calcium. It can also break up clay soils and increase water infiltration.

The winter rains will wash these amendments down to the root zone and are unlikely to leach them out altogether as they might with nitrogen products. There is still time for a simple cover crop to increase organic matter in the soil and to grow your own mineral nitrogen for the spring. Timing is essential to maximize the nitrogen benefit. Be sure to have the cover crop incorporated into the soil well before flowering, ideally 4 to 6 weeks prior and after the legumes are 10% flowering.

Stay on top of weeds and get rid of invasives.

Perhaps most importantly, get acquainted with the elegant style of lower alcohol European wines. Go out and buy a few bottles and share them with your winemakers. Open the discussion of the possibilities now available. Winemakers in many cases are going to need to stretch their vision a little this year but they may find they like it. The public is demanding a lower alcohol wine that you can actually taste food with. This might be the year to deliver and the benefits and pleasures of balanced low alcohol wines might surprize us all.

Best of all, prepare for the coming holidays and some well deserved down time with your friends and family. Put the vineyard to bed and your attention on the year to come.

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