

Napa County 2005

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The 2005 season in Napa Valley was remarkable in many ways. It will certainly be the largest crop on record (possibly reaching 200,000 tons – far surpassing the previous 1997 record of 144,000 tons), and it will challenge conventional thinking about grape yield and wine quality because great wines are being produced from many of these high-yielding vineyards. It was also one of the latest harvests on record, with reds being picked up until Thanksgiving.

Heavy winter rains brought a huge snow pack to the Sierras, and fully recharged vineyard soils with water. Late rains continued into April, May and even into June. Some parts of Napa Valley had over 15 inches of rain after budbreak. This created a number of problems for growers. Weed control costs skyrocketed because late storms started new crops of weeds that needed to be managed. Spring botrytis was evident in most vineyards, and it became one of the worst years for trying to control powdery mildew. The lower spring temperatures reduced the effectiveness of sulfur dust and many growers were forced to use other, more expensive, products.

The vines, however, loved all the soil moisture and they developed canopies much larger than normal. In fact, there was considerable concern about how to slow down the canopy growth in order to maintain balance between shoot growth and fruit production. Additional problems faced by growers during the summer months were late-season populations of mites, thrips and leafhoppers, as well as a cluster disorder known as bunch stem necrosis.

Crop load issues went through a remarkable progression in 2005. Some of the spring rains coincided with bloom in many vineyards, so there were initial concerns about excessive shatter and reduced yields. After set, it was clear that this did not occur in most vineyards and that yield would not be reduced. Cluster numbers were about average so everything appeared to be on track. As berry development continued, many were struck by the large size of many clusters and the increasing berry size. It was not until harvest actually began that most growers realized just how big the crop would be. Even after considerable thinning in most blocks, crop estimates were revised upwards by 30% or more once picking got underway. “The boxes (of fruit) just kept coming out” was often heard as growers shared stories of their embarrassment of riches. Clusters weights at harvest were often 50% or more above the standards used by growers for estimating yields, and nearly everyone was caught by surprise. Large crops were the norm in all the major varieties, Chardonnay, Sauvignon blanc, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, which is why the total for the county will shatter the previous record.

Wineries were caught in the crush of fruit and most did not have nearly enough tank capacity for all the fruit that was ready to come in. In many cases, fruit was left on the vine for weeks waiting for tanks to open up.

What saved the 2005 year from potential disaster was the remarkable weather in September, October and November. Harvest for sparkling wine began on schedule in early August and

proceeded normally through the first week in September. September weather was mild throughout the month with no heat spikes of any consequence. Harvest for still wine did not get going in earnest until October because of the mild September weather. The main Cabernet Sauvignon harvest began in the middle of October and continued until the middle of November.

Fortunately, the weather in October and November was ideal for an extended harvest. Temperatures remained mild allowing the fruit to ripen without dehydration. There were a couple of minor rains in late October, but not enough to create major problems with bunch rot. Some fruit (especially Merlot) was never picked because once wineries took their contracted tonnage, they were not interested in taking more. They needed the tank space for other varieties still coming in, and/or the additional wine volume would not match with their marketing plans.

“All’s well that ends well” would be a fair synopsis of the year. There were a number of significant problems faced by growers throughout the season. Bunch rot could have been a disaster if we had had early rains in conjunction with the large crops and delayed harvest. Thankfully, everything turned out great at the end and both growers and wineries are pleased with the outcome. The mild fall weather allowed for extensive hang time and flavor development in the fruit, without the big increases in sugar content that occurred in 2004 from dehydration.