

Napa County 2004

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A recent *Wines & Vines* article by Dan Berger presaged “the end of Cabernet Sauvignon” due to the plethora of high alcohol, boring wines that he tastes. He puts the blame on winemakers’ fears of methoxypyrazine and green flavors, resulting in long hang times and over-ripe fruit. Winegrower Andy Beckstoffer recently challenged researchers to study whether long hang times are shortening the productive life of vineyards. The 2004 season did nothing to assuage their concerns, as Brix levels soared during September heat.

The season began with heat and ended with heat. In March, records were set during a 2-week heat spell that generated temperatures in the 70’s and 80’s. This stimulated early budbreak and rapid shoot development. Fortunately, frost was not a factor after this. The season stayed on an early track, with all phenological stages being advanced. Bloom began in April and was variable in duration. The earliest vineyards to bloom did so quickly and uniformly, but many others had a protracted bloom period lasting several weeks. Veraison was also early, and many were predicting the earliest harvest ever.

The harvest for sparkling wine began at the end of July at near record dates. Cool weather intervened in early August, postponing the start of harvest for still wines. Sauvignon blanc and Pinot Noir were harvested in mid-late August, and the first Merlots and Cabernets were picked in early September.

A heat wave in early September created problems for many producers. Despite irrigation, clusters began to wither in the heat. However, winemakers felt that the fruit did not yet have ripe flavors. As the heat continued, decisions were made as to the best course of action. In some cases, vineyards were harvested multiple times – first to harvest just the shriveled fruit, then the rest was picked later to allow for flavor development, albeit at very high sugar levels. A new vocabulary of shrivel terms rapidly emerged: “golf ball dimpling is alright, but try to avoid deep folds and raisining.”

Yields were low in most varieties, generally down 15-20%. Some blocks, especially Sauvignon blanc, were off as much as 50%. Cluster counts were reduced (due to cool weather in 2003) and many cluster weights were reduced due to heat stress. The low yield and improved wine market created greater demand for fruit than there was in 2003.

Vine mealybug continues to be the pest of greatest concern here. Introduced on infested grape nursery stock, it was first found in Napa County in September 2002. It has now been found in over 30 Napa vineyards and there is evidence of vineyard to vineyard spread. The other pest of major concern, the glassy-winged sharpshooter, fortunately is still absent from Napa County.