

Napa County 2003

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Hope springs eternal...Fingers are crossed that 2003 will turn out to be bottom of the depressed business cycle experienced by the California wine industry. The recent trend has been slow wine sales, high inventories, and low prices paid to growers. Grape prices in Napa in 2003 declined considerably, with grapes sold for less than \$1,000 per ton at the end of the season. A few small vineyards were not harvested due to lack of interest from buyers. Some positive signs emerged, however, giving life to those looking for an upswing in business. The economy began to recover and there were some positive indications in wine sales, including the tremendous volume of wine removed from the bulk wine market thanks to sales of "Two-buck Chuck" and other super-value wines. Whether 2003 turns out to be the bottom or not, everyone is looking ahead to a recovery.

The growing season was filled with ups and downs. Budbreak was early, but vine development slowed during cool weather in March and April. Growth was rapid in May and bloom time weather appeared to be excellent. However, fruit set turned out to be quite poor in Merlot, Zinfandel and some Pinot Noir, resulting in yields that were often down by over half. Powdery mildew was a problem in many vineyards, especially if there were any gaps in treatment schedules. While there was unseasonable rainfall in August (including a spectacular lightning storm on August 21) only minor amounts of bunch rot developed. Harvest got off to a slow start in early September due to mild weather. However, two heat waves in the middle of the month got things going at a frenzied pace. With several varieties at high sugar levels, it appeared that a flood of fruit would need to be picked at the same time, putting considerable pressure on harvest crews and on wineries with limited tank capacity. Fortunately, the weather cooled and an extended, even-paced harvest ensued. Many vineyards had considerable hang time and were not picked until well into October. This allowed tannins to soften and flavors to fully develop. The outlook for these wines is excellent.

Pierce's disease remains in decline in Napa County compared to the epidemic levels experienced during most of the 1990's. While Glassy-winged sharpshooters are still absent from Napa, a new pest has emerged as a major problem. Vine mealybug was first found in Napa County in September 2002 and has now been found in twenty vineyards. Introduced to Napa on infested grape plants, this pest requires expensive control measures to reduce populations and to avoid further spread. Unchecked, it will infest grape bunches and make entire vineyards unharvestable. Another pest, olive fly, had a major impact on producers of specialty olive oil. Many trees went unpicked because of the amount of damage, and most producers had to sort the olives in order to eliminate infested fruit – often 30-40% of the crop.