

Napa County 2002

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2002 was a difficult year for growers throughout California who were hit by the combined effects of an industry downturn and an oversupply of grapes. Reduced consumer spending following Sept 11th, the decline in the stock market and the downturn in the economy greatly impacted wine sales. Wineries entered 2002 with large wine inventories and lagging sales. As a result, fewer grapes were purchased and contracts were cancelled or renegotiated to lower prices. This industry downturn came at the same time as statewide grape production was booming due to the recent expansion in vineyard acreage. Spot-market prices crashed to less than \$100/ton in some regions. The grape surplus, combined with diminished winery demand, left many growers without a home for their fruit.

Because the premium end of the wine business did better in 2002 than other sectors, Napa County growers fared much better than rest of the state. Little fruit went unsold, but other impacts were still felt. Many wineries did not accept tonnage above that specified in contracts, prices were renegotiated, and spot-market fruit was sold at considerably lower prices than in previous years. For many wineries, this was a good year to have blocks out of production. Considerable acreage was removed from production (especially blocks for sparkling wine), and some vineyards were top-worked to change varieties. Many vineyards were pruned more severely and crop thinned to keep production down.

The growing season began with excellent spring growth and full canopy development. Frost was not a problem this year. Approaching bloom, the potential crop looked to be quite large. Cool weather and rain during the early bloom period reduced fruit set in some vineyards, but most vineyards bloomed during warmer weather that followed and fruit set was good. Powdery mildew was a problem for many growers due to mild weather during early summer. Considerable fruit thinning took place to eliminate mildewed clusters and to reduce production levels.

Harvest began in mid-August for sparkling wine, but there was some delay for still wines despite hot, windy weather in early September. Many winemakers felt that sugar levels in the fruit came up well in advance of flavor development. As a result, many blocks that appeared to be ready to harvest (based on sugar levels) were not picked. Some of these blocks suffered considerable crop loss (30% or more) as fruit withered during a second heat spell later in the month. In general, grapes were harvested at much higher sugar levels this year as winemakers waited for flavors to develop. Fortunately, there were no rains during harvest and no concerns over rot.

Pierce's disease was less of a problem than in recent years. It appears we may be coming out of one of the epidemic cycles that have been the historic pattern for Pierces disease. The glassy-winged sharpshooter remains absent from Napa County due to the combined efforts of nurseries, regulators and growers. Locals remain vigilant, however, as this insect still remains a serious threat. Unfortunately, another new pest appeared for the first time in Napa County – the Vine

Mealybug. Introduced on infested grape nursery stock, this pest could have a major impact on local growers and become a serious problem throughout the county.