

Napa County 1999

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Napa County experienced light harvests in 1998 and 1999, but for very different reasons. 1998 was dominated by the El Nino weather pattern of heavy rainfall extending late into the spring. It rained throughout the bloom period and fruit set was poor. By contrast, La Nina shaped 1999's weather, which was relatively dry, but quite cold. Bloomtime weather was dry, but cool. Fewer clusters were present in 1999 because of weather conditions in 1998. In both years, harvests were late and crops were light.

The La Nina effect first appeared in late December 1998 with a statewide freeze. This had little effect on dormant grapevines, but was devastating to citrus in some parts of California. Cool weather extended through the spring of 1999, delaying budbreak and causing very slow vine development. Pinot noir was particularly affected by the cold spring weather. Severe yellowing was evident on young shoots, and many vines lost several leaves just below the growing point. When warmer weather finally arrived, the vines recovered and grew normally.

The summer remained mild and vines were slow to ripen the fruit. The sparkling wine harvest began in late August, about two weeks behind normal. Harvest for still wine was delayed even more. Little picking occurred until a heat spell came in late September. This led to a frenzy of picking as sugar levels, that previously had been barely rising, suddenly jumped to 25-26 Brix. Acid levels remained high, and pHs low, in spite of the high sugar levels.

Following this burst of activity, the weather remained mild and dry, allowing for extended hang time for the remaining fruit, much of which was not harvested until November. Overall, the harvest was relatively compact. Yields were down in most varieties, in large part due to low cluster counts. Sauvignon blanc was particularly low. Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay were down for most growers, while Merlot seemed to do better.

Mites were a particular problem in 1999. Some vineyards also had problems with a late brood of grape leafhoppers. Bunch stem necrosis was also a bigger problem for many growers this year, particularly in Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

As we approach the new millennium, growers throughout California are concerned about the newly established populations of glassy-winged sharpshooters in Southern California. This insect is of great concern due to its ability to transmit Pierce's disease. The Temecula region may no longer be a viable grapegrowing region due to this insect's recent arrival. The potential spread of glassy-winged sharpshooters to the Central Valley and Northern California is a serious threat to California viticulture.