

## **Napa County 1998**

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The 1998 vintage in Napa County has been described as: "unusual", "forgettable", "big on inputs, low on yield", and "pathetic", as well as "awesome", "really nice", and "we really lucked out". The first set of comments came from growers who had to deal with the onslaught of problems created by El Niño, the second set are from winemakers who are ecstatic about the 1998 wines.

El Niño was the dominant force in 1998, bringing unseasonably late rains into May and June, and delaying all stages of vine growth and development by a month. The season began with heavy rains in January with minor flooding in February. Several nights of frost protection were required in April. Cool, rainy weather continued through the spring, delaying budbreak, early vine development and bloom.

It was a severe spring for diseases, including phomopsis, spring botrytis and powdery mildew. Bloom was 3-4 weeks late and was slow and straggly. There was considerable rain at the end of May that coincided with bloom in the early varieties such as Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Cabernet and other late varieties had much better weather during their bloom period.

Due to the heavy disease pressure, growers were forced to apply multiple applications of fungicides. In addition, the late spring rains wreaked havoc with weed control and other cultural operations. Growers were diligent with canopy management practices such as leaf removal in order to reduce the risk of botrytis at harvest. This backfired in some cases due to extreme heat spells that came in July and August. Many vineyards lost considerable crop due to sunburn of exposed fruit.

Crop loads were already light in most cases due to the poor weather conditions during bloom. Cluster counts were normal but cluster weights were very low due to poor fruit set. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay were particularly low, Merlot was variable depending on the site and Cabernet generally set average crops. These light crops may have been somewhat of a blessing in disguise. Harvest was a month behind schedule with most occurring in October. Had yields been higher, harvest would have been delayed even further and fruit may not have gotten ripe.

As it was, there were great concerns in September due to the low sugar levels and the prospect of rains coming in October. Fortunately, the weather finally turned in growers' favor and October was blessed with warm, dry "Indian summer" conditions that allowed the vines to ripen their fruit. Fall botrytis was not a major problem in most vineyards. The slow ripening during the short days of October allowed for excellent flavor development, thus the glowing reports from winemakers.

Yields ranged from "pathetic" to normal. Pinot Noir crops of less than one ton per acre were not uncommon. Most vineyards were off by 10-50%, with the exception of Cabernet Sauvignon which yielded well in most cases. El Niño's effects on yield may even carry over into 1999. Growers are now concerned about low crops in 1999 due to reduced cluster formation during the poor weather conditions in the spring of 1998.

1998 will be remembered as the most challenging year for most grape growers. While the wines may prove to be exceptional, you'd be hard pressed to find a grower who would like a repeat of the year.