

Napa County 1997

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Oh, Happy Days.....There were a lot of smiles in Napa Valley following the 1997 harvest. A large crop, high prices, excellent fruit quality and brisk wine sales make it a vintage to look back upon with pleasure. It was a year of extremes that included flooding, drought, frost, early everything (budbreak, bloom, harvest), huge crops, high prices, a compressed harvest, no tank space and horrible Pierce's disease.

Winter rains were extremely heavy in December and January with a major flood occurring on January 1. February, March and April followed with the lowest rainfall amounts on record at some locations. The dry conditions contributed to a very early budbreak, with many vineyards coming out more than three weeks early. Frost was a major problem, compounded by the early budbreak. Frost protection was necessary on many more nights than in recent years. Some vineyards suffered considerable damage.

The early trend continued with bloom starting in mid-April. The bloom period was relatively short with excellent weather conditions making for a high degree of uniformity in berry maturity at harvest. By summer, it was evident that the crop was going to be very large. Many people expected the harvest to be delayed due to the crop load, but this did not occur. The vines had full canopies and were well balanced, in spite of the large crop. Summer temperatures were ideal for ripening fruit. Harvest began in July for sparkling wine producers. For many, it was the earliest harvest on record. Even with this early harvest, the growing season was of normal length because the vines had started so early in the spring.

The early harvest proceeded smoothly for several weeks. An unseasonable storm in mid-August dropped nearly an inch of rain. It caused great concern among growers who had not yet harvested. Fortunately, much of the Chardonnay had already been picked. Several growers suffered significant losses due to botrytis bunch rot, especially in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir for still wine, and in Zinfandel. A second storm in early September dropped very little rain in Napa County, so botrytis losses here were considerably less than in neighboring counties.

The crop of 1997 will be the largest on record for Napa County. Many post-phylloxera vineyards with modern designs are now in full production. These vineyards are living up to their potential of increased yields and improved fruit quality.

The harvest was also very compressed in time. In September, wineries were crushing Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet all at the same time. Many wineries ran out of tank space due to the large harvest and overlap of varieties. In some cases, ripe fruit could not be harvested for several days until tank space became available.

Grape prices were at an all-time high due to strong demand and light crops the last two years. Already, it appears that prices will be lower in 1998 for uncommitted grapes due to this year's

large crop. Most grapes in Napa are under multi-year contracts and are less subject to big swings in pricing.

Over 70% of the acreage subject to phylloxera decline has now been replanted. Pierce's disease is now one of our biggest concerns. More vineyards than ever had losses due to this fatal disease.