

Napa County 1996

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Low crop levels were the norm throughout most of California in 1996 and Napa County was no exception. 1996 could turn out to be the lightest crop year in Napa County since 1983. It will almost certainly be the lightest crop of the next 20 years. Some vineyards produced only 50% of normal. Yields were generally down 20-30% in Chardonnay and 25-35% in Sauvignon blanc. Cabernet Sauvignon was less affected than Merlot which had yield reductions of 15-20% or more. Pinot noir managed to come through with near-normal yields. Vineyards out of production due to phylloxera replanting will further reduce the county's total production figure.

Napa's reduced crop can be attributed to at least three climatic factors: rain, rain, and heat. First, the late rains during May and June of 1995 affected the 1996 crop by reducing the number of clusters formed inside the dormant buds. Chardonnay seemed especially affected by this. Rather than the normal two clusters per shoot, many Chardonnay vines in 1996 had shoots with only one cluster or with no clusters at all! Chardonnay vines which were cane pruned tended to have more fruit than those which were cordon pruned because the buds farther out on the cane differentiated later in 1995 when weather conditions were better and were more likely to have developed two clusters per shoot in the dormant buds.

Next, there was considerable rain in mid-May 1996 which came in the middle of the bloom period for many vineyards. Most Chardonnay and Pinot noir had already finished bloom by this time, but many Cabernet and Merlot vineyards were in mid-bloom. The rain and low temperatures limited pollination and reduced fruit set in many blocks. Finally, a heat spell at the end of July with several consecutive days with temperatures above 100° F caused considerable sunburn and crop loss.

The season started off early and continued so all the way to harvest. The winter of 1995/1996 was one of the warmest on record leading to budbreak that was about two weeks early. Bloom, veraison, and harvest stayed on track and were all 1-2 weeks earlier than normal. Harvest for sparkling wine began on August 1st and continued at a furious pace for the next three weeks as the light crops ripened quickly during the hot August weather.

The still wine harvest by comparison was slow and luxurious. September cooled off considerably and growers were no longer racing to get their fruit harvested. The weather remained cool and dry through September and October and grapes came in fully ripe and free of powdery mildew or botrytis. The slow pace of harvest allowed winemakers to pay greater attention to individual wine lots as they were not as pressed for time or tank space as in most vintages.

Grape prices reached all-time highs as strong consumer demand, a limited supply of bulk wine and the outlook for a short crop fueled the market. Several wineries began importing bulk wine

from France or Chile and bottling it in California in order to meet their market needs. The strong market has sparked a planting boom throughout California. Vineyard acreage in Napa County is also increasing, but only slowly as most suitable land has already been planted.