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California 2005

by Carolyn Tillie

The words “legendary vintage” get invoked all too often, but many industry insiders are already predicting 2005 as potentially mythical for California winemakers. While it might be premature to call it legendary, the sheer size of the harvest has had many producers scrambling at the last minute for empty barrels and tanks.

Early, cold spring rains seemed endless and caused much consternation as grape growers anxiously awaited bud break. Lasting well into midsummer, the rains wreaked havoc on growers in Mendocino County and for many Pinot Noir vineyards statewide. “I don’t know if it was the frost of April 15 or just normal shatter due to the excessive rains in May and June, but our crop was down dramatically from past years,” states Casey Hartlip of Eagle Point Ranch in Mendocino.

Hartlip’s diminished crop was more the exception than the rule, since the inordinate and late rains ultimately caused a substantially larger harvest for the bulk of California’s growers. Early estimates have the state’s total harvest pegged at 14–40 percent larger than in 2004. The trickle-down effect has resulted in many wineries desperate for storage space, with barrels in short supply due to the excess grape tonnage.

The onslaught of summer rains lasting into July was unusual enough, but the temperatures remained moderate with the classic, much-desired heat spikes not occurring until late September and early October. With veraison delayed, there were fears that an early fall would impact hang-time, but “consistently high temperatures throughout October produced good textures and big, concentrated flavors,” stated Dirk Hampson, director of winemaking at Far Niente in Napa, known for its estate Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay.

Hampson could not be more pleased. “Across the board the fruit crop is up, and the very best vineyard managers adjusted early on by pulling down extra shoots and laterals. Unfortunately, many were still surprised, and those are the ones who suffered. However the Chardonnay is where I can be the most enthusiastic—it is the best I have tasted in 15 years,” he said.

Everyone is surprised at how heavy the clusters are. Hampson confirms: “We started weighing and measuring clusters several years ago, and this year’s clusters are easily 30 percent heavier than those from the past three years.” Asked whether it had the makings of a legendary vintage, he smiled: “Yes, if we were in Bordeaux.”

Laura Zahtila of Zahtila Vineyards in Calistoga, at the north end of the Napa Valley, uses grapes from growers such as the renowned Beckstoffer vineyards in Rutherford, as well as her own estate-grown grapes. “We had more fruit than we knew what to do with, and the Cab growers wouldn’t listen. We repeatedly asked them to drop fruit, and now we have too big a yield without the high quality that we want and normally expect.” Disgruntled with growers who seemed to be holding wineries to ransom, she is still pleased with the overall quality of the harvest.

Mountain wineries are the ones suffering the most. While the bulk of lower-elevation producers completed their harvest by the end of October, those on higher elevations still had upward of 30 percent of their fruit hanging well into November, when the first cold fall rainstorms began. Although generally thrilled with the quality, they had a scramble to pick in waves, bringing in the ripest grapes and hoping that another day or two of warm sun would bring more sugar to the rest.

Michael Terrien, winemaker at Hanzell Vineyards, prominently situated on the southern end of the Mayacamas mountain range and known for its pursuit of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir wines in the best tradition of Burgundy, admits to some

difficulties with the continual rains. “The grapes ripened at a lower sugar level in 2005. The typically rapid accumulation of sugar under the hot sun and low humidity of September did not happen, and in this delay we tasted exquisite flavor without the syrup of high Brix.” Ultimately, however, Terrien was satisfied. “We are very happy with the quality [of the Pinot Noir] due to the small berry size. These will be profound, rich wines with exquisite fruit characteristics reflecting the terroir [and] the dry forest smell bolstered with very robust dark fruit.”

Mary Baker at Dover Canyon Winery, which focuses on Zinfandel and Rhône varieties in the central California town of Paso Robles, also lamented the late rains: “It was a difficult vintage due to the rainy spring. Overall the foliage was leggy and weak, and unless the growers were proactive on thinning, the vineyards ended up carrying too heavy a crop load.” Since Dover Canyon is similar to Zahtila in its use of bought-in grapes, Baker had similar qualms. “There was a lot of good fruit, and there was also a lot of vineyard fruit that didn’t have the pH levels we needed. We turned away a lot of potentially great fruit because of lower pH levels.”

Generally, the word is good, and the bounty will be high. Comparisons to Bordeaux styles will be apt, since the alcohol levels may finally be slightly reduced, showing less extraction in favor of greater terroir definition and depth.



California enjoyed a bountiful harvest