



A Nichols Worth of Wine

In the Vineyard

October 2007

By mid-September, the 2007 Harvest in the northern hemisphere was well under way with about half of the grapes already in the winery for crushing. Every vintage brings its own set of challenges and this year is certain to be no exception. Once again, despite prayer and protestation, Mother Nature rules supreme in the vineyards from Sicily to Sonoma. And it hasn't just been a fickle climate challenging winemakers. A continuing labor issue, the shortage of pickers, has grape growers in California scrambling to get their fruit into the cellar before the next wave of typical end-of-season weather changes. This is "make or break" time for winemakers and if you don't think our government's effort to "control" our southern borders isn't working, just talk to the grape growers who rely on the seasonal workers' pilgrimage to the Napa and Sonoma valleys (and elsewhere) each summer. Interestingly, similar cries of "not enough help" is coming out of many of Europe's grape producing regions, where it is not always politics, but a robust economy that is creating a grape picker shortage, as temporary farmhands have left the fields for the more respectable construction and service industries.

Last year I reported the 2006 growing season to be one of "extremes". This year is far more typical in that it is only specific regions of wine-producing countries experiencing deviations in weather patterns that are often only a mountain range or just a few hundred miles apart. Italy's harvest this year is a good example of the impact that temperature and precipitation can have on vineyards within a country's borders, as crop quality differed significantly from the north to the south. If there was a single constant across both continents this year, it was that almost every wine region had a premature bud break, with most winemakers picking early this year, some at record calendar dates.

The 2007 harvest just might go on record as the "year of the vineyard manager". More than any harvest in recent history, those who managed down their yields and perfectly timed their picking (by fortune or wisdom), may be rewarded kindly. Others, well... climate, in large part, dictates the fortune of their labor in the last few weeks of any harvest.

There will be many very good wines from the 2007 vintage. Some may even be legendary – look to Napa and the southern Rhone. Yields however will be down for most wineries, some severely so. Oddly, this might be welcome news for the many wineries sitting on a glut of inventory resulting from the recent string of bountiful harvests, but not so favorable for consumers when the market forces of supply and demand emerge, elevating prices.

Below is a brief overview of some of the wine regions who have reported harvest results. Later in the fall or early winter, once the grapes are in the barrels and winemakers have a closer look at their wines, I'll report back with a more complete review of this year's vintage.

In the meantime, over the next few weeks and months new releases will come into the market as wineries make room in the cellar for their 2007 crop and that means an even greater selection of wine and hopefully even better prices!

USA

California winemakers have quit holding their breath as temperatures moderated on September 7th after an incredible 10-day heat wave that hit most of the vineyards up and down the state. Many of the whites and a good share of the pinot noirs and lighter reds are in and winemakers are encouraged by the balanced flavor profiles, thanks to lower alcohol levels and good acidity.

In Napa, most industry watchers are cautiously optimistic, some are even hinting that the 2007 vintage may be the best in a decade! Smaller berries and average to lower yields look to produce intense fruit in many of the reds. Sauvignon blancs were harvested with higher levels of acidity that should result in incredibly crisp and clean tasting wines.

Sonoma may face a somewhat more challenging vintage than neighboring Napa. After a season of mild temperatures just prior to the string of 100+ degree days, the heat wave sent sugar levels soaring before many of the grapes fully ripened. Sonoma's cooler climate wines may not take well to such extreme temperatures so late in the growing season. It's a wait and see game for much of Sonoma, but the warmer sub-climate regions in the county could do well.

Mendocino enjoyed mild, almost perfect weather and the harvest there should produce many outstanding wines.

Monterey is experiencing a delayed harvest but early indications are that most of the wineries can meet the challenge of getting the grapes in this shortened, fast-paced picking season and will have a reasonably good vintage.

Santa Barbara had near perfect weather and while the crop is light, the wines should be outstanding.

Midwest. Yes, the Midwest – every state now produces wine grapes. In a word, “disastrous” is the only way to describe how Mother Nature treated the small, but growing group of Midwestern grape farmers. Texas, Missouri and Oklahoma all experienced spring freezes and hailstorms that decimated up to 75% of the crops in some of the wine regions.

Special Note: Of local interest, Swanson Vineyards, owned by longtime Naples resident, Clarke Swanson, appears to have another award-winning vintage on hand. Their always incredible Pinot Grigio was picked just prior to the late August heat spike in Napa and the red grape varietals, including the fabulous merlot, may rival – or even surpass - the outstanding 2004 vintage Swanson wines.

Washington State, in the Pacific Northwest, looks to have an exceptional vintage. While what is estimated to be the largest crop on record, it is the quality of the fruit that has many winemakers giggling with delight. Most vineyards are already picking and the grapes have ripened slow and evenly thanks to a cooler than normal summer.

In Oregon, the jury is still out as to how good the vintage will be, as many of the vineyards have experienced a slow growing season, with a particularly cold August. Weather has turned warmer in the middle of September, so even though yields are expected to be down significantly compared to last year's record harvest, many of the fields have yet to be picked. If the current weather patterns hold over the next few weeks when the harvest typically takes place, the quality of the grapes could improve.

Europe

Italy, as mentioned earlier, had the most extreme weather conditions of any of the northern hemisphere wine producing regions in 2007. Overall, extreme temperatures and little to no rain in the south challenged winemakers in that part of the country. Conversely, the wine regions in the north and central areas of Italy enjoyed excellent conditions right up to the third week of August when cool, wet weather blew in. Since Italy, like much of the winegrowing world had an early spring, many of the whites have been picked and are showing fabulous fruit that should produce exceptionally clean and crisp wines.

As of the first week of September, Tuscany looked good. Piedmont wines will be more uneven due to early season hail while the wines in the south, particularly from Puglia and Sicily, will fare the worst due to the excessive heat and humidity that resulted in unprecedented rot and mold in a number of vineyards. However, long range weather forecasts look promising for the entire country and producers have their fingers crossed that the moderating temperatures will allow the vines to prosper during this critical end of the season growing period.

French winemakers are throwing caution to the wind regarding the 2007 harvest, but over the years I have learned to take a "let's see what happens" attitude to early vintage reports from France. Centuries of cultivated vines and soil, generations of winemaking experience and late season improved weather conditions can, and often will, offset early predictions for an average vintage. In what can only be called "weird" weather this year, France had one of the hottest Aprils on record, followed by cool overcast skies that fell over most of the country for the next four months. Many vineyards suffered mildewed vines. The exception to this unusual weather pattern was in the southern Rhone valley where August sunshine and warm temperatures persisted throughout the month. Most areas outside of Rhone, especially Bordeaux, though will see a significant decline in production; not good news for fans and collectors of this region's celebrated chateaux and estates. If you were disheartened by the pre-release cost of the extraordinary 2005 Bordeaux, imagine what this 2007 vintage will do to wine prices from the region. There's not much in the way of grape quality forecasting coming out of Burgundy yet. Vintners there are playing it close to the vest until the end of September when picking should be near completion. Nevertheless, the weather in Burgundy this year pretty much mirrored Bordeaux, so expectations are not high for a quality vintage.

German winemakers, on the other hand, have plenty to celebrate this harvest. Germany, like the rest of Europe and America, is experiencing one of the earliest harvests ever recorded. Unlike its neighbors to the west and south though, weather conditions have been ideal throughout the growing season. The crop is expected to increase by double digits and quality does not appear as though it will suffer with these increased yields as early ripening has locked in the incredible flavors and aromas German wines are so famed for. Domestic consumption, which stands at about 50% of the annual crop, is being challenged as German wine sold to other countries increased to near 20% in the last year alone and the impressive quality of the 2007 vintage should see export percentages escalate yet again. The better vineyards planted to high-quality rieslings will not pick until about the first week of October, still historically early for the country. While the harvest is not yet quite complete, Germany's 2007 wine vintage is predicted to be one of the best ever!

Spain and Portugal's 2007 harvest unfortunately has little to report even though the harvest in both of these Iberian countries is well under way and complete in many regions. Due to the hottest reported temperatures in 400 years (hmmm... was there really someone recording the weather back then?), many vineyards suffered from dry, parched conditions. Those wineries with good irrigation systems will likely see a decent vintage.

Spanish wine producers in many areas were fighting the dual dilemma of unusual weather – excessive heat in some areas (Priorat), cooler than usual in others (Duero), along with labor problems. In Spain, just as in America, there is a political issue affecting this year's harvest with the Spanish government attempting to slow, if not stop, the immigration of pickers from Bulgaria and Romania.

In Portugal, what little information that is available is indicating that unusually cool, wet weather will result in uneven quality and fewer wine grapes.

All in all, 2007 will be regarded in many vineyard locations as a good to a great year for wine producers. Yields will be down in virtually all wine producing countries, Germany being the exception. Yet from a quality standpoint select regions and as always, the best wineries, will produce terrific wines in 2007, with Napa Valley, Washington State, southern Rhone and Germany's Mosel leading the way. Good news for us!

Around Town

In a town where “pasta palaces” border on prolific, it must be daunting for Italian restaurants to distinguish themselves from one another. Some try to do it by featuring a menu of “*authentic regional cuisine*”, others with a European staff that can be extraordinarily charming, and thankfully, some do it by just turning out delicious, American-influenced, Italian food. Rarely will you find one that hits the mark on more than one of these points and certainly the latter is the exception. So it was with some surprise that on two separate visits within a week, I fell back in love with *Naples Tomato*. It's not that I ever didn't enjoy my experience there, I did. Some of my earlier visits were uneven, but consistency is not always a sure thing at restaurants, especially in a town with a revolving door of employees.

Naples Tomato seems to really have found itself. The food, service and the new look, with a focus on dining, were all exemplary. And oh, the wine! The list featuring more than twenty wines by the glass - another few dozen - if you count the adjoining wine bar selections, is fabulous. There are a few hundred bottle choices from around the globe with an obvious leaning to Italy and California. Local vintner representation has thankfully been considered, reflected by the inclusion of outstanding selections from Figge Cellars, Domaine Serene and Swanson Vineyards.

Some of the more memorable items from the menu we enjoyed included the “*Roasted Beet Napoleon*” (which brought oohs and aahs from my vegetarian daughter) and the “*Butternut Squash Ravioli*”, one of a number of meatless choices that more than satisfied an otherwise carnivore friend. My two entrée picks (yes, eaten on separate occasions!), the “*Mussels Oreganato*” and an evening special of pan-seared “*Day Boat Scallops*” were magnificent in every way. On both visits, I ordered the Caesar Salad, which is one of the best I’ve had here in Naples. I’ve promised myself to not load up on the delicious bread on my next visit and save room for what looked to be some fabulous desserts, but I suspect that I will just give in and enjoy both!

Naples Tomato has a lot going for it, including lunch, dinner, take-out, catering and a wine room that features six Enomatic wine dispensers, offering four dozen wines in one, two, and six ounce pours. I suggest you visit their website, www.naplestomato.com to learn more about them. Better yet, if you haven’t yet dined here, or haven’t been back in a while, make a reservation today. Between now and November 15th, *Naples Tomato* has an unbelievable two-course “*Early Diner*” dinner menu for \$13.

Did you know...

As if our esteemed lawmakers in Washington do not have more pressing matters to attend to, they are currently considering enacting legislation requiring wineries to include caloric content, recommended serving size, and carbohydrate information on wine labels.