

A Nichols Worth of Wine

August 2008

Recently, I ran across a headline in one of the scores of wine rags I scour each week that read, “*So, you want to be a winemaker*” that got me thinking, Why?

Winemaking is a tough, tough business, not for the thin-skinned, feint of heart, or those with high blood pressure. You also better have some very deep pockets, know more than a little about farming and it wouldn't hurt to have the local weatherman plugged into your blackberry.

Think I'm being overly dramatic? Consider the 2008 grape growing season in many viticultural regions of the globe, particularly right here at home in northern California. Mother Nature has not been exactly kind to winemakers in 2008. At least not so far. On the positive side, grapes are a resilient fruit and with anywhere from a few weeks to a few months before harvest, depending on the varietal and the weather, this could yet turn out to be a good (great?) vintage.

However, considering the ugly start some vintners got off to in late winter and continuing through the spring and early summer, there are many fingers being crossed in the vineyards. Already this year, they have seen freezing temperatures, frosts, a dry spring, wildfires, smoke damage, scorching heat spikes, high winds, water shortages, governmental intrusion, soaring fuel costs, herbicidal drifts and pesky pests. Need I go on?

Surprisingly, and thankfully, winemakers and grape growers are a tenacious and passionate bunch. But this has, by any standard, been a really weird season in many grape producing areas. In late April, while visiting Chalk Hill in Sonoma, I woke early in the morning to temperatures that overnight, had fallen to 29 degrees. There was a mix of anguish and relief throughout the north coast as growers, many of who never went to bed the night before, surveyed their vines. Some vineyards suffered significant burn that would ultimately reduce this year's yield by 20% or more, while adjoining farms had no damage. Most of the “survivor's” ran sprinklers through the night.

Of course those with costly sprinkling systems would, just weeks later, fret over diminishing water supplies used to combat the frost, as typical spring rains failed to materialize. Then, late August heat spikes that can be so beneficial to pushing the sugar levels in the grapes to ripening perfection came. The problem was that it was around the Memorial Day weekend! With the heat and dry weather, came nasty wildfires pushing dangerously close to some vineyards. If the fires were to reach the valley and hillside vineyards, would there be sufficient water to combat them?

Maybe not if some local wine country jurisdictions got their way and carried through pending legislation aimed at regulating growers access to local stream water in an effort to protect the local salmon and trout population. While most would applaud the effort to save the fish, what would we wash it down with if the water supply to growers disappeared and there was no wine?

The challenges facing winemakers in California, while extreme this year, are not limited just to that wine growing region. Australia's agriculture minister just announced that dramatic climate change threatens the survival of the Margaret River wine region over the next few decades. Growers in Loire, are fearful that the spring frosts will wipe out 50% of this years grape crop.

All however, is not doom and gloom. New Zealand which has already harvested it's Southern Hemisphere grapes reports a bumper crop and heavy rains ended South Africa's drought and it looks to be a great harvest there. Reports for the other grape growing regions of the world are beginning to trickle in and as more information becomes available, I'll bring it to you.

The next few weeks are pivotal in California's vineyards. As I said earlier, grapes are as hardy as, well as hardy as the people who grow them. In spite of this convergence of perhaps a once in a lifetime sequence of hurdles winemakers are facing this year, they could yet again turn out some sensational wines in 2008. Stranger things have happened. I'm just happy that a few adventurous souls wanted to be a winemaker.

Did you know...

Rosé passed white as the French's favorite wine and its sales in England are up more than 30%.

Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce