



CALIFORNIA WINE 2018 HARVEST REPORT

**SLOW AND STEADY GROWING SEASON
BRINGS EXCELLENT QUALITY ACROSS THE STATE**

SAN FRANCISCO – Following a long growing season characterized by moderate temperatures throughout the spring and summer, California’s 2018 harvest played out like a dream for winegrowers in regions across the state. Harvest began anywhere from 10 days to three weeks later than in 2017, and vintners are reporting exceptional quality, thanks to consistent growing conditions and cooler temperatures, which allowed the grapes to mature slowly.

(Above) Experienced vineyard crews are key to a successful winegrape harvest.

A few regions, including Temecula, Paso Robles and San Diego County, experienced issues with heat spikes, but most reported even temperatures throughout the season with little-to-no frost damage. As the season drew to a close, vintners braced for a compacted harvest of later-ripening varieties in early October. Vintners reported abundant yields in line with the United States Department of Agriculture’s August forecast of 4.1 million tons in 2018, up 2% from 2017, and above the historical average of 3.9 million tons. Overall, vintners are enthusiastic about both the quality and quantity of the 2018 vintage.

The Growing Season

“The mild summer weather allowed fruit to mature slowly without heat stress, and canopies are looking healthy,” said **John Killebrew**, winemaker for Z. Alexander Brown winery in Napa. “Crop levels looked good and quality appears very high, with balanced sugar, acid and tannin levels.”

Like many wineries in the North Coast region, Napa’s Black Stallion Estate Winery began picking two weeks later than in 2017. “Fortunately, compared to previous years, we did not see any major heat waves in the early part of harvest, so the fruit ripened evenly and stress-free,” said winemaker **Ralf Holdenried**.

Dennis Cakebread, chairman and senior vice president of sales and marketing for Cakebread Cellars in Rutherford, Napa Valley, reported normal to above-average yields and high-quality fruit. “We’re really happy with the grapes,” he said. “They have good flavor and balance.”

Mark Burningham, director of grower relations for Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen, Sonoma County, is equally optimistic about the 2018 vintage. “This is one of those years where everyone is happy,” he said. “Yields are up and quality is excellent, thanks to the moderate temperatures and dry conditions.”

“It was a compacted harvest for the Cabernet Sauvignon, coming in right on top of the large crop of Chardonnay, so tank space was at a premium,” he continued. “Labor was tight, but we managed it by scheduling far in advance.”



Top-selling red wines by volume are Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Blends, Pinot Noir and Merlot, according to Nielsen-measured U.S. off-premise sales.

In Lodi, vintners began picking old-vine Zinfandel mid-September. “This year we’ve seen a later bud break, set and veraison, followed by a hot July and a cool August,” said **Stuart Spencer** of St. Amant Winery. “The cool temperatures in mid- to late-September led to gradual sugar accumulation and good flavor development. In general, we saw better flavors at lower sugars and the quality looks great.”

Despite ongoing challenges with drought in Santa Barbara County, vintners reported a healthy crop for 2018. “The vines produced a big, bountiful crop that we began harvesting in mid-September,” said **Karen Steinwachs** of Buttonwood Winery & Vineyard in Solvang. “The hottest July on record led to cool temperatures in August, continuing into September. Cold, crisp evenings kept our legendary Santa Barbara County acidity in the grapes, and the flavors are simply divine.”

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– MARK BURNINGHAM,
BENZIGER FAMILY WINERY

Wine Region Reports

AMADOR COUNTY

Overall, 2018 was a very good year for Amador County winegrowers. Harvest began around 10 days later than normal, after an even growing season with no frost damage and plenty of heat during veraison. Set was good on all of the region's major varieties, with Tempranillo experiencing some issues. Vintners are expecting a larger than average crop, with good color and extraction. On a 10-point scale, fruit quality looks to be an 8.

CALAVERAS COUNTY

A later than normal harvest, higher yields and good quality fruit characterize the 2018 growing season. The region experienced a cool, wet spring, with some shatter issues for Grenache. A period of mild days and cool nights was followed by a prolonged heat spell, but temperatures

cooled down in time to allow the grapes some extra hang time. Harvest began two to three weeks later than normal, and yields are slightly higher than average despite bird issues at some ranches. Vintners are reporting good color in the grapes with slowly developing flavors, and good acid and pH levels.

LAKE COUNTY

Harvest 2018 got underway about a week later than last year and started to wind down by mid-October. By late September, the region's warm summer temperatures gave way to mild fall temperatures, which allowed for longer hang time. With the onset of wildland fires in late July, growers began working closely with winery partners on testing, analysis and micro-fermentations, and adjusting viticultural and harvest practices accordingly to minimize any impact to the grapes and wine. Because of Lake County's vast, diverse and mountainous terrain, assessments are being conducted on a vineyard-by-vineyard, varietal-by-varietal basis. While growers noted a larger crop than the prior year, sugars and acids are well-balanced, leading growers and vintners to be optimistic of fruit quality. Growers remain dedicated to maintaining the region's reputation of delivering high-quality grapes.

LIVERMORE VALLEY

The 2018 year is shaping up to be great for the Livermore Valley. Bud break occurred later than normal and flowering was prolonged due to a wet, cold spring. Temperatures hovered in the 90s for most of the summer, followed by refreshing, cool temperatures in August and September that allowed for slower maturation, flavor development and longer hang time. Chardonnay has excellent quality with great acidity and flavors. Syrah ripened at a lower Brix than usual and is showing complex flavors. Vintners were picking Cabernet Sauvignon into late October. Most vineyards reported yields about 10% higher than in 2017, with fruit showing great flavors and acidity levels.

LODI

The season got off to a slow start in Lodi, with later than normal timing for bud break, flowering and veraison. A moderate spring, very warm July temperatures, followed by a cool August allowed for gradual sugar accumulation. Moderate September conditions, allowed the grapes to ripen slowly. Yields appear to be average with younger vineyards having larger crops and older vineyards having lighter ones. All the region's major varieties fared well, despite the ongoing challenges of hand-picking the old vines. Quality across the board looks good, and vintners are expecting fresh wines with nice acidity and good balance for 2018.



Map of
California
Winegrowing
Regions

**“THE FLAVORS ARE
SIMPLY DIVINE”**

– KAREN STEINWACHS,
BUTTONWOOD WINERY &
VINEYARD

MADERA COUNTY

Triple-digit temperatures and the slow development of physiological maturity challenged Madera winegrowers this year. The season began with a mild winter and spring with little rainfall and a late bud break. This was followed by a high number of consecutive days over 100 degrees. Yields were average, due to growers' pruning practices, such as shoot and bunch thinning to help grapes reach maturity. Mediterranean varieties fared well in the warm growing conditions. Overall, the grapes showed light color and good flavors.

MENDOCINO COUNTY

Winegrowers are reporting very good quality for the 2018 vintage, with larger than normal yields. Bud break and flowering happened late this year, and conditions in May were windy and cool. There was a little frost in Potter Valley and Redwood Valley, but most regions were not impacted. Summer temperatures climbed to more than 100 degrees, but then cooled down in time for the harvest. The weather during harvest was ideal with warm moderate days and cool nights. Overall, the region's major varieties fared well with good sugar maturity. Acidity levels were up from last year and pH levels were down. The fruit is showing ripe flavors and vintners are expecting a nice vintage that will showcase Mendocino's potential for high quality wine.

MONTEREY COUNTY

For the first time since 2012, growers experienced a return to California's normally cool, coastal climate and a long, drawn-out harvest season. Mild, cool temperatures in winter and spring extended the period for bloom and fruit set, leading to sleepless nights for growers ready to protect vines from any frost. Despite this worry, there were no issues with fruit set. Because of the coolness, many predicted a light crop in early summer, but as the hang time extended, they changed their assessments to an average-sized crop. Quality for both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir is exceptional, with solid acid levels and great phenolic development. Vintners are expecting a high-quality year.

NAPA VALLEY

Growers reported "beautiful, steady conditions" for the 2018 growing season and harvest. Rain was abundant in February, and endless days of sunshine followed with the buds emerging from the dormant vines. Vines flowered uniformly, paving the way for even cluster development. The first picks of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier began in mid-August. Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay were harvested without exposure to heat spikes or rain. Vintners experienced increased activity in October, as red varieties came in. Cabernet Sauvignon benefitted from warm days and cool nights, resulting in extended hang time. Growers are reporting strong yields compared to last year, along with complex flavors and excellent quality.



USDA estimated the winegrape crop in August at 4.1 million tons, slightly higher than the five-year historical average.



Ever-popular Chardonnay remains the number one winegrape variety in the state.

PASO ROBLES

Paso Robles vintners have high hopes for an excellent vintage after a challenging growing season. Lower than normal rainfall over the winter resulted in a slightly later bud break, and cool weather during flowering extended the bloom period and caused some shatter in certain areas. An extended heat wave followed with 40 consecutive days of temperatures exceeding 90 degrees and 20 of those days reaching into triple digits. Once the heat wave subsided, the weather pattern returned to normal leading up to harvest, which began anywhere from one to three weeks later than usual. Most varieties had more clusters per vine than a normal year, but smaller cluster sizes and berries should lead to some excellent quality wines. For most varieties, yield appeared to be about average and wine quality for the major varieties looks promising.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Quality for 2018 will exceed that of 2017, and vintners are reporting good color, acidity and Brix levels in spite of a significant summer heat spike. A long, cool spring led to later bud break than usual, and a heat event in early July damaged several vineyards in the area and presented challenges for growers in certain locations. The harvest began about three weeks later than in the last few years, and yields were lower than normal due to the heat spike.

SAN LUIS OBISPO

May and June were particularly cool months in the SLO Coast winegrowing region, but hot spells in July and early August kicked the growing season into high gear. Despite the warm temperatures, the harvest began about 10 days later than in recent years. Rain in early October had no negative impact on the grapes. Yields for Chardonnay and other varieties were larger than average and quality looks great across the board. Fermentations have proceeded nicely and the wines are delicious.

“WE DID NOT SEE ANY MAJOR HEAT WAVES IN THE EARLY PART OF HARVEST SO THE FRUIT RIPENED EVENLY AND STRESS-FREE”

— RALF HOLDENRIED, BLACK STALLION ESTATE WINERY

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

There are early rumblings that the 2018 vintage will be reminiscent of 2016. After six years of early, warm harvests, 2018's cool temperatures in late summer and early fall were a return to normal conditions by long-term standards—but surprising nonetheless. Temperatures during bud break and flowering were cool, followed by a hot July and a normal-to-cool ripening period during August and September. The start of this year's harvest was the latest since 2011. Yields were average overall, but the Chardonnay crop was light. Fruit is concentrated with healthy acidity and good depth of flavor. Overall quality looks excellent.

SANTA CLARA VALLEY

Growers are very pleased with the long, slow 2018 growing season. The weather remained beneficially cool throughout the extended harvest season, punctuated with short periods of warm mid- to high-80s days, combined with relatively dry weather and low disease pressure. Pinot Noir in the cool San Ysidro and Madonna Pass areas was harvested the last week of September with Chardonnay, Viognier and valley floor Bordeaux varietals in mid-October. Red Rhone varietals were harvested in late October and early November. Overall fruit quality has been excellent, with notably long hang times, notably darker color and thicker skins than average, and relatively low sugar levels for equivalent pH and phenolic ripeness.

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

Winegrowers reported a slow and steady season with terrific quality. A cool, moderate spring pushed bud break to late March/early April and flowering in June for many vineyards. Summer weather was moderate, with August temperatures a bit below normal—dipping into the low 70s. For the first time in many years, there was no major heat spike in September. Grapes were allowed to ripen slowly and consistently due to the moderate weather and extended hang time. Yields are expected to be higher than normal. Overall quality is exceeding expectations with low sugars and excellent phenolic ripeness for both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

SONOMA COUNTY

Vintners are expecting an excellent 2018 vintage. The region experienced an increased amount of rainfall during the spring, followed by occasional heat spikes that occurred in June during flowering. Fortunately, the heat spikes were not prolonged, so the effects should be minimal. The harvest began about two weeks later than in previous years but was more in line with normal timing in the years before the drought. This year saw a significant increase in yields compared to recent vintages, and so far, vintners are reporting great quality and flavor intensity in the fruit.

TEMECULA VALLEY

Temecula Valley harvest began with “normal” timing mid-August. Weather was challenging the entire season. Vines entered dormancy late in the season, due to unusually warm temperatures November through January, then freezing temperatures hit vineyards in February. Zinfandel experienced some late season bunch rot, and a July heat wave hammered the region’s Muscat, Petite Sirah, Barbera, Sangiovese and Syrah. A hot August sped up the harvest and increased the need for irrigation. Overall yields are expected to be slightly down. Chardonnay is a bit below average yields, but quality looks good. Syrah had a rough year, from frost issues to heat damage, but the fruit fared pretty well. Cabernet Sauvignon is looking great this year, along with Barbera, Sangiovese and Merlot.



“THE COOL TEMPERATURES IN MID-TO LATE-SEPTEMBER LED TO GRADUAL SUGAR ACCUMULATION AND GOOD FLAVOR DEVELOPMENT”

— STUART SPENCER, ST. AMANT WINERY

California makes 81 percent of U.S. wine and is the world’s fourth largest wine producer.

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