

# Sonoma County vintners counting on quality, not quantity in this year's harvest



Vineyard workers pick pinot noir grapes under a bright array of floodlights during a night harvest at E & J Gallo's Laguna Ranch Vineyards in Sebastopol, California, on Wednesday, September 2, 2015. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

BY BILL SWINDELL

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Midnight had come and gone, but winemaker Boyd Morrison was still walking through the Laguna Ranch Vineyards outside Sebastopol to examine the grapes that will become the foundation for his 2015 vintage.

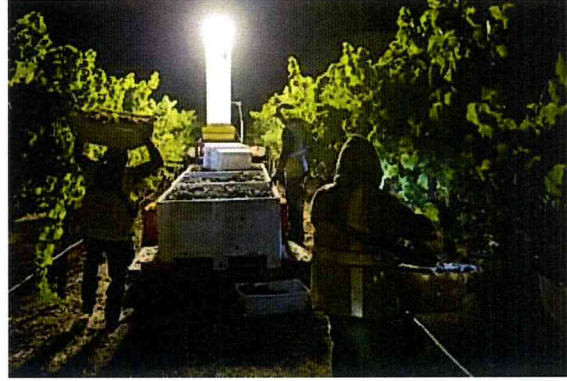
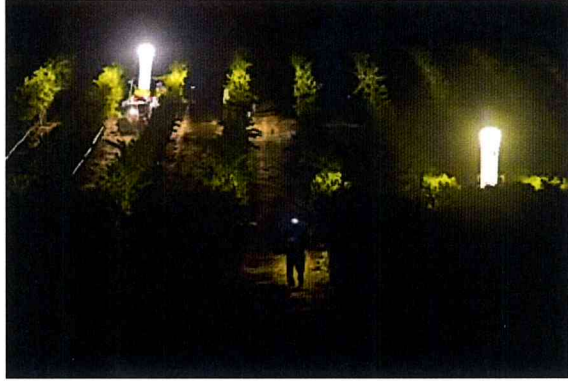
**VIP'S LUMINITE!**

Halogen floodlights lit up the vineyard as crews moved down the rows, swiftly snipping clusters of pinot noir grapes from the vines. Morrison, who had been up since 4 the previous morning, was filled with a mixture of exhaustion and elation, a feeling that winemakers know all too well in September as the North Coast's annual grape harvest shifts into high gear.

As winemaker for MacMurray Estate Vineyards, a pinot noir specialist owned by Modesto-based E&J Gallo Winery, Morrison monitors all the different vineyards in his portfolio. He had been

down to Monterey earlier in the week and wearily joked that harvest is “just the time to live in your car.”

## Sonoma County Wine Grape Harvest



Large light towers provide illumination to picking crews during a night harvest at E & J Gallo's Laguna Ranch Vineyards in Sebastopol, California, on Wednesday, September 2, 2015. (Alvin Jornada/The Press Democrat)

*Uniminate  
Light towers  
(Very soft)*

But the payoff approached as Morrison sampled the grapes from Wednesday night's pick. The berries, he noted, were “super small” with a good juice-to-skin ratio, which should translate to very flavorful wines with great depth that will age well.

“The flavor and the quality we are going to get out of this harvest is going to be incredible,” Morrison said.

Vintners like Morrison across the North Coast are relieved about the quality of the fruit. It helps take some of the sting out of this year’s harvest, which will be much less bountiful than last year’s \$1.4 billion crop.

The Sonoma County grape crop alone could be anywhere from 30 to 35 percent smaller than 2014’s total of 255,635 tons, said Karissa Kruse, president of Sonoma County Winegrowers, which represents more than 1,800 local growers.

“We are really happy with the wines we are getting. ... We wished we had more,” said Laurence Sterling, director of operations at Iron Horse Vineyards in Sebastopol, where this year’s crop is down 45 to 55 percent from 2014 in some blocks. “We’ll make it work.”

This year’s harvest is one of the earliest ever, beginning July 22 in Napa County and July 29 in Sonoma County. About 30 percent of the Sonoma County crop has been picked, Kruse said, and harvest should be finished well ahead of its typical ending, which occurs around the first week of November.

Unusual temperatures are responsible for both the early start to harvest and the smaller yields.

Record heat in January and February awoke the vines from their winter hibernation far earlier than normal, kicking the growing cycle into action.

But cooler weather in April and May slowed down flowering and fruit set, when small flowers on the vines are fertilized and transformed into tiny grapes. That, in turn, reduced the size of the 2015 crop, even though the vines continued on their march to an early harvest.

Vineyard managers and vintners in certain areas, such as Napa’s Atlas Peak, have reported significant amounts of shatter, which is essentially when clusters have not developed fully. Others have reported an uneven ripening of grapes — “hens and chicks” in the parlance of growers. In some cases, growers have sent crews out into the vineyards before harvest to cull the unevenly ripening grapes.

In general, cool sites in higher elevations such as in the wine grape growing areas of Sonoma Coast, Bennett Valley and Sonoma Mountain have struggled with very poor set and uneven ripening, said Eric Flanagan, proprietor of Flanagan Wines. He has found crop yields down from 5 percent to 80 percent relative to last year.

Certain varietals have suffered more. Zinfandel and sauvignon blanc have been particularly hard hit with lower yields, said Duff Bevill, founder of Bevill Vineyard Management, which oversees about 1,000 vineyard acres.

Winemakers, however, are adjusting. On Wednesday night, Scott Johnsen, a viticulturist for Gallo’s Frei Brothers Reserve, summed up this year’s harvest as he picked up a cluster of pinot

noir grapes during the Laguna Ranch pick. He noted the small Pommard clone he held in his hand had a lot of small berries that had no seeds, while some of the larger ones had only one seed. That meant the grapes would have to spend more time on the vine.

“We’re going to have to get this cluster pretty ripe, riper than we would have otherwise if they were all full, mature berries,” Johnsen said.

At Iron Horse, the unevenness was evident when a crew picked a block of pinot noir grapes for sparkling wine on Aug. 18 and then left fruit on that section to ripen for an additional two weeks. The vineyard was fully picked Thursday and Friday, Sterling said.

“We did that first pass ... and it was crossing our fingers because we had no idea what was going to happen,” Sterling said. “Was all this fruit we left out there going to be pickable?”

Growers have benefited from good vine weather this summer with little rain and temperatures for the most part in the high 80s and low 90s with few heat spikes. That temperate climate has given winemakers enough lead time so they are not rushed to make a pick. Some local vineyards had an influx of powdery mildew earlier this summer, but it didn’t pose a significant problem.

Still, the lower yields are having repercussions.

Sterling said he is paying his pick crew by the hour, as opposed to by the weight, so they don’t suffer significant wage losses because of the small harvest. Some vintners who have relied on surplus grapes that were readily available in recent years have found themselves scrambling for fruit.

“Most of the winemakers are getting less than they expected,” Kruse said.

In addition, some contract growers may find it will be tough to break even on certain vineyard blocks because they will not get the tonnage they projected earlier in the year when they entered into price-per-ton contracts with wineries, Bevill noted. Roughly 85 percent of local growers are locked into contracts, as opposed to selling their grapes on the spot market.

“It’s a crapshoot all year long,” Bevill said of growing grapes.

Industry executives say the lower yield, however, is actually good for the overall North Coast wine marketplace because it will help bring it back into balance after three previous bumper crops, including 2013’s record-setting crush for Sonoma, Lake and Mendocino counties. Napa County’s largest crop was in 2012.

“We have some short-term pain for some moderate-term benefit,” said Brian Clements, vice president for Turrentine Brokerage, a Novato-based grape broker.

Another large crop would have depressed prices in the bulk and spot markets, Clements said. Some varietals, such as chardonnay and pinot noir, could have slipped below \$1,000 per ton, he

said. Local chardonnay is priced around \$1,700 per ton and above, while pinot noir is about \$2,500 per ton and above.

“Mother Nature gave us exactly what we needed for the marketplace,” Clements said.

It will likely take an average 2016 crop to bring the bulk market back into balance, he said. The only varietal that appears to be immune from price sensitivities right now, Clements said, is cabernet sauvignon, which he called “bulletproof.”

Even Bevill agreed, saying, “another bumper crop would not be good.”

You can reach Staff Writer Bill Swindell at 521-5223 or [bill.swindell@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:bill.swindell@pressdemocrat.com). On Twitter @BillSwindell.