

Napa Valley Vintners—Report on Harvest 2011

Challenging year in the vineyard reaps rewards in the cellar

“Although it may be stretching to compare our harvest with one of the greatest ever games in the history of baseball...but like the 2011 World Series, we had our ups and downs, and finally pulled it out. This was one of our most exciting harvests ever!” said **Cain Vineyards’ Winemaker and General Manager Chris Howell**. And once again the excitement of the finale of the American baseball season seems to parallel that of the vintage at harvest from America’s premier winegrowing region, the legendary Napa Valley. Today the Napa Valley Vintners (NVV) non-profit trade association of more than 420 wineries representing 98% of the appellation’s wine production offers its annual report on harvest.

“2011 was a challenging and as well as what I am calling ‘an educational vintage,’ the third in a row,” said **Oakville Ranch Winery General Manager Paula Kornell** who was born and raised in the Napa Valley wine industry. “What we found this vintage were flavors that developed at lower brix, giving us an opportunity to make truly elegant wines at lower alcohol levels.”

“Harvest 2011—from tears to glory!” is how renowned vintner **Tim Mondavi, owner of Continuum** capsulized the year and winemakers appellation-wide are in agreement.

What began with a wet winter and spring continued with rainfall into mid-June that delayed bloom and disrupted fruit set resulting in shatter in parts of the region set the stage for a long, cooler-than-average growing season with a later-than-average harvest beset with autumn rain storms. The precipitation measuring season ending on June 30 found the region more than a third above normal in rainfall. While this is good news for water resources, the cloud cover and cool temperatures delayed vine development by several weeks at the onset of the growing season.

This timetable continued through the somewhat cool summer season where harvest for the first varieties for sparkling wines found the latest harvest start in anyone’s memory, beginning August 29. Few high heat events occurred at any point this year, but growers managed more open vine canopies to ensure sunlight, warmth and good air circulation around the grape clusters. The shatter resulting from the rain events in June was variable by vineyard location hitting some locations harder with projected crop diminished by more than 30% while leaving other sites nearly untouched with near-normal crop.

New Media Resources Tell Story of Year in Real Time

New this year, wine lovers around the world were able to follow the Napa Valley harvest like never before. Twitter was a-buzz at #harvestNV with thousands of tweets from the vineyards and cellars. Read the ongoing Twitter feed at the www.napavintners.com/harvest.

Napa Valley filmmaker Bret Lyman chronicled the vintage in a series of harvest videos beginning in August with the start of harvest for sparkling wines to the white varieties, Merlot and then Cabernet Sauvignon. Check out today’s release of the final chapter of the harvest videos below.

The region's winemakers and vineyard managers participated in a week-long "Harvest Live" streaming video the week of October 17 with six days of morning and afternoon live chat painting the picture in clear detail of what was happening in the vineyard and in the winery in real time. Check out the U-Stream link below to watch the archived programs hosted by **Christophe Smith of Titus Vineyards** along with his esteemed guests.

<http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/17941005>

And, more than ever before the vintners themselves blogged all season on their experiences in written, photo and video posts on the NVV's official blog "Unfiltered."

Reports from throughout the Appellation

Bruce Cakebread of Cakebread Cellars said, "The consumer doesn't care that the tonnage is down over one year or another, the consumer only cares about the quality and the 2011 crop is looking phenomenal across the board, I'm really excited."

Schramsberg Vineyards Winemaker Keith Hoch noted that, "For sparkling wine, 2011 is one of the best years for Pinot Noir we can remember, beautiful fruitful aromas, great flavors, lots of acid and the Chardonnays have a ridiculous--in a good way--amount of acid, lots of generous aromas and tasting wonderful."

Jon Ruel of Oak Knoll District's Trefethen Family Vineyards, celebrating the family's 44th harvest said, "It has certainly been stressful and exhausting, but here's the thing...harvest is always stressful and exhausting. It's hard to explain to someone outside the industry, but for the past two months the *harvest* has occupied my mind in almost every waking hour, and some of the sleeping ones too. From the vineyard side, harvest is really the culmination of a full year's work. As a grower, I practice farming in real-time throughout the growing season, adjusting plans to the vintage at hand, always thinking about how each decision will affect the condition of the grapes at *harvest*."

He continued, "As for harvest 2011, the delayed ripening from the cool spring and summer pushed the harvest back a bit - and then it rained. So, we had some weather to deal with and an unusual amount of grapes still on the vine. Big deal? Not really. But, in the moment, it sure felt like it. Chardonnay at 22 brix before the rain had winemakers wondering about their style targets - should they pick and be safe or roll the dice and hope for more sugar? And a few weeks later, the same questions were being asked about Cabernet and Merlot - pick at 23 brix or hope for more but risk more botrytis. This is how wine is made! Making decisions in real-time with the goal of making fantastic wine."

Most of our white lots, Riesling and Chardonnay, are now dry and taste fantastic. There has been talk about this being a 'less ripe' vintage. That's misleading. The grapes got ripe--seeds hardened, skins softened, flavors went from green to fruity, but they just, in some cases, had less sugar when they got there. And, that's like describing a car by the size of the tires. There is a lot more to it."

Chateau Montelena Winemaker Cameron Perry reports, "Our patience was rewarded with a Chardonnay that exudes precision and balance. The mild, steady warmth of the summer months lacked any significant temperature spikes, which yielded uniformly ripe fruit and fantastic flavor development. Expect to find zesty green apple and concentrated melon notes,

with the refreshing acid. We have found in our long experience with Chardonnay that these cooler vintages make wonderful, classic wines, and we rate 2011 as unequivocally successful.”

In the Carneros District just off the San Pablo Bay at the cooler southern reaches of the appellation, **Winemaker Jerome Chery of Saintsbury** noted that harvest here was completed in mid-October and said, “2011 was challenging, as it was a combination of a cold wet spring and cool summer without any drastic heat. Since every vintage is different, it is up to the winemakers to be experienced and prepared to face any kind of challenges. I am very excited with the Pinot Noir lots. They offer great fruit purity, great color and suppleness. It wasn’t a tannic year for Pinot Noir at all, which means that we had to gear our winemaking protocol towards extraction with various tools available at the winery.”

“2011 was the year of patience. This year forced oneself to be patient and there were pleasantries to be found. On Spring Mountain we are thrilled with this year’s fruit. Chardonnay we waited through the first two rains of this year to pick on October 18th. Were there risks in doing so? Yes, but we did not want to panic pick and make a lesser quality wine. We held on tight and were patient, and that patience paid off. Yields are consistent with last year – maybe down 10%,” **Wes Steffens, Winery Manager, Vineyard 7 & 8.**

Far Niente’s Director of Winemaking Dirk Hampson said, “Our Chardonnay production was about 25% below expectations. Quality looks very good. About half came in after the rains with the damage left behind in the vineyard. Alcohols are slightly lower with structure and length that emphasizes layering in the final bottling.”

Michael Silacci of Opus One said, “I had thought 2010 was the most challenging vintage we’d been through, but 2011 was even more challenging. There was a light crop because of the rain during fruit set and approaching balance in the fruit was a lot of work. In most cases for us, everything worked out really well and we’re very happy with the outcome.”

He continued, “Where we shine is as an appellation. We produce good wines under any condition--we learn to adjust. These vintages cause us to think like our viticultural forefathers. When the going gets tough, winemakers get out in the vineyard.”

At Viader Vineyards and Winery on the hillside just below Howell Mountain, **Winemaker Alan Viader** had a compressed harvest beginning on October 17 and completed ten days later. “Overall, it was a great spring and I had high hopes for a good crop until the June rains knocked off most of my flowering clusters. The rest of the year was mild and I took full advantage of my steep west-facing exposure. This vineyard site does very well on years where the vines need sunlight. I was able to ripen my fruit slowly but evenly. These last rains came at a time in the maturation period that didn’t affect much. There were some very warm days before the rains, so the precipitation just gave the vines a breath of fresh air so they could continue to focus on ripening the fruit. This type of weather makes me thankful that I live and grow grapes in Napa Valley.” He continued, “My biggest problem with 2011...I don’t have enough. This vintage should produce some Napa Valley classics for sure. “

Jon Ruel added, “You’ll notice I didn’t talk much about mold, rot, botrytis, et cetera. Why? Those challenges are on the grapes that we didn’t harvest. Botrytis certainly had a major impact on the quantity of the harvest, not the quality. The commitment to quality runs so deep and strong in this valley that systems for effective sorting were already set-up, both in the field and at the wineries.”

With vineyards located along the valley floor, **Silacci notes** to the report that Opus One was finished with harvest in mid-October. "We walked blocks carefully early on and started picking when fruit reached an early ripeness, which we felt was the correct expression of this vintage. At this fresh fruit stage of ripeness there was good phenolic quality. We are really excited about this year's vintage. The fruit this year will make for well-balanced wines with good intensity, structure and texture with a brightness of flavor."

He continued, "Merlot is a huge success story for 2011. While it can tend to be on the greener side, the cool weather helped the vines work more efficiently and produced a beautiful vintage of this varietal. Look for black cherry and plum, not any prune character."

At **J Davies Vineyards on Diamond Mountain**, harvest wrapped up the first week in November and **Owner Hugh Davies** said, "2011 was definitely not a cookie cutter year. With challenges comes opportunity, and the demand for attention the vineyards needed in 2011 has given us more knowledge and resources on how to grow premium grapes in years when 'Mother Nature' throws curve balls at us. Our Cabs are fermenting; the color looks good, great aromas and delicious flavors--exceeding our expectations!"

From atop Howell Mountain in the eastern hills of the appellation, **Ladera Vineyards Owner Pat Stotesbery** said, "2011 was an overall cool year but not cold in the fashion of 2010. Patience provided sufficient ripeness but it was challenging waiting through the rain and coolness of early October. Other than the general coolness of the growing season, botrytis was the single biggest challenge but it was minimized here on Howell Mountain due to the timing of bloom versus the timing of the June rains. As a result we saw very limited amounts of botrytis.

We think the 2011 Sauvignon Blanc is excellent; bright, acidic and clean. So far, very few Cabs are finished at this point but the tastes from the fermenters are very good and typical of Howell Mountain with great dark color and spicy dark berry fruit."

Longtime Napa Valley vintner **Bo Barrett of Chateau Montelena Winery** waxed poetically about the season saying, "Some vintages are a walk in the nice little Napa Valley Park. But vintage 2011, was more like Shackleton's *Voyage of Endurance to Antarctica!*...Long and grueling and a risky harvest where fortune favors the bold. Our collective experience gave us never ending hope and conviction enough to 'gut it out' through the rough patches and as we write this commentary on a warm windy November day, the voyage of Vintage 2011 comes to a very successful ending.

Despite the highly publicized, uncommon weather conditions besetting Napa Valley, our grape quality was high. More than a little courage in farming was essential to a very successful outcome. In particular, the Cabernet family of grapes does require quite a bit of heat to get fully ripe and make the wines for which Napa Valley is famous. After a consistently cool summer season, significant mid-October rain pushed the vintage even later. But growers were rewarded with weeks of fantastic weather, a prolonged Indian summer that provided needed ripening time."

Hampson continued, "For us, Cabernet Sauvignon production is off by more than 30%, again mostly due to the wet cool conditions during bloom and set. The rains did start some unusual botrytis so we did a separate pass to remove it prior to picking. Fermentations were a bit shorter than some years as we were seeking wines with elegance and length that some might call more 'traditional' but which respect the nature of the vintage. I am quite optimistic about what we have pressed off."

On other red varieties, **Perry reported**, “This year’s Zinfandel and Primitivo lots are some of the finest we’ve tasted in the last 8 vintages. Every tank has been a delight, showing excellent color, great tannin structure, and wonderful ripe fruit flavors--this will be one to look for. The Zinfandel did amazingly well with the October rains, and while the yields were lower--primarily due to very selective harvesting--the quality is excellent.”

In late harvest dessert wines like Dolce from the team at **Far Niente, Winemaker Dirk Hampson** said this week, “We just finished harvest. The botrytis was exceptionally good this year. Quantities were very low due to spring fruit set, but the concentration and flavor are outstanding for late harvest wine.” **Ruel echoed** these sentiments in his excitement on the late harvest Riesling just brought in.

This report was prepared by:

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About the Napa Valley Vintners

The Napa Valley Vintners is the non-profit trade association responsible for promoting and protecting the Napa Valley appellation as the premier winegrowing region. From seven founding members in 1944, today the association represents more than 420 Napa Valley wineries and collectively is a leader in the world-wide wine industry. To learn more about our region and its legendary American wines, visit www.napavintners.com.