

A Nichols Worth of Wine

December 2008

Harvest Report

Every December I publish my annual Harvest Report and 2008 is no exception, although this time around, it became quite an undertaking due both to the number of new wineries reporting their results and the internet. Never before has so much information on harvest happenings been so readily accessible. I poured through hundreds of articles and thousands of pages about this year's harvest, - not that I'm complaining. I always enjoy learning and sharing my findings about wine with anyone who'll listen!

Below is a summary of my research, but before I begin, a word of caution. First, the wine industry, particularly vineyard owners and winemakers, have a very strong, and understandable, interest in painting a sunny picture of their harvest results. Also, I have to sift through sizable conflicting opinions, so I look at all the available data and form an opinion. More importantly though, is that while yields, ripening levels, acidity readings and a host of other indicators can point to the degree of success, or failure, with any wine growing vintage, a lot can happen once the wine is in the bottle. Most wines go through their first of many stages of development at this point. Ultimately, it can be years before consumers get their first true assessment of a vintage.

Overall, 2008 was a "typical" harvest. Mother Nature, if nothing else, was as fickle as ever. Some wine regions fared very well (Germany), while others faltered (France). Some had an easy go of it (Chile); some experienced bizarre growing conditions (Napa Valley). In the end, consumers will be blessed with some outstanding wines to select from. Maybe more than ever before, thanks in large part to a new genre of vintners and growers dedicated to a focus on quality over quantity. One thing is clear, the wine choices we have today are better than ever.

I'll begin in the southern hemisphere where producers bring in their grapes in the spring due to their below-the-equator location, which explains why we're already seeing some white wines from the 2008 vintage showing up on wine shop shelves.

Australia

In the land down under, the vintage is being referred to as *A Tale of Two Harvests*: There was what happened before the heat, and what happened after. The winemakers, lucky or smart enough to have picked prior to the hellish early March 100+ degree temperatures that lasted for weeks certainly fared better than those who sat waiting for additional ripening. As inevitably happens during extended heat spikes of this nature, pickers scramble, working around the clock to get the grapes in only to be faced with a shortage of barrel space to hold their fruit. I'm not sure whether the bumper crop - by some reports is up 30% over 2007 will be viewed as entirely favorable by producers. A glut of aussie wine the last few years has severely depressed prices. Quality reports varied widely, often for the same regions.

It is doubtful that drought-ending January rains will ultimately do much for the quality of South Australia's premier regions of Barossa and McLaren Vale this year, but vintners from the Margaret River region on the West Coast, were blessed with a near-perfect growing season where they brought in most of the crop early in February, before temperatures climbed.

New Zealand

The words harvest and mixed-bagged have been almost interchangeable in recent years and that certainly reflected the 2008 harvest for the kiwi and sauvignon blanc capital of the world. Imagine sailing through the growing season only to be faced with torrential vine-damaging rains just weeks and, in some cases, days before harvest? That was the reality in much of New Zealand's largest grape growing region, Marlborough, especially in the Wairau Valley, home to many of the country's best sauvignon vineyards. Similar conditions also took place in portions of the North Island's, Hawkes Bay. Vineyards that managed around the rains are likely to produce beautiful, more fuller wines, and more tropical than usual. Those who were not quite so lucky saw severe rot set before they could get their fruit in. Interesting though, pinot noir overall seemed to fair better. The one standout was the yields; many vineyards report tonnage to be up by as much as 35%.

While many reports indicated uneven quality, the New Zealand Winegrowers Association claims the quality will be "*very, very good.*" We'll know for sure once we pop the cork - or more appropriately, unscrew the caps. Pinot Noir's I've tasted from New Zealand have been incredible. This is a wine country on fire and I only hope that quality this year is on target.

South Africa

There are instances when adverse climatic conditions become beneficial for winemakers. There may be a silver lining in the somewhat difficult season for South African vintners. Chenin Blanc is a signature grape for this country and because it can be made in different styles, dry, off-dry and sweet, varying ripening conditions worked in favor of riesling growers this year. Across most wine regions, wineries needed to dedicate more attention and resources than ever in the vineyard, right up to harvest. Those who did will be rewarded. Red grapes hung longer due to cooler temperatures toward the end of the season, while whites, again depending on location and vineyard management commitment, were spotty. The bottom line for South Africa; it was a difficult vintage that will require very selective choosing for consumers of wines from this area.

Chile

All was not lost for southern hemisphere wines once you crossed the seas to the America's. Chile had what could yet be hailed as a banner vintage. At the very least it will rank up there with the best, think 2003, and definitely for the red varieties. A long, dry growing season allowed vines to mature slowly, developing small concentrated berries and tannins that provide the backbone for many of the varieties. I am a huge fan of the carmenere grape and all indications are 2008 could be the year that finally puts this grape on the radar of wine consumers everywhere. White wine grapes did well, if not spectacular, due to the warm, dry conditions.

Argentina

Away from the moderating marine influences from the Pacific Ocean and nearer the higher elevations of the Andes, Argentina was cooler, much cooler than usual in 2008. In fact the preceding winter was one of the coldest in more than fifty years and there were early rains to content with, but as I commented on earlier, a fickle Mother Nature shone favorably on Argentina vineyards this season. While the wines may not be memorable, and certainly not as heralded as from neighboring Chile, the reds, especially Mendoza malbec, should show well.

In the northern hemisphere and beginning with Europe, 2008 will deliver wines of extraordinary quality as well as wines that were marginal at best and given the cost of bringing wines into the US, due to a still unfavorable dollar exchange, some should be avoided.

France

Despite very small pockets of brilliance and the protestations of chateau owners, Bordeaux was a disaster. I know I'll get some heat for that assessment, but the price to quality ratio for these wines is absurd, especially given early harvest reports. I may yet be proved wrong, but my guess is that maybe, and this is a big maybe, Sauternes could be an exception. Weather was abysmal in many regions, yields are down, and quality was questionable at best. That being said, consumers the world over, particularly the far east will probably continue to buy these wines at the usual frenzied pace. Hopefully (but doubtful), vintners and negociants will finally come to their senses and re-price their wines down to a more reasonable level.

Burgundy, which harvested a month later than customary seemed to fair marginally better than their brethren to the north and east. Hail, rain and frost all beset the region. Yields were down most everywhere. Whites look especially troublesome. Early indications are that mildew and low grape sugar will negatively impact quality of this less than stellar vintage in Burgundy.

Loire followed suit as weather wreaked havoc in many of the vineyards throughout the vineyards, leaving vintners and wine watchers less than optimistic.

Perhaps the only one bright spot is in Southern France, where a string of late days of warm sunshine may deliver wines of good, if not great quality for many of the red and white Rhone varietals. That's a shame given that France's largest growing region continues to lose vineyards at an alarming rate, having given up 50% of its grape acreage in the last two decades. The better producers will prevail and hopefully we'll continue to see great values from this region.

Italy

Despite early spring rains and freak hailstorms late in the growing season in Montalcino, (arguably the benchmark as one of Italy's most coveted wines, Brunello) good summer weather trumped this aberration. Tuscany vintners anticipate slightly smaller production, but again great

summer weather promises to lift quality for Chianti and sangiovese-based wines. 2008 looks cautiously optimistic for most Italian wines. Yields in some regions (Piedmont) will be down considerably and the continuing string of impressive vintages could be in jeopardy in the Veneto. For many growers, it was small consolation that the grapes that were brought in look to be of good, if not great, quality.

Timely reports were hard to come by (I generally don't take that as a positive sign) for northerly wine regions, yet early wet weather may prove to be advantageous, keeping yields low and flavors concentrated, especially in the more mountainous growing regions. Whites in particular could show well. Conversely, Sicily, long ignored, looks extraordinary promising. In fact, vastly improved vineyard management and favorable weather in 2008 should bode well for much of Southern Italy's growers and producers. Look for some fabulous, reasonably priced Nero d'Avola to come from the vintage.

Germany

Adjectives abound for the Germany's 2008 vintage. As do comparisons to some of the country's greatest vintages. Germany's thirteen wine growing regions all reported favorable results, especially in kabinett quality wines, always good news for value conscious consumers. A few even boldly compared the vintage to 2007, one that some dare to declare as the vintage of the century. German wines, in America, still struggle for market share and shelf space, and maybe the recent move to make their labels more consumer friendly and a great vintage will help sell more wine. Maybe as we begin to open our palates and wallets to the riesling grape, we'll embrace this under-served region of extraordinary wines.

USA

It's de-ja vu all over again. For the Californian vintage, that should come as no surprise. Bizarre is the only way to describe 2008 in the state's northerly vineyards. They had it all, especially in northern California. It all began with a cold, dry winter - one of the coldest on record. Spring was hardly less forgiving. I remember waking up to freezing temperatures while visiting Chalk Hill Estate in late April, when many North Coast winemakers spent the night spraying their vines to ward off the frost. Then on another visit to Napa in late August, temperatures up in the north end of the valley pushed the thermometer beyond the 100 degree mark for several consecutive days.

In between, wind, rain and fire threatened the region. If all of that wasn't enough, water shortages, the result of weather and politics, added insult. In the end, however, perseverance, a little luck and a lot of patience prevailed. It looks to be a vintage of fewer, but more elegantly structured wines.

From Temucla in the south to Phyllo, in the far reaches of Mendocino County, the one common denominator is lower yields, but quality up and down the state looks very promising. This is a year where what happens in the winery may be more important to the finished wines than what happened in the vineyard. My contacts in Napa and Sonoma share a level of optimism that 2008 will be a fairly good vintage once the corks are popped a few years down the road, Speaking

with Peter Figge, of Figge Cellars, the wines of Monterrey “hung forever” and promises of highly concentrated fruit and great balance will reward chardonnay and pinot noir lovers of wines from this appellation. Grapes from the Central Coast looked very good at harvest.

To the north, Oregon’s 2008 vintage seems poised to rival the outstanding 1993 and 1999 growing seasons. Picking started late and continued well into the final weeks of October, pushing sugars to optimal levels, As I said earlier, predictions before wines have time to come into their own in the bottle is speculative at best, but Oregon’s current crop promises to bring fabulous wines to the market when they hit the shelves.

Crossing the Columbia River into Washington State, “*vintage of the decade*’ are the words being bandied about, and maybe with good reason. A worrisome cool spring fortuitously lengthened the growing season resulting in wines, especially the whites, with beautiful acidity and balance and yields are slightly above last year meaning more pleasure for fans of Pacific Northwest wines.

Not to be forgotten are the wines of the eastern US. Unfortunately, Long Island vintners who have struggled to compete with western wine producers for years faced a difficult season. The crop size was down significantly and quality is marginal at best. A polar-opposite outcome where the perfect combination of timely rains and a warm summer in the Fingers Lake region look to provide an almost perfect vintage. Wine lovers would be well served to seek out the white varietals, especially riesling, when these wines are released.

Now that the 2008 vintage is in, the general agreement is that there will be less wine and mixed quality, depending on your geographical leanings. Overall however, quality improves with each vintage and increased competition hopefully will hold prices down and bring additional value to wine consumers the world over.

Here’s hoping that 2009 will bring great weather, a continued commitment to producing quality wine and many more new wine enthusiasts.

2008 has been a sensational year for Naples Wine News and I look forward to sharing my passion for wines in the coming months and year. Thanks for listening, and remember...

Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce