

May 2008

Dry summer a blessing to winemakers

The La Niña weather pattern that dominated the summer of 2008, bringing drought to many of the farming regions of New Zealand, was a blessing to the nation's grape growers and winemakers.

The prolonged warm, dry summer meant that all the grapes on the vine were able to ripen fully without disease pressure, yielding good volumes of well-developed, intensely flavoured fruit in most areas.

Significantly, the harvest in New Zealand's premier wine region and home of its iconic Sauvignon Blanc, promises to be one of the best for some years. Volumes in Marlborough are well up on last year, with good quantities of intensely flavoured grapes harvested.

The high quality and volume of Pinot Noir is a watershed year for this variety and New Zealand wine in general.

In Hawke's Bay, the nation's second largest wine region, damaging spring frosts meant that many vineyards had less than the ideal load of fruit to start off with, so that the positive effects of the excellent weather later in the season were less pronounced.

While juice from many of the country's vineyards is still being fermented into wine, initial tastings show a classic vintage for the aromatic and fruit-driven wine styles that New Zealand is known for.

Marlborough

This year, Marlborough has delivered in both wine quality and volume. New vineyards coming into full production and a bountiful harvest have seen a continuation of the fine Sauvignon Blanc harvests of recent vintages. Flavours developing through fermentation are the typically bold, ripe and zesty characters associated with this variety.

A near perfect flowering with warm, sunny weather was followed by well-timed rain at the end of flowering and again towards the end of January, just before the grapes start to soften and gain colour. This meant that cluster size was larger than normal for Sauvignon Blanc, which contributed to the larger than expected crop.

Expert vineyard management – ensuring that canopy management activities, such as leaf removal and trimming, occurred at the right time and to the right degree, as well as attention to detail when it came to nutrient and irrigation management, meant that the vines went into the harvest with healthy canopies and full-flavoured fruit.

The Marlborough harvest started on cue during the second week of March. However, it reached its peak about 7 to 10 days earlier than usual, thanks to hot, sunny weather. By the end of March, well over half of the Sauvignon Blanc had been picked. Normally, only about one third would have been harvested by this time.

As well as increased volumes of earlier ripening Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir for red wine was also harvested at this time. The earlier harvest peak turned out to be a blessing, as several rainy spells through the first half of April interrupted picking activities. Fortunately, by then it was too late to do noticeable damage to Pernod Ricard's overall crop in the region.

Our winemakers predict that the intense flavours, outstanding ripeness and ample volume of the 2008 harvest will make it one of the best in recent history.

Hawke's Bay

Damaging spring frosts throughout Hawke's Bay took the gloss off the harvest in many vineyards and in the worst hit areas crops were considerably smaller than normal. This was especially frustrating, as the region went on to have a glorious summer that would have been perfect to ripen large crops.

Vineyards that escaped the frost and those protected by fans and sprinklers were able to take advantage of the long, hot summer. In these vineyards, flowering and fruit set were very good, thanks to the fine, hot weather and fruit development in the late season was excellent.

Pernod Ricard's fully frost-protected Matapiro vineyard produced wonderfully flavoured crops of Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris.

Small parcels of great Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah were produced with careful selection and intensive hand harvesting of frost-affected vineyards from the Te Mata and Red Metal Triangle regions, while the fruit quality and yields from the Gimblett Gravels showed why this warm pocket on bony soils is so highly prized.

Gisborne

The cold weather that affected Hawke's Bay didn't cause any frost damage in Gisborne, but it did disrupt pollination, meaning that the crop size on mature vines was down from what would normally be expected.

Being smaller, the crop ripened more quickly and Gisborne was well into the harvest of its sparkling wine by late February. According to winemakers, the quality of these grapes is superb, as can be expected in such a warm, dry summer.

Harvest of ripe Chardonnay for table wine began in early March, with early harvested fruit showing soft, full flavours with incredible fruit intensity. Rain toward the end of the main Chardonnay harvest period meant that some later maturing blocks were harvested slightly earlier than the ideal, however they still show the fullness of flavour that is the hallmark of Gisborne Chardonnay. Careful hand selection of fruit will allow some wonderful wine to be made from of this later ripening fruit.

Being later ripening varieties, Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer escaped the adverse effects of the mid-harvest rain. The 2008 Gewürztraminers are fragrant and perfumed, while Pinot Gris wines show good weight and texture with delicate pear flavours coming to the fore.

Waipara

With Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Riesling still being harvested in Waipara, predictions on the final wine quality are somewhat premature. However, Waipara winegrowers are very pleased to see a return to more normal cropping levels after the very low-yielding 2007 harvest.

The growing season followed much the same pattern as the more northerly Marlborough region, with the exception of some very heavy rainfall in early March, before the grapes had started to ripen.

The Waipara harvest started in early to mid-April and is expected to finish in early May. Early indications are that this year's Waipara Pinot Noir is showing great colour and density of flavour.

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