

How This Wet, Wild Winter In California Wine Country Could Have Unexpected Benefit

Brian Freedman | Feb 23, 2017

Unusual weather throughout much of the United States this winter has been the subject of speculation, consternation, and obsession across the country. Springlike heat in the Mid-Atlantic and flooding rains in the West have wreaked havoc across a wide range of industries. In the past two months, both the Napa River and the Russian River, the latter in Sonoma County, hit flood levels.

How, then, is this weather affecting the great wine regions of California? And what will the impact be for the 2017 vintage? Fortunately, because of the natural cycles of vine growth and vineyard-management requirements, the floods don't seem to have caused too much damage to the vineyards themselves—at least, nothing that can't be fixed. “[Other] than physical damage to the trellising and needing to remove debris from vineyards which were flooded (including our own Westside Farms in the Russian River Valley),” there hasn't been any damage to the vineyards of Ramey Wine Cellars, David Ramey noted in an email.

Christian Gastón Palmaz, of Palmaz Vineyards, also dodged the proverbial bullet. “Fortunately we haven't experienced any significant damage,” he wrote in an email. “Because the rains were late enough in the season, our cover crops had sufficient time to stabilize soils and avoid top soil erosion of our steepest slopes.”

Not everyone was as lucky. Jeff Smith, Proprietor of Hourglass Wines, wrote to me that his “biggest issue is the damage caused by trees coming down. We’ve had several 150 foot digger pines come down that have taken out some vineyard rows. That’s a sight to see!”



Vineyards in drought-stricken California, like this one in Guerneville in the Russian River Valley, could actually benefit from record rains this winter (Credit: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images).

Overall, it seems as if some soil erosion is possible, but if steps have been taken beforehand to mitigate that risk, many producers and growers remain in good shape. “At Cliff Lede Vineyards, we have extensive drainage and erosion control practices and procedures in place, therefore, we have not seen any damage or issues at our estate vineyards,” explained Remi Cohen, Vice President and GM. “Other vineyards in the area that have been

flooded should be okay too, as long as the water drains before the growing season begins.”

Christopher Howell, Wine-Grower and GM at Cain Vineyard and Winery and one of the most incisive minds in the business, is taking the long view. “Our dramatic hillsides were carved over millennia by rains just like these,” he wrote in an email.

“Ironically, now that we have planted vineyards, we want nothing to change. But despite our best efforts, change is inevitable. Our cover crop has worked perfectly to prevent runoff and erosion. Thanks to our attentive crew, the surface drains have worked very well. Even so, we have seen some movement, and a few slides, for the most part, not in the vineyard. Thankfully, our vines are intact.” Another area where there seems to be a sense of consensus about how the weather is impacting the life of the vineyard is with the pruning schedule, which, as a result of the rains, is a bit more complicated this year. “The heavy rains have shortened the time frame by which we prune,” wrote Pam Starr, partner & winemaker at Crocker & Starr Winery. “Extra hands and [a] shift in schedule (if it wasn’t raining Sundays the team would go out) was [needed] to prune. We have one seven-acre block near the winery where we are waiting to prune. This area was impacted by surrounding property runoff.”

Then there is the issue of disease. Brice Jones, of Emeritus Vineyards, pointed out that “it has slowed us down [with pruning], but we usually start early and finish early. This year we will likely finish the same time as everyone else. The vineyards just are too muddy to walk in and it's never good to prune when it's wet if you want to prevent disease.”

Still, if the unusually wet weather is handled with care, 2017 has the potential to be good year. That, of course, is determined by a thousand different unpredictable factors, but the rains of this winter won't necessarily prove to have been a bad thing as the growing season gets underway. "Hopefully the 2017 vintage will be impacted in a good way," Todd Graff, winemaker and GM of Frank Family Vineyards, commented in an email. "The reservoirs will be full and the ground water is being replenished." He added that, "Obviously, statewide this rainfall is a tremendous benefit for California's drought. Locally speaking, we have been very lucky in the last few years to have received limited rain at exactly the right time."

Kathleen Inman, of Inman Family Wines, also sees a silver lining to all of the rain. "I think it should be good for the vineyards. Water tables should be a bit higher and we will get back to dry farming," she wrote to me. "In the fourth year of the [recent] drought, we had to resort to some irrigation—this year we will not need to!" Michael Chelini, of Stony Hill Vineyard, agrees. "Because our vineyards are dry farmed, our vineyard roots go deep down, so this rainfall should really help the vines be healthier and happier with the 2017 vintage," he noted. "This rainfall will keep the vines from stressing as much as they have been over the last five years, which will hopefully result in a bigger crop than we've seen over the last five years."

As winter enters its final phase, however, it's still too early to tell what will happen with any sense of certainty, which is the nature of the wine business. Rosemary Cakebread, of Gallica Wines, pointed out that, "We really won't have a handle on rainfall impact until bloom, and we still have the possibility of several more

weeks of winter-like conditions. Although slightly soggy, we have been grateful for the abundant rain and snowfall in California!”

Producers are far from out of the proverbial woods, though. Pam Starr, of Crocker & Starr, warned that, though “[thankfully] the vines are still in their dormancy phase...the warmer rain is warming the soil, and if the soils remain super saturated, I imagine the vines might have a little ‘spring sickness’ when they wake.” Spring sickness, she elaborated, “is basically the lack of oxygen in the root zone. Clay soils will be at higher risk than our alluvial soils on the west as clay holds onto water longer...Symptoms include yellowing of the leaves and shorter shoot growth in the early stages. [Fortunately], vines are resilient and grow out of this sickness.”

As far as the financial impact of the wet weather, “The qualitative and economic issues will be determined in the spring,” explained Jeff Smith of Hourglass Wines. “Excessive vine vigor, due to wetter soils, can have a big effect on farming costs and quality. This is why the [top] vineyard sites generally have a rock/drainage component. These vineyards drain well in dry or wet conditions in the spring, which is where the year’s growth activity is set. Better drained sites generally produce higher quality and better farming conditions, both of which affect the bottom line.”

The next big moment in the vineyard that will impact the 2017 vintage is bud break, which may be slightly delayed this year as a result of the weather. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Christopher Howell, of Cain Vineyard and Winery, noted that, “Right now, we’re hoping for a somewhat later bud break (April) with adequate moisture in the soil—it should be a set up for [a] very healthy, happy growing season. If the flowering comes a bit

later—in June—the weather is likely to be good, so there will be a reasonable harvest. So far, so good!”

Remi Cohen, of Cliff Lede Vineyards, also stressed the importance of what happens around bud break. “It will depend on the weather as we enter bud break and the growing season. What we now know is that we will be entering the growing season with fully replenished soil profiles which is a good thing, especially after several years of drought. With a full soil profile, we should see good canopy establishment in the spring, provided that we get adequate sunshine and there are no other issues like frost.” She did sound a note of caution, however. “If rain continues well into the spring, we could see excessive canopy growth, and that would mean more canopy management work such as hedging and leaf and lateral removal.”

Joe Nielsen, winemaker at Donelan Family Wines, wrote that the weather “may also push back bud break in some instances, meaning that there is a chance of a later harvest as a result. I haven’t seen bud break in any of our vineyards yet...but my guess is we may see a slight delay of a week or more. This could result in adjusting crop for later ripening vineyards to ensure optimal ripeness is possible. I enjoy the challenge and welcome the change of pace from the previous five years.” Christian Gastón Palmaz seems to agree: “Coming from so many ‘easy’ years, really since 2012, I was worried we were starting to forget how creative you sometimes need to be,” he told me in an email. “After 2009-2011, we felt battle worn and ready for anything, ultimately only to [be] rewarded with what has been textbook long Napa growing seasons from 2012 - 2016. In my mind, we were due for a challenge, and nature tends to have a sense of humor.”

Brice Jones, of Emeritus Vineyards, is maintaining a positive outlook, too. “2017 will be better than ever. We are dry-farmed, and since the roots are used to going down 20-25 feet for their water source, we like that this rain will fill up the soil profile for the years to come. The vines are asleep right now so the fruit won't be affected in the same way it could be if this rain came during harvest, but we will see healthy vines for this vintage and the excess water will ensure great vintages looking ahead.”