

Mad Dash to Save This Year's Wine Harvest

Grape pickers rush to beat the rain

By Joe Rosato Jr. | Monday, Oct 3, 2011 | Updated 4:24 PM PDT

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Grape pickers work in the rain to harvest grapes at DeLoach Vineyards in Santa Rosa.

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As rain fell on a Santa Rosa vineyard, a group of grape pickers squared off against nature. With an efficient swoop of each knife, a cluster of chardonnay grapes surrendered and tumbled into a plastic tub. It's been a similar scene since last Thursday, when managers at DeLoach vineyards sounded the alarm over coming rain, and decided to start picking.

"We've probably brought in a quarter of our harvest in the last three days," said DeLoach winemaker Brian Maloney. "Usually that will be spread over a five week period."

A cool summer forced Bay Area winemakers to leave their grapes on the vine as late as possible to allow the flavors to develop. But Monday's

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forecast of rain closed the window on the waiting.

“Everyone kind of waited until the last minute and now it’s kind of a mad rush to get it inside,” said Maloney.

He estimated late spring rains, and cooler summer temperatures had already reduced this year’s grape crop by one-third. Those numbers added an urgency to the rush to get this year’s grapes off the vines before the rain hit.

“Half of farming is in dealing with what Mother Nature gives you,” he said. “Some years it’s cold, some years it’s rain, some years it’s heat.”

While not all rain is bad for grapes, it can water down flavors of ripened wine grapes, and cause mold and fungus to take hold. Vineyard Manager Eric Pooler pointed to a clump of mildewy chardonnay grapes in a plastic tub as an example. He said majority of the grapes picked in the last week would turn out fine, but the coming days would determine how many were lost.

“Any grapes that are lost are definitely going to be a loss on something that wasn’t that heavy to begin with,” said Pooler.

Pooler said vineyards across the Bay Area picked round the clock throughout the weekend in an effort to beat the rain.



“I was in some vineyards yesterday in Sonoma and there were people picking as fast as they could,” said Pooler. “They were picking into tubs of all shapes and sizes trying to get the grapes up as quickly as possible.”

The result of this year’s fickle season is likely to be a smaller supply of wine on the market, which could drive up prices. But any winemaker will tell you, rolling the with the weather, is all part of the job.

“Every year, mother nature throws you something different,” said Pooler watching the rain drench the recently picked vineyards. “ And part of being a grape grower and a wine maker is just figuring out how to work with what you’ve been dealt.”

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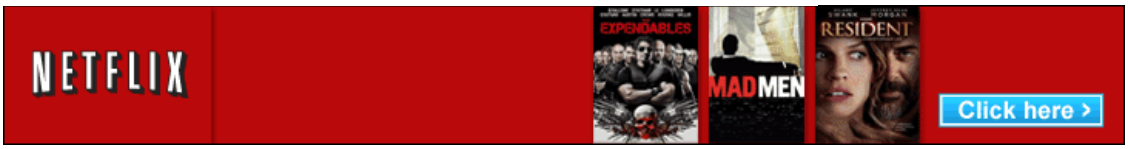
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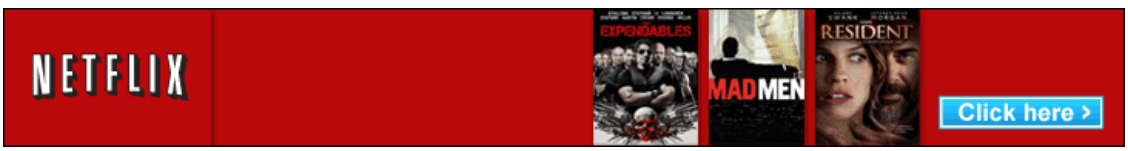
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