

SLOW ROAD TO RECOVERY

Wine country wonders when tourists will return

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SONOMA

The sun was shining, the temperatures were pleasant and, by all rights, the tasting room at Buena Vista Winery should have been packed Sunday.

Instead, California's oldest winery was surrounded by a phalanx of exhausted, soot-covered firefighters. Wine barrels were dusted in ash, and the fountain in front of the 19th-century stone-and-mortar building was filled with muddy gray water. A nearby oak tree still smoldered, and the hillside was charred to within 20 feet of the winery.

"Doesn't get much closer," said Scott Fraser, a weary battalion chief from a Lake Tahoe-area strike team.

After a week of misery and death, Northern California's devastating wildfires showed signs of easing off Sunday. As winds calmed down, containment grew at most of the major fires and the citywide evacuation order for Calistoga was lifted. More than 25,000 people were allowed to return home across Northern California. The death toll was unchanged at 41 and some evacuation shelters closed down.

"We were able to make considerable progress," California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection spokesman Daniel Berlant said.

It was also clear, however, that the road to recovery was

going to be long and slow. Approximately 75,000 Northern Californians were still displaced, scores of people remained missing and large pockets of Northern California were facing lengthy and painful economic recoveries.

That was particularly true for the tasting rooms, spas and luxury B&Bs that give California's fabled wine industry its distinctive flavor. Winery owners and innkeepers said they expect to reopen quickly, but they acknowledged that visitors might not be so quick to return.

"That's the hard part. We're all ready to get back to normalcy but there may not be a lot of people who will come," said

SEE FIRES, 7A

Erin Stauffer, chief marketing officer at Domaine Carneros, considered one of the most elegant wineries in the region. "We anticipate that."

Located west of the city of Napa, Domaine Carneros plans to reopen Tuesday.

The wildfires' timing couldn't be worse. Fall is prime time for visitors to Napa and Sonoma, where tourism is a \$3.2 billion-a-year industry - or about three times the size of the annual wine grape crop. Up to 10 percent of visitors come from overseas.

Sunday brought event cancellations and postponements. A concert by a U.S. Air Force band in

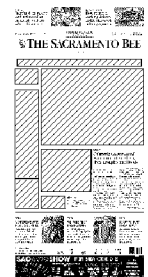
Yountville was scrubbed. A "Chips and Sips" outing at Napa Gold Course, featuring golf lessons and wine tasting, was put off indefinitely.

Wine country has bounced back quickly from previous disasters, including a 2014 earthquake that registered 6.0 on the Richter scale and flooding a decade ago. But experts say the deadliest set of wildfires in California history could prove particularly challenging for tourism promoters.

"Death puts a pall on visitors," said Carl Ribaud, a travel and tourism consultant in South Lake Tahoe. "How am I going to have a good time sipping wine if I know 30 people died? You have to respect what happened to the local community. You have to give people time to heal."

Napa and Sonoma business leaders said they recognize that a go-slow approach might be in order. They want to get the word out that wine country hasn't been destroyed. But they aren't going to rush out a glossy promotional campaign while there's still smoke in the air.

"We want to make sure there are enough hotels that are open, there are enough wineries that are open, that the air quality is good, the roads are open,"



said Clay Gregory, chief executive at Visit Napa Valley. "We are definitely not ready to say it's business as normal."

At the town square in central Sonoma, some of the locals were trying to get on with the recovery. Someone outfitted the bronze statue of General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo with a blue respirator mask and strung together a series of thank-you notes for firefighters. A poster sat nearby that read, "The love in the air is thicker than the smoke."

On the west side of the square, the Global Heart Fair Trade gift shop opened for the first time in a week. Owner Sofie Wastell's mission was to tidy the place up; she wasn't counting on a lot of customers and was afraid to guess how much business she'd lost already during the shutdown.

"A week in October is pretty big," she said.

Gov. Jerry Brown announced that the White House approved his request for direct aid to affected individuals and families in Orange and Nevada counties. Assistance had already been approved for Napa, Sonoma, Butte, Lake, Yuba and Mendocino counties.

With winds calming considerably, Cal Fire officials were cautiously optimistic that they'd turned the tide. The 5,000 residents of Calistoga who had to flee their homes Wednesday were allowed to return, as were residents of the Green Valley area of Fairfield and all evacuees from Butte, Yuba and Nevada counties. Some more

evacuees from the Redwood Valley Fire in Mendocino County also were allowed to return home.

Kaiser Permanente hospital in Santa Rosa, which had been closed all week, was scheduled to partially reopen Monday morning. The main hospital and emergency room stayed closed, but medical offices, the urgent walk-in clinic and other services were set to reopen.

"Overall, things are feeling optimistic for us, though we're cautious about that," said Cal Fire Incident Commander Bret Gouvea.

Trouble spots remained. Firefighters were struggling with the Oakmont Fire, which erupted early Saturday in Santa Rosa. Although fairly small at 550 acres, it was bearing down on a wooded area with plenty of fire-friendly dry, heavy timber. A giant plume of smoke, from Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, was visible for miles Sunday afternoon.

Plenty of other signs of fire danger were evident throughout the region. Behind UC Davis' agricultural field research station in Oakville, a half-dozen helicopters were dumping water on a cluster of stubborn, smoldering hilltops overlooking Napa Valley.

As it struggles to recover, the wine industry does have one thing going for it: Physically, it has come through the fires pretty well intact. The vast majority of the grapes had been harvested by the time the fires broke out, and vineyard owners have been able to truck their grapes and unfinished wines to other parts of

Northern California for safekeeping.

Just a handful of wineries have been outright destroyed, and even their owners were talking about getting back on their feet soon. At Signorello Estate on the Silverado Trail in Napa, where the tasting room was destroyed but the wine and grapes were unharmed, Natalie Birebent spoke about keeping the business going.

"Napa's still alive," said Birebent, whose husband Pierre is Signorello's winemaker. "Yes, of course."

Organizers said a conference on wine marketing and tourism would proceed as scheduled Nov. 6 at the Santa Rosa Hyatt Regency. "There are 1,200 wineries in Napa and Sonoma counties, and maybe five or six were lost," said one of the scheduled speakers, Paul Wagner, who teaches classes on wine marketing at Napa Valley College. "I'm reasonably optimistic this isn't going to be a long-lasting slowdown."

There were, indeed, tasting rooms open for business Sunday.

"I'm looking at guests as we speak," said Jean-Charles Boisset, owner of Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena, in a phone interview.

The French-born Boisset, who also owns Buena Vista in Sonoma, said he plans to reopen the historic venue Thursday or Friday. Boisset said he's eager to tell visitors the story of how the winery, founded in 1857, barely escaped the fires.

"This is a very big deal, the symbol of winning (against) the fires," Boisset said. "What I admire in America is your amaz-

ing spirit of always going forward.”

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DEATH PUTS A
PALL ON VISITORS.
HOW AM I GOING
TO HAVE A GOOD
TIME SIPPING
WINE IF I KNOW
30 PEOPLE DIED?
YOU HAVE TO
RESPECT WHAT
HAPPENED TO
THE LOCAL
COMMUNITY.
YOU HAVE TO GIVE
PEOPLE TIME
TO HEAL.

*Carl Ribaldo, travel
and tourism consultant*



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Natalie Birebent holds a melted wine bottle at the Signorello Estate winery in Napa on Sunday. The tasting room behind her was engulfed and burned to the ground during the Atlas Peak Fire. "Napa's still alive," said Birebent, whose husband Pierre is Signorello's winemaker.



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At left, Sonoma residents Lynne Orwell, front, Ron Zak and Luke Orwell, right, look at a statue of Gen. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo covered with thank-you signs for firefighters Sunday in the plaza.



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Helicopters battle fire in the mountains between Highway 29 and Highway 12 on Sunday near Oakville. Wildfires showed signs of easing after a week of misery and death.



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Suzanne and Daniel Hansen walk Lady, Merle and Chobe in the deserted Sonoma town square Sunday. Their home survived the wildfires.



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Sonoma's Buena Vista Winery survived losing buildings after firefighters controlled the blaze Saturday night.