

The Press Democrat

2017 harvest yields record \$1.5 billion of grapes from North Coast vineyards



(1 of 7) Brian Maloney, director of winemaking with Boisset Family Estates, uses a thief to sample the 2017 vintage at Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma on Friday. (photo by John Burgess/The Press Democrat)

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Despite lower yields from a difficult harvest between heat spikes and wildfires, North Coast vineyards produced a record \$1.51 billion of grapes in 2017 as prices continued to climb to new highs, according to preliminary figures released Friday.

The average price of grapes from Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties last year jumped 9 percent to an unprecedented \$3,259 per ton, according to a report issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Although the size of the crop fell 8 percent last year to 464,765 tons, rising prices drove up the value of the region's prized grape crop 1.3 percent from \$1.49 billion in 2016.

The 2017 harvest was difficult for winemakers as they battled a Labor Day heat wave that forced them to pick pinot noir and chardonnay grapes before they began to raisin. A month later, some growers

had to leave their fruit — mostly late varietal reds — on the vine because they were damaged by smoke from the October wildfires.

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Grape prices set new records in all four counties for the seventh consecutive year, a timespan that has seen prices for North Coast fruit soar 48 percent. Napa County growers again commanded the highest prices in California for their grapes, averaging \$5,205 per ton, while Sonoma County grapes sold for \$2,803 per ton, on average.

The report provided the first official statistics on the economic impact of the region's most valuable agriculture crop, which declined in size for the third time in four years. Analysts said the heat wave in September, where temperatures spiked to 110 degrees and higher throughout Sonoma County during Labor Day weekend, likely played a much bigger role in the overall yield than the fires. For example, growers harvested 60,920 tons of Sonoma County chardonnay last year, down 19 percent from 2016 and the lightest crop since 2011.

Likely all of that varietal, which is the largest grape crop in the county, had been picked by the time of the fires on the night of Oct. 8.

"We had three days of intense heat," said Glenn Proctor, a partner at Ciatti Co., a San Rafael wine and grape broker. "I really think that whacked the whites, chardonnay in particular."

Late rains that swept through the region last year also could have played a factor because it didn't allow the ground to dry out as quickly as it should have to kick-start the vines' root systems, said Karissa Kruse, president of the Sonoma County Winegrowers trade group.

In contrast, the cabernet sauvignon crop, typically one of the last varietals picked, increased 3.3 percent last year to 42,930 tons in Sonoma County. In Napa County, the cabernet sauvignon crop fell only 1.1 percent. Analysts said cabernet sauvignon was likely on pace for an even larger than typical harvest until the fires struck, affecting such regions as Atlas Peak in Napa County, an area known for mountain cabernet sauvignon.

However, another late-harvested red, merlot, fell 16 percent in Sonoma County and 12 percent in Napa County. The varietal is commonly blended into cabernet sauvignon.

Winemakers are finding that grapes harvested after the fires do not appear to be suffering from smoke taint as once feared, said Brian Clements, vice president at Turrentine Brokerage in Novato.

Tests for phenol compounds, such as guaiacol, have not appeared significant so far, Clements said. Such compounds are released during fermentation and can give the wine a horrible aftertaste.

"I believe that smoke taint will not be an issue," Clements said.

The 2017 vintage will start showing up at retail stores and restaurants as early as the spring, starting with white wines that do not require as much aging as reds. Pinot noir will be out in late 2018 and early 2019.

Despite the travails during harvest, quality appears good for the vintage, according to winemakers.

That will be the key message for marketing teams as they sell the vintage in a wine marketplace where growth is slowing.

Wine shipments increased 1.3 percent in the United States last year.

Brian Maloney, director of winemaking with **Boisset Family Estates**, which includes the Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma, said the 2017 chardonnay and pinot noir have great color and concentration even though they were picked fairly quickly. He noted that the sugar levels of the grape "weren't crazy" when the fruit was picked, which has resulted in a vintage that has a relatively moderate alcohol content.

"We're excited about the quality," Maloney said.