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The Wine Country Fires of 2017

In the wake of destruction, a community has come together to heal and rebuild

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On Sunday evening, Oct. 8, 2017, the winds blew hard, warm and achingly dry in the wine country north of San Francisco. Uncontrollable wildfires soon marched across the landscape, their causes still unknown, fueled by vegetation baked tinder-dry by the hottest summer in California history and dangerously dense after decades without burning. It was the Golden State's version of the perfect storm.

The slopes of Napa County's Atlas Peak were some of the first ablaze, and near the mountain's base stands Signorello Estate winery. Beamed around the world, the images of flames consuming its Italianate stonework became some of the most powerful from the wine country fires of 2017. There seemed little hope that anything remained.

Yet when the smoke cleared, Signorello had mostly survived, its wines intact and its vineyard still alive. Only the structure that housed its tasting room, offices and laboratory had burned. By late January, most of the wreckage had been cleared from the site, and owner Ray Signorello was thinking about when he could start rebuilding—perhaps sometime this summer.

Now, in spring 2018, the slopes above the winery are a vivid emerald hue, carpeted by grasses and wildflowers nurtured by winter rain. An oak tree, its trunk scored by the flames, sprouts green leaves from its higher branches in a surge of regrowth. Nearby, just a few feet from where the flames finally ended, the fermenting tanks stand untouched. They were full when the fire hit and came out completely unscathed, according to Signorello. Those red wines are now resting in barrels.

"We really didn't know the day after, on Monday, what had happened here," Signorello says. "We knew the parking lot was full of trucks with the journalists that had been brought up here and crews broadcasting with their live cams." It was only later in the week that Signorello made it back. "The first thing we saw was that the front vineyard was OK, and then the tanks were OK, and most of the rest was intact," he adds. "We were relieved."

Signorello's story was echoed throughout North Bay wine country: devastation juxtaposed against untouched natural and vineyard landscapes. Half a dozen wineries were destroyed in Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties, and seven others were significantly damaged. But hundreds of producers were unaffected and many of the most picturesque sites were spared.

But wine country is more than the wine industry. With 44 dead, more than 240,000 acres burned in Northern California and an estimated 8,900 structures destroyed, the tragedy is without parallel for the region.

Sonoma suffered the most. Santa Rosa, the county seat and largest city in wine country (population: 175,000), lost 5 percent of its housing inventory overnight. One of the conflagrations, the Tubbs fire, which roared from Calistoga to Santa Rosa, is itself the most devastating single wildfire in California history, responsible for 22 deaths and 5,600 structures leveled. North and east of the city of Napa, six lives were lost and nearly 800 structures were incinerated in the 51,000-acre Atlas Peak fire.

Yet as horrible as the destruction was, most of it doesn't overlap with the areas known for wine tourism. In the North Coast, the majority of the damage occurred in the mountainous terrain between and around Napa and Sonoma counties, leaving the valleys relatively undamaged. And where there is damage, it's mostly at the edges, where wild lands and vineyards interface, remote from the well-traveled routes. There was little impact on the vineyards themselves. In fact, vines acted as firebreaks, slowing down the fire in places, protecting buildings and saving lives. Grapevines don't provide fuel for fires; they retain water, and their green foliage makes them hard to burn.

Jimmy Hayes stands in a vineyard block of Mayacamas Vineyards, in the mountain range of the same name that separates Napa and Sonoma counties. Hayes manages the 480-acre property, which got hit by the convergence of two fires, destroying a historic building that was used as a visitors center but sparing the winery 10 feet away, an outcome Hayes calls miraculous. The fires tore through the surrounding forests, singeing the vineyards on the edges. Here, like elsewhere, the vines did an effective job of slowing down the fire.

Hayes pulls at the lush green cover crop between the recently pruned rows, coming up with a fresh daikon radish in his hand. He points out how the burned trees on the hills in the distance have changed the views. "You didn't used to be able to see San Francisco from here," he says.

Not only have the views changed in some areas, but the vintners also see their community differently. Wine country DNA has been altered. Everyone knows someone or several people who have lost everything. Residents of the area were forced to evacuate or were prepared to. Wooden fences, gates and other traditional infrastructure suddenly seem vulnerable.

Paradise Ridge in Santa Rosa lost its winery, event center and thousands of bottles of wine. Yet co-owner Rene Byck asserts, "The fires made the community stronger." He says Santa Rosa used to feel like a big town, but the fire made it seem smaller. He shakes his head thinking of the compassion

that's been shown to his family. "It's nice to know how important the winery was to other people."

Paradise Ridge's destruction was widely publicized, and Byck says the event center that burned down had hosted a thousand weddings over the years, further connecting people to his family's property. Many of the colorful sculptures that dot the land are mostly intact; a large one spelling out "Love" has become a symbol of the region's resilience. "When we rebuild, we'll become a symbol that the fires are behind us," Byck says of his property.

Meanwhile, customers are flocking to the producer's Kenwood tasting room location to enjoy the wines or to experience the property's unique herb garden "sensory tour," complete with a tasting that pairs herb-infused chocolate with wine. The publicity from the fires has actually increased sales for Paradise Ridge.

Byck believes that the common experience of the wildfires has bonded rival regions Napa and Sonoma. "If you want to know how to support us, come visit," he says of both regions. "As happy as I am that we've had enormous support for my brand, other brands have also been affected." He counts off business owners who lost their homes and says he is committed to supporting them with his patronage, noting that employers and employees alike felt the pinch of lost income when much of Napa and Sonoma was closed for almost three weeks.

During those weeks, the area's restaurants and hotels took up the cause to help displaced locals and the army of first responders by offering up beds and free meals. Many top chefs spent more than a week cooking for evacuation shelters, fire and rescue crews, and volunteers. Restaurants like Zazu in Sebastopol and Valette and Healdsburg Bar and Grill in Healdsburg, among others, supplied food and kitchen help, even as their own bottom lines were hit by the downturn in tourism.

"I think it's very indicative of who we are in Sonoma County. It's a very conscientious, closely knit, like-minded community," says Carrie Brown, owner of Jimtown Store in Alexander Valley.

As destructive as it is, fire is a natural part of the ecology of California and the North Bay wine country. Atlas Peak burned in 1981, and a series of fires swept over the region during the mid-1960s as well. Now, with the fuel load essentially depleted in the most recent burn areas, there isn't likely to be another series of fires of this intensity for some time, perhaps decades, although unburned areas remain vulnerable.

But winemakers are already strategizing how to be more prepared in the future. "The takeaway is to get the right shovel, the right gloves, the right face masks, the right insurance," says vintner John Schwartz of Amuse Bouche in Napa. He has a new appreciation for solar cell phone chargers and generators.

In the near term, the focus throughout the region is on rebuilding. County and city governments are reducing permit processing times in an effort to speed reconstruction, though the enormous scope of housing renewal in a region already desperately short of dwellings is daunting. Fortunately, the cleanup of rubble and debris from the devastated zones was mostly completed by April, clearing the way for recovery.

"Going through my mind that Monday morning was: Do I have a vineyard?" Ray Signorello says. "Even if you lost the wines, it's only one vintage. But the vineyards are what matters. They take years to plant and bear fruit. The whole hillside [above the winery] burned, but it's already come back to green. I consider myself extremely lucky. We were very fortunate."

Green is the color of life in wine country, now more than ever, and it proliferates as the vines are growing once again and a new harvest awaits. Vintage 2017 will not be soon forgotten, but the land and people of California wine country have begun to heal and are looking to the challenges of the future with as much optimism as trepidation.

"If you were back in Ohio [watching television], it looked like the whole area had burned down. But it didn't really affect a lot of vineyards and wineries," says chef Dustin Valette, a partner in Valette restaurant and a Healdsburg native. "The worst situations bring out the best in people. As horrible as this fire was, it definitely got the entire county together. We're closer now, because we've been through something together."

Senior editor Tim Fish contributed to this report.

PUNCHDOWN CELLARS

"That week was supposed to be the last week of grapes coming in," says Punchdown Cellars general manager Chris Hollingsworth. As the fires burned out, Hollingsworth, who had lost his own home to the blaze, was trying to find a generator to restore power to the custom-crush facility located near Santa Rosa's incinerated Coffey Park neighborhood and save the fermenting wines for his nearly 40 clients, which include Donum Estate, Saxon Brown and Eric Kent.

The worry wasn't over after the generator arrived. The fuel tank was only a third full. Hollingsworth waited until 11 p.m. for a diesel truck to arrive, well past the 5 p.m. curfew that the police had implemented to prevent looters.

"I had the only building with light on in Coffey Park, and I was nervous that I was drawing attention," he says. He calls the time a "crazy" end to harvest, and the most stressful period of his life.

RELIC WINE CELLARS

Mike Hirby, owner and winemaker of Relic Wine Cellars in Napa, was driving home from San Francisco the night the fires erupted. Receiving worried text messages from friends, he headed toward his winery, but was met by a roadblock. Hirby retreated to a friend's home on a hill to see what he could see. The smoke veiled his view, but he could make out flames on the hillside near Stag's Leap. He assumed all was lost. "There were so many question marks," he recalls.

Hirby had three vineyards left to pick, all in evacuation areas, and four tanks fermenting at his winery off Soda Canyon Road, which was also an evacuation area. Come daylight Monday, he tried three times to get to the winery, but a police barricade prevented him from gaining access. By Tuesday, Hirby was determined to find a way. He and assistant winemaker David Philbin hiked across the Napa River behind the barricade and up Soda Canyon Road to the winery. The hillside the winery is built into was charred black, but the winery itself was unscathed, albeit without power.

Hirby breathed a sigh of relief to discover that all of the fermentations were stable at 72° F. But he knew he had to get power restored. He drove a company truck out an auxiliary entrance, on a narrow four-by-four road.

The next day, his team returned with the truck, now carrying a generator. Over the ensuing days, they would finish most of the year's winemaking. They also helped their neighbor and fellow fire victim White Rock Vineyard with its pressing. "That's what the Napa Valley does," says Hirby. "We're a community."

KUNDE ESTATE

The fire hovered ominously over the Kunde Estate property in Sonoma for days. The tasting room served as an evacuation shelter not only for family members, but also for winemaker Zach Long, who slept in the tasting room eight straight nights while trying to manage the 22 different fermentations under way.

Long admits that not everything went according to plan. All of the winery's winemaking data is stored on a Web-based server. There was no power and no Internet, and the 75-mile-per-hour winds blew all the tank identification cards away.

"I had to trust my memory that I remembered what was in every tank, and just taste, taste, taste," explains Long. "I carried a notebook and kept track of every detail. I don't think any of us realized how dependent we were on computers."

Several Kunde family members served as his makeshift winemaking team. Long says considering that none of them had ever done a pump-over before, they managed the situation well, and all got stronger and better each day.

"At the end of the day, I credit the Kundes," he says. "They rolled up their sleeves and saved the winery."

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