

Many feared Napa's smoky 2020 wine harvest Was a bust. A recent auction revealed otherwise

Jess Lander

March 4, 2022 Updated: March 9, 2022 10:53 a.m.



2of2

Napa wines from the 2020 vintage made a surprising debut at the 26th annual Premiere Napa Valley event. Napa Valley Vintners

Many Napa Valley winemakers would likely name 2020 as the worst year of their career — and not because of the pandemic. Plagued by a pair of major, back-to-back fires, a significant portion of the grape crop, especially for red wines, was ruined by wildfire smoke before it could be harvested. Some Napa wineries made no wine at all that year.

But a recent trade event, the annual Premiere Napa Valley, proved that the 2020 vintage in Napa was not a total wash. A surprising debut of 2020 red wines generated optimism within the local industry for the prospect of making wine during future fire seasons. Once these wines are released to the public, consumer confidence may be restored in what was widely publicized as a disaster Napa vintage.

Though unfamiliar to the general public, Premiere is a longstanding tradition for Napa's wine industry. The weeklong event, which took place last week, always culminates in an auction in which restaurant and retail wine buyers from across the country bid on small, one-off limited-edition wines that were made specifically for Premiere. The money raised by the auction helps fund programs by the Napa Valley Vintners.

Historically, the wines poured at the event are almost all Cabernet Sauvignon from the vintage that took place two years prior. This year should have been the 2020 vintage's moment in the spotlight, but very few wineries had 2020 wine to show. According to the 2020 Grape Crush Report, Napa County producers crushed just under 100,000 tons of grapes, down from 160,000 in 2019.

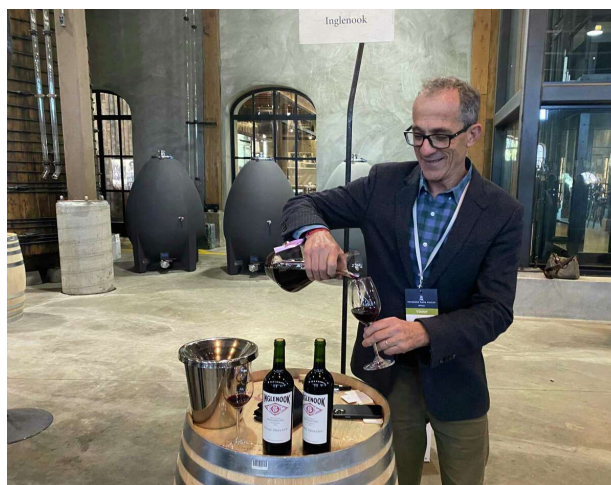
Of the 109 lots of wine that Napa wineries presented, only 35 were from the 2020 vintage. That gave these wineries a rare advantage in Napa's Cabernet-driven monoculture, a chance to stand out in a much smaller pool. The trade greeted these 2020 wines with a combination of curiosity and skepticism — would they actually be any good, or were they tainted by smoke? “Are people looking for something that’s not there? I think to some degree you’re going to find some of that,” said Yohanna Burmeister, director of national sales for Pride Mountain Vineyards, which sits on the crest of the Mayacamas Mountains and brought a 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon to Premiere.

But by the close of Premiere last week, the general consensus from wine industry people in attendance was that the 2020 wines were showing well, and didn't have noticeable traces of smoke taint. At the auction, the 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon from Silver Oak Cellars nabbed the second-highest bid: \$70,200 for 240 bottles worth of wine. Overall, reds from the 2020 vintage sold for an average price of \$234 a bottle, above the overall average of the past several Premiere events. Last year, it was \$227. Several 2020 wines went for over \$500 a bottle, including offerings from Spottswoode Estate, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Alpha Omega.

“With the difficulties of the 2020 vintage, I've been very surprised by the quality they're showing here,” said Robert Ord, director of winery relations and a buyer for Underground Cellar, a wine e-commerce company based in the Bay Area. “To put it indelicately, Napa took a beating in 2020, but the juice that is here is really quite fantastic.” At the auction, Underground Cellar bid on eight 2020 lots, winning four of them.

Without as much Cabernet, though, there was also an unexpected bounty of red wines from 2019, 2020 and 2021. (This kind of widespread vintage divergence has rarely been seen before at Premiere.) Among the offerings were Merlot, Malbec and a rare Nebbiolo from iconic Pritchard Hill producer David Arthur Vineyards. White wines were on display, too. Spanish-owned Artesa Winery brought an Albarino, the historic Trefethen Vineyards a Riesling.

The impact of smoke on wine grapes depends on a variety of factors, including proximity to the smoke, current climate conditions, the grape variety and where the grapes are in the growing season. In the case of the 2020 red wines showcased at Premiere, they almost all had one thing in common: The fruit was picked before the Glass Fire in late September that year. The LNU Lightning Complex Fire, which occurred a few weeks earlier, didn't appear to have as devastating an effect on Napa Valley grapes as the later blaze did.



Inglenook associate winemaker Chris Phelps pours the winery's 2020 lot at Premiere Napa Valley.
Jess Lander

At Francis Ford Coppola's Inglenook in Rutherford, associate winemaker Chris Phelps said his team blind-tasted roughly 100 lots of 2020 fruit to determine what was good enough to make into wine. In the end, all of the lots that passed their test were picked before the Glass Fire.

Burmeister noted that Pride had a similar result. "That which came in before the Glass Fire is delicious," she said. "That which came in after the Glass Fire was destroyed."

There's still much the industry doesn't understand about smoke taint, but the reception of the 2020 wines at Premiere can provide some hope that future fire seasons — which are occurring with greater frequency than ever before — won't necessarily be catastrophic for wine quality.

"Smoke will likely become one of the aspects of the vintage, just like higher yields or frost or any of the variables that you have in nature," said Jean Hoefliger, a consulting winemaker for several brands, including Napa Valley's AXR and Pope Valley Winery. "I think we are getting more accustomed to making wine in these conditions. In 2020, I decided not to make any wines. Honestly, looking back, it was probably a mistake. I think I could have taken a little more risk."

Phelps believes that other winemakers, like Hoefliger, might now be second-guessing their decision to toss their 2020 fruit. The immediate consensus that all 2020 wines were irreparably marked by smoke may have been a premature conclusion. The next time there is a major smoke event, more will at least attempt to make the wine and see how it turns out, Phelps said. "I think a few people are kind of kicking themselves, like, maybe they should have given it a serious go," he said.

The Premiere wines could also help change the narrative of Napa's limited 2020 releases. "There was a lot of press and negativity around 2020," said Siobhan Irons, a buyer at Harrods in London. The luxury department store won Spottswoode's 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon lot, which had the highest-selling bottle price at auction: \$633.

Consumers might be less willing to spend their money on 2020 wines if they think they have smoke taint, but many producers, especially those in the fine-wine space, are unlikely to release such wine. "If you're confident in the producer and the quality they adhere to," said Irons, "then you know that they would have either made a good wine in 2020 or they wouldn't have one at all."

Alternatively, Burmeister suggests purchasing from trusted retailers and not necessarily a major grocery store chain. "It's a really good reason to shop local winemongers," she said, "the small bottle shops that are tasting absolutely everything that comes through their door."

Jess Lander is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: jess.lander@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @jesslander

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/food/article/Many-feared-Napa-s-smoky-2020-wine-harvest-was-16978321.php>