

LET IT RAIN

A JANUARY TO REMEMBER

IF YOU ARE READING

WineInk in one of the high mountain papers in which it lives weekly, you no doubt are in a ski town. And that means you were inundated this January with epic amounts of snow.

In Lake Tahoe, records for snowfall were set. Keystone has already announced that there is enough snow to extend the ski season by at least a

week — in April. Vail has seen the best days in the Back Bowls in a decade and Aspen, while it was just nicked by the edges of a couple of fronts and missed another entirely, still received snowfall measured by yardsticks.

Of course, all this fluff comes courtesy of the Pacific Ocean and, before it gets to our high-alpine environs and turns white, it falls as rain along the left coast. That would be the coast populated by the nation's best vineyards.

So I was not surprised to have a friend query me: "What's all this rain going to do to the vineyards?" It was a good question and I'm sure that others may be concerned that the 2017 vintage would ultimately be best described as "soggy."

But the thing is, as I explained to my friend, the rains came in January, a time when the vineyards are dormant, the vines are asleep and the rains simply fall and run through the rows into the creeks and washes. Unless there was significant erosion, or perhaps rock and mudslides or other disasters that would be harmful to life and limb, the vineyards themselves, at least at this time of year, should remain largely unaffected.

As of Jan. 26, with a forecast of sunshine scheduled to round out the month, the town of Napa at the southern end of the famed Napa Valley had received 12.11 inches of rain in January, which is 348 percent of normal. For the season, they are at 195 percent of normal with a seasonal mark of over 21 inches. And frankly, most of the

wineries and vineyard managers could not be more pleased.

"After five years of drought, we've been happy to see so much rain in the Napa Valley this year and it couldn't come at a better time," said Patsy McGaughy, communications director for the Napa Valley Vintners, echoing a refrain that has been heard throughout the valley. "Right now, the vines in Napa Valley are dormant, so they have not been harmed by the large amounts of rain. The storms have instead helped to recharge our groundwater, fill reservoirs and set up the Napa Valley for what we hope will be a tremendous growing season ahead."

While it is true that stressed vines, those that do not receive heavy irrigation and have roots that must reach deep for moisture and nutrition, produce vibrant and full clusters, water is a good thing for vineyards. That is if it comes at the right time. And January is perfect.

Over on the West Sonoma Coast, where the weather can be harsh, Andy and Nick Peay have planted their estate vineyards on land that once hosted orchards of sweet and tart Gravenstein apples. Less than half a dozen miles from the Pacific, and at the top of the ridgeline, these vineyards are baked by the sun when the fog burns off each day, but can be soaked when the storms come raging off the sea. This year the region has been pummeled, with as much as 9 inches of rain falling over a three-day period from Jan. 8 to 11.

But even that amount of rainfall does not worry the proprietors of Peay Vineyards, which has established a reputation for producing exceptional pinot noir, chardonnay and syrah from their estate. Andy Peay said, "In general, rain during dormancy, even an enormous rainfall, has little effect on established hillside vineyards. On the valley floor and near rivers there will be flooding and that can be problematic, especially if the vines sit in water for long periods of time and are on rootstock that is adversely effected by 'wet feet.'"

"Our vineyard is also well-



KELLY J. HAYES

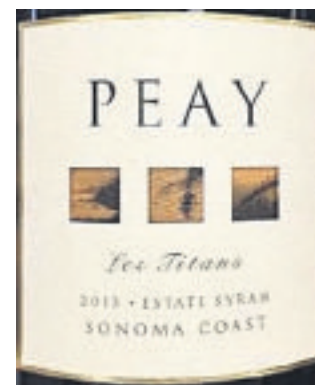


The "little" river below the Peay Vineyard, the Wheatfield Fork of the Gualala River, flows freely in the midst of the deluge.

established with permanent cover crop, so erosion is minimal," he continued. "It is also likely we will not need to water as much, if at all, in most places in our vineyard. There are so many variables that will affect the growing season that this is only one potential small factor."

So there you have it. While you ski your spring snow this season, fear not. The source of your pleasure has not adversely affected your future wines.

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NEED TO KNOW

2013 PEAY VINEYARDS "LES TITANS" SYRAH

Cool-climate pinot noir is something you may be familiar with, but cool-climate syrah? Maybe not so much. But the brothers Peay and winemaker Vanessa Wong make a pair of elegant and lush wines from syrah grown in one of the coolest growing regions in all of California. This wine is deeper in color and bolder than I expected and paired perfectly with grilled lamb. Vibrant fruits, a lush texture and a touch of California earth made this a highlight syrah. I'd go back for more.



ABOVE: The sun, the soils and the vines. All are good in the Napa Valley following the epic rains of January 2017.

FAR LEFT: Jean Hoefliger, the winemaker and general manager of Napa's Alpha Omega Winery, says that vines in dormancy are like "bears in hibernation." Despite the optics of the vines sitting in the stormwaters, the most important effect of the rains has been in replenishment of the reservoirs.

LEFT: The Russian River as it rose near Healdsburg. After five years of drought the rising rivers were seen as a blessing in California wine country.



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