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Here's how the devastating wildfires will affect Northern California's wine industry



MADELINE STONE
OCT. 12, 2017, 9:10 AM



The entrance to the fire-ravaged Signorello Estate winery is seen

Monday, October 9, 2017, in Napa, California.

Marcio Jose Sanchez/AP

Northern California wine country has been devastated as a [series of dangerous fires](#) continues to threaten the areas around Napa and Sonoma.

The region is an economic powerhouse for the state, and many notable wineries, hotels, and restaurants have suffered damage. Among the wineries that have been reduced to rubble and ash are [Signorello Estate](#) in Napa and Paradise Ridge Winery in Santa Rosa.

Other wineries won't know the full extent of damage until after the evacuation order has lifted, but initial [confirmed photos](#) show a great deal of destruction. Multiple fires are ravaging [more than 50,000 acres of land](#) in multiple wine-producing counties.

Depending on the path that the fires take, the smoke could have some adverse effects on this year's wine harvest.

According to ETS Laboratories, which conducts scientific research for wineries and the accompanying industry, wildfire smoke can cause something called "[smoke taint](#)" — off-seeming flavors that are sometimes described as "smoky," "bacon," "campfire," and "ashtray."

The flavor is "usually long lasting and linger on the palate even after the wine is swallowed or spit out," reads a page on ETS Laboratories' website. Smoke taint occurs when vines and berries absorb chemical compounds, called volatile phenols, from wildfire smoke.

Luckily, an estimated 90% of grapes had been picked from vines before the fires started on Sunday night, leaving them less vulnerable to smoke taint, according to the nonprofit trade association Napa Valley Vintners. Even Signorello Estate, whose winery burned down, does not expect to [lose next year's vintage wines](#), a spokesperson told Business Insider.

Napa Valley Vintners said in a press release: "It is too soon to tell how the fires and related challenges will impact this year's vintage overall. What we do know is that of the grapes remaining on the vine, it is almost all Cabernet Sauvignon. Our winemakers report that this thick-skinned variety, fully developed and ready to be picked for the 2017 harvest, is not expected to be impacted by the smoke from the fires."

Smoke taint can be removed through a process of reverse osmosis, though wine industry professionals say it's unlikely for that to be necessary at this stage in the harvest.

Kelly Carter, a spokesperson for Alpha Omega Winery in St. Helena, told Business Insider: "Due to the maturity stage of the fruit, smoke is not expected to permeate the skin. Should smoke somehow permeate the skin, technology can remove the smoke."



Vineyards line up under a mountain engulfed by a wildfire Monday, Oct. 9, 2017, in Napa, California.

Marcio Jose Sanchez/AP

Carter continued: "No matter the circumstances, Napa Valley winemakers remain committed to upholding Napa Valley's reputation for making some of the world's finest wines and they will do everything possible to ensure the highest quality winemaking for the rest of the 2017 vintage."

Smoke taint has caused problems for winemakers in the past. In 2008, fires that took place earlier in the growing season left Mendocino County vintners [deciding whether to sell their wine at all](#).

Experts say that consumers should not expect wine prices to rise in the wake of the fires, though it's far too early to fully assess the damage at this point.

"If it's a large winery, if they are financially stable and can handle (the effects of the fire) long-term, they may say, 'We've got other assets, we've got vineyards in Chile,' and hold their prices. There's a lot of economics involved," Kevin Riley, a wine executive with beverage distributor Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, [told USA Today](#).

Locals are optimistic for the time being.

"We are anticipating a successful vintage and that wine values will stay strong," Maria Castellucci, proprietor of Castellucci Napa Valley, [told Business Insider](#).