

Tuesday 28 September 2010
by Cheryl Lincoln - San Francisco

Page 1

Napa 2010: long cool summer promises 'European' vintage

Napa vintners are gearing up for one of the coolest harvests on record – and many are saying wines will be more balanced, elegant and lower in alcohol as a result.

Shafer Vineyards

While grapes have been slow to ripen in the long cool growing season, vineyards have also been prey to a number of different hazards – like a heat spike in August - which have reduced yield significantly.

But winemakers are sanguine: indeed, some, like Elias Fernandez at Shafer, and Ivo Jeramaz at Grgich Hills Estate, see the difficult season as a boon.

‘After 3 years of draught, we now face one of the coolest seasons on record,’ said Jeramaz, vice president of vineyards and production at Grgich, a champion of lower-alcohol wine.

Jeramaz said the persistent cool temperatures will force many to produce wines lower in alcohol because the grapes won’t achieve the higher sugars levels that many Napa growers typically seek.

Veteran Shafer winemaker Elias Fernandez said he would be able to pick at lower sugar levels this year.

Shafer’s Hillside Syrah and Stags Leap Merlot will start coming in today (Tuesday), followed by Chardonnay later in the week. The Cabernet Sauvignon in the first week of October.

‘I’m seeing color and seed development way ahead of sugar, so I’ll be able to pick most vineyards at lower Brix.’

He said to speed up ripening they had done a severe green harvest, dropping 50% of the crop in some parcels, leaving one cluster per shoot.

‘This was done in hope that we could at least make Shafer-quality wine with 50% of the grapes. We also left one cluster per shoot in some of our late ripening Chardonnay clones in Carneros.’



An anomaly was the late August heatwave, which caused vineyards to lose between 10-30% of the crop from sunburn and stem necrosis (a type of berry shrivel).

Fernandez said he considered this a blessing in disguise, or ‘Mother Nature’s way of telling us we were carrying too much crop in a year that was already behind, forcing us to drop crop which I believe will help many bring in their fruit before the rains come.’

At Alpha Omega in Rutherford, winemaker Jean Hoefliger was cautiously optimistic about the cool season, saying ‘the consequences of these lower temperatures are higher acidity and lower alcohol. It’s already a great vintage for the white varieties reaching full ripening. And, if the weather stays dry, we might have the vintage of the century.’

Dennis Cakebread, at Cakebread Cellars said the same: ‘Overall, we are enthused about how this year is going. The weather forecast has a nice Indian Summer starting now and running for the foreseeable future. Ocean temperatures have dropped, which typically means a dry Fall, so we see many positives to work with. We are looking forward to another great vintage.’