

WINES & VINES

Wineries Consider Next Steps Amid Flames

Acreage from nine North Coast fires steady at 85,000 acres

by Kate Lavin and Jim Gordon 10/10/17

San Rafael, Calif.—Firefighters working to control a series of wildfires in California’s North Coast region were able to hold the acreage on all but one of the blazes today, but that was small consolation to winery and vineyard owners whose homes and livelihoods remained threatened by flames.

While the 5,000-acre Nuns Fire, 2,000-acre 37 Fire and 1,000-acre Partrick Fire continued to burn in Napa and Sonoma counties, the larger Atlas and Tubbs fires have caused the most damage since starting late Sunday, and smoke is significantly worse upvalley.



Mount St. John is rendered invisible by smoke surrounding the iconic Robert Mondavi Winery today in Napa Valley.

Signorello Estate winery on the Silverado trail was burned to the ground by the 25,000-acre Atlas Fire, and the 27,000-acre Tubbs Fire destroyed 6,000-case Paradise Ridge.

In spite of reports indicating the demise of several wineries, representatives of Gundlach Bundschu, Darioush, Shafer Vineyards, William Hill and Nicholson Ranch took to social media to reassure fans that, in the much-edited words of Mark Twain, “Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

2017 vintage conditions

Several Napa winemakers spoke at a media briefing today at Honig Vineyard & Winery in Rutherford, Calif., saying that they expect no effect on wine quality due to the fires. They do anticipate decreased yields compared to the 10-year average, but said that was also a consequence of other factors this year.

Patsy McGaughy of the Napa Valley Vintners (NVV) said the group had heard from 100 of its more than 525 members, and none reported fatalities or injuries among their families or employees. However, five wineries owned by members were destroyed by fire, and nine others were damaged. The group declined to name the wineries.

Michael Honig, chairman of NVV board and president of Honig Vineyards & Winery winery, said, “The Napa Valley community has always been a strong community. Robert Mondavi used to say, ‘The better the Napa Valley brand does, the better we do individually.’ We’ve struggled through drought, pestilence, earthquake—even Prohibition. We suffered and we survived, so this is a hiccup in the context of a generational business.”

Peter Heitz, winemaker for Turnbull Wine Cellars, added: “I was out in a vineyard this morning, tasting fruit. The grass was singed at my feet from the fire and the fruit hanging on the vine tasted great.”

Winemaker Sara Fowler of Peju winery agreed about the year's potential high quality. "We're really looking forward to this vintage. We anticipate being done with harvest in about two and a half weeks. We're not rushing, taking it smooth, really focusing on the people right now," she added.

Jean Hoefliger, winemaker at Alpha Omega Winery, said: "There's really nothing to fear about the vintage so far besides the tragedy that is happening now. The tragedy is about people, and I think right now it's about helping and saving people."

Honig said the Napa Valley Community Disaster Relief Fund, which the NVV established in 2014 immediately following the South Napa earthquake, has been reactivated. He recommended that anyone wishing to make donations contribute via the Community Foundation of Napa Valley's website.

Further afield

The Redwood/Potter Fires in Mendocino County currently total 21,000 acres. Martha Barra, owner of Barra of Mendocino, said the winery was incredibly fortunate it hadn't suffered property losses, although nearby neighbors had not been so lucky. The winery offices currently are serving as a dormitory for the 15 employees living onsite.

"It doesn't look very sophisticated right now, but at least they are all comfortable and well taken care of," she told *Wines & Vines*.

In Lake County, the 2,500-acre Sulphur Fire that is part of the Mendocino Lake Complex was 30% contained as of 10:52 p.m. today. Jonathan Walters, director of Farming at Brassfield Estate Winery in the High Serenity Ranch area of

Lake County, told *Wines & Vines*: "Having gone through the Valley Fire and the Rocky Fire, we understand smoke taint on our vines. We don't expect any damage."

Tamara Richmond, chief operating officer at Stonehouse Cellars in Clearlake Oaks, Calif., said no large commercial wineries or vineyards had been affected, although some smaller wine and grape operations might be damaged by the fire.

Stonehouse's two largest blocks—about 9 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon—have yet to be harvested, but Richmond said that the grape skins are thick enough this late in the season that she does not expect smoke damage from the nearby fires.

For the latest information about the fire situation in California, visit fire.ca.gov.