



SCORCHED EARTH

WILD FIRES LEAVE CALIFORNIA WINE COUNTRY REELING, INDUSTRY WONDERING

BY JEFF SIEGEL

The good news is that the October fires in Napa and Sonoma didn't do as much damage to the wineries, production facilities, and vineyards as feared. Save for a few hiccups in the supply chain, wine from these two regions is getting to restaurants and retailers and—tourism aside—business seems to be close to normal.

The bad news? It remains unclear, given that some fires were still burning toward the end of October, as to the extent of the damage. This includes smoke taint and burned-out vineyards in the two most important wine regions in the U.S.

"Everyone expressed a lot of concern about what was going to happen, but fortunately, the disruptions have been small, and especially for the producers we work with," says Michael Warner, who owns

the four-year-old DCanter Wine Boutique in Washington, D.C. "Obviously, everyone is still very concerned about the tragedy and the people who lost their homes. But over the long term, we're not seeing any major disruption. In the short term, we're seeing some delays in getting products, but that should clear up by the end of the year."

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

In fact, many previously scheduled tastings and road tours continued as scheduled. This, say state viticulture officials and trade groups representing Napa and Sonoma wineries, is another example that it's business as usual. More positives:

- Most of the harvest was done before the fires started, probably more than 90 percent.

A combination of dry ground conditions, whipping winds and fiery embers made the wild fires difficult to track, let alone contain. Napa and Sonoma counties were the hardest hit; Mendocino suffered damage as well.

- UC-Davis enologists, in a late October report, said that only a small percentage of the 2017 grape harvest might have been harmed by the fires and smoke. In addition, they wrote, grapevines in the area of the fires may have acted like firebreaks, preventing the flames from causing more damage than they did.
- The UC-Davis report also said smoke or heat from the fires didn't damage fermenting wine or wine that had already been bottled. Also, said the trade groups, wine inventories from previous vintages were generally unharmed.
- All told, said the trade groups, fewer than a dozen of the approximately 1,200 wineries in Mendocino, Napa and Sonoma counties were destroyed or heavily damaged. This is far less than the number feared in the early days of the fire.



Declared the Wine Institute, which represents the state's wine industry: "Most winery tasting rooms have reopened for business. People planning to visit should not cancel their trips. Now is the time to visit and support wine country."

CONCERNS ABOUT VINEYARDS & PIPELINE

Still, this didn't prevent wine drinkers from worrying about their favorite labels. Several retailers across the country reported heavier than usual buying in the early days of the fires from customers who were worried supplies would be short. And a couple of retailers interviewed for this article said they were considering buying more for this holiday season than usual, just in case.

The immediate concern, as Warner noted, was short-term supply, mostly caused by a lack of transport. Trucks normally used to ship wine out of the fire areas were being used to bring in relief and recovery supplies, including building materials.

The longer-term concern, said some retailers, was smoke taint: damage caused to ripening grapes, grape juice being fermented, and wine being aged by smoke from the fires. Smoke taint occurs when soot and ash from a fire land on the grapes, and it can result in a variety of off-flavors and aromas, including an almost pharmaceutical-like tang.

Local community response to the fires has been uplifting for many of the individuals and businesses who experienced damage; now wineries and regional associations are actively putting out the message that Wine Country is open for business.

"Exposure and duration of exposure are the critical factor," says Jon McPherson, winemaker at South Coast Winery in Temecula, which wasn't in the fire area. "Most of what was left hanging was Cabernet Sauvignon that was already ripe, or close to it, while grapes are more susceptible to the effects of smoke taint during veraison. I am sure some guys will have issues, but I would think it will have to be a wait and see."

In addition, says Stephen D. Menke, PhD, the Colorado state enologist and an associate professor of enology at Colorado State University, smoke taint usually won't harm wine—whether it's being fermented, aged or stored—as long as the grape product is in an enclosed building that wasn't damaged by fire and where smoke didn't get in.

FUTURE SHOCK

The other concern revolves around whether vines will need to be replanted after the fire, how many vines may be lost, and how old the vines are that need to be replaced. In this, the supply chain could be a factor again, as vineyard owners scramble to find replace-

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ment vines in what could be a tight market. If extensive replanting is necessary, it will probably take place over a couple of years.

The soil itself won't be affected, says Menke; rather, it's a question of how much fire damage the vines that didn't burn down sustained and whether they can come back. This, given how grapevines can be quite resilient, may not be as big a problem as feared.

That can't be determined until vineyard workers can get on the land and look at the vines, and even then some that might seem lost could be fine come spring. Because of this, Menke said, new vines will probably be planted between existing vines.

And if some of the region's 50- to 75-year-old vines need to be replaced? That will pose one of wine's most metaphysical questions: How much difference in quality do old vines make? ■