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Nature Throws Vintners a Changeup

Cold California and Sunny Bordeaux? As harvest approaches, nerves are frayed

Augustus Weed, Mitch Frank

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As harvest approaches across the Northern Hemisphere this month, some vintners are breathing easy, but they're the exception. In North America and Europe, this year's vintage looks like a bad film where the main characters switch bodies. Vintners in Spain, France, Italy and other Old World wine regions have begun picking grapes two or three weeks early, thanks to a hot, sunny spring that accelerated their growing season—and threatened to cook the grapes in some areas. In California and the Pacific Northwest, however, a cold, wet start pushed back picking. Oregon may not finish until November. When it comes to quality, the jury is still out. (Look for Wine Spectator's *Vintage Report* later this year.)

For most of June, European winemakers were staring at the earliest harvest ever. "April, May and June were very hot, with summer temperatures," said Stéphane Deroncourt, a leading consultant based in Bordeaux. "Water scarcity was felt very early." Vintners across Europe found their grapes three weeks ahead of the usual growing cycle by the end of June. In Bordeaux, things got too hot for some. Deroncourt reports that ironically vines planted on soils in poor *terroirs* that retain too much moisture in normal years did better in 2011's dry conditions. Grapes withered if growers removed too many leaves.

Just when it looked like Champagne would be harvesting during the first week of August, July brought cool, cloudy conditions to Europe. For many regions, including Bordeaux, Rioja and most of Italy, the slowdown was a relief. Vines were less stressed.



John Hodder

Pickers are already hard at work in Champagne.

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does not mean that we will make bad wine, just that we will have to work harder," said Jeremy Seysses of Domaine Dujac. "Botrytis is a reality in Burgundy. We have to sort almost every year and this year will be no exception."

August brought the sun back—Tuscany enjoyed a high of 104° F on the 18th—and Sicilians had already begun picking their white grapes a week earlier. Champagne began picking around the same time. Some Bordeaux châteaux were picking white grapes by August 15th. What remains to be seen is what impact that roller coaster has on the resulting wines. "With such warmth, the challenge is not the sugars," said Giacomo Conterno, who oversees viticulture for his family's winery, Poderi Aldo Conterno, in Barolo. "It's the acidity and tannins."

"The vintage is the opposite in California," said Derenoncourt, who also makes wine in Napa Valley. "Perhaps we will make a great Bordeaux there."

It's been a difficult year for grapegrowers along the West Coast. For much of spring, they wondered when the clouds and cool temperatures would go away. In Napa Valley, the cold and wet delayed flowering and caused some flowers to drop off the grape clusters, a process known as grape shatter. Richard Sowalsky, winemaker at Clos Pegase Winery in Calistoga, estimates that yields may be down 15 percent compared to warmer years. Forecasters predicted picking in late September.

In neighboring Sonoma County, the early rains led to botrytis and mildew in some of their vineyards. "We have to spend a few more dollars on the sprays," said Ulises Valdez of Valdez Family winery. Winemakers also thinned extensively in their vineyards because of increased canopy growth. Despite the extra work, Valdez predicts a good year for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, with normal yields.

California's Central Coast was not so lucky. The region experienced one of the worst frosts in years, with vineyards in Paso Robles especially hard hit. "There are some places that have horrendous yields," said Fred Holloway, winemaker at Justin Vineyards and Winery in Paso Robles. He estimates that certain vineyards may only produce 15 to 20 percent of their average crop. And thanks to a cool summer, Holloway said his vines were four to five weeks behind schedule.

On the East Coast, things looked much better as August began. Virginia vintners reported that a warm, dry summer had created ideal conditions. There were similar reports in New York. But it's unclear what impact Hurricane Irene's heavy rains have had as harvest looms.

Cold also hit the Pacific Northwest. An early freeze struck Washington state's prime grapegrowing regions in late November, damaging vines and buds, especially in Horse Heaven Hills and Walla Walla Valley, before they could go dormant for the winter. The size of Washington's grape crop will be down this year by between 15 to 20 percent.

Oregon is experiencing one of its coldest vintages in years. "We haven't had one day in the 90s," said Rollin Soles, winemaker at Argyle in the Willamette Valley. He says his vineyards didn't bloom until the third week of July. Oregon vintners report that the harvest could be running a month behind schedule. A few weeks ago, Soles cut off half the clusters in his vineyards, in an effort to ripen what he left hanging. He is hoping for good sunny weather in October. "We're ready for the three point jumper right at the buzzer," he said. So are a lot of vintners.

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Ivan Campos — Ottawa, Canada — August 29, 2011 7:14pm ET

Any word on BC and Ontario?

The Okanagan was 2-3 weeks behind when I was there in early August.

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