

THE WAY THE WIND BLOWS



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Wildfires have become a yearly occurrence for Napa and Sonoma – but what is their impact, and how can producers handle the effects? Sophie Thorpe spoke to some of Northern California's leading producers to investigate the issue

Driving through Napa and Sonoma, the land still bears the scars of 2020. The wildfires that raged through the region have left a long-lasting mark, whether it's lengthy reconstruction efforts or the stark, charred tree trunks that cover the mountains. But it's more than that. To an outsider, the fires feel intangible, terrifying yet somehow conceptual. Talking to those that lived through them, however, makes you instantly realise quite how petrifying that season was. The trauma of those flames is still smouldering away.

In 2017, fires hit Northern California on 8th October, however most producers had already harvested. Indeed, the fire even crossed the Kistler property, but their vines helped act as a firebreak. Two years later the Kincadee fire swept through Sonoma County at the end of October.

But in 2020, the first fires arrived earlier. The LNU Lightning Complex started with what is known as the Hennessey fire on 17th August. Sparked by lightning after thunderstorms, the complex was a weave of 250 different fires that collectively raged through almost 150,000 hectares of the region. The damage was enormous: 1,491 buildings were destroyed and six people lost their lives. While the fire did diminish in size, it wasn't entirely extinguished until 2nd October, almost a month and a half after it started.

Before the Lightning Complex had fully subsided, the Glass Fire attacked. The blaze started on 27th September, east of St Helena near the Silverado Trail, spreading north to Calistoga and then south and west, towards Santa Rosa. It burned until 20th October, encompassing over 27,000 hectares and taking over 1,500 buildings with it, including numerous wineries. It cut through Eisele Vineyard, across 90 acres of hillside and forcing them to rip up 1,000 vines. Fortunately they'd already picked all their fruit (finishing their harvest three days before the fire broke out, on 24th September). And this was all in the midst of Covid-19.

Wildfires aren't new in Northern California, but they're certainly more prevalent than ever before. Indeed, as Cory Empting – Director of Winegrowing at Promontory, Harlan and Bond – tells me, the region's indigenous people, the Wappo, used to describe autumn as “smoky mountains”.

Paul Hobbs – who has been making wine in “the Valley” (as the locals would say) since the late 1970s – remembers a fire in the 1980s that burned its way along the Silverado Trail. “All it took was a gust of wind,” he says – and one flame turned into something uncontrollable in the blink of an eye. He remembers climbing up on a roof to see the sobering effects of the fire.



Cleary Estate in Freestone-Occidental, one of Paul Hobbs's properties

Perhaps partly due to this early exposure, fires have always been at the forefront of his mind when picking a site – avoiding rugged, dry areas like Diamond Mountain or Calistoga. And he is exacting with forest management of the sites he works – even on our wander around his Goldrock Estate vineyard, he notices some saplings that are troubling him, and calls over his vineyard manager to take a look, conscious to reduce the risk as much as possible. And he's deservedly cautious. The 2017 vintage was his first working with Cleary Estate out in Freestone-Occidental, and he paid almost \$2 million for fruit that he couldn't use.

The fire itself is one challenge, however vines are natural firebreaks so don't tend to suffer much direct damage (although the heat from a blaze can sometimes scorch vines). The real threat, however, is in the air – smoke. But the science of smoke taint is complex, and poorly understood. Producers can send samples to laboratories to be tested for the compounds responsible for the taint (guaiacol and 4-methylguaiacol) but the exact level of perception isn't known. These compounds also naturally occur in some varieties, eg Syrah, and come from oak barrels (in particular the toasting process).



The vineyards at Promontory, tucked in amongst dense woodland

Of course the impact of smoke is dependent on proximity to the fire, the intensity of the smoke, elevation and the wind. Hobbs explained how in 2020 much of the smoke from the Glass Fire stayed north for several days, but then the wind shifted and sent it south to the Bay Area. As smoke travels, and ages, the volatile compounds also degrade, so there is also a significant difference between the impact of “fresh” smoke, versus what Hobbs describes as “atmospheric” smoke. The latter may look bad, but it’s unlikely to hold significant taint, whereas if you’ve got fresh smoke, it’s “game over”.

Lots of producers do micro-ferments to look for smoke taint, testing to see if it’s worth the expense of picking the fruit and making the wine – however that’s also not a sure-fire way to know if you have smoke taint. The nature of these compounds means that they can lurk, undetectable in a wine, and emerge in bottle as hydrolysis occurs. “That’s why it’s so insidious,” Hobbs says.

If you’ve got smoke-tainted fruit, the options are limited. The compounds are concentrated in the skins, so the aim is generally to minimise skin contact. Indeed, some producers made rosé in 2020, having picked earlier, with higher acidity than normal. Otherwise you can use reverse osmosis or spinning cone (both expensive processes that are used for de-alcoholisation), or carbon fining – or a combination of all of the above – to try and strip out the smoky flavour. The result, as Mark De Vere MW at Robert Mondavi said of trials they’d done, it generally didn’t work, but if it did, “It took so much else out.” ([Robert Mondavi](#) ended up making almost no 2020 wine.)

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Read anything about 2020 and there is a cacophony of opinion. “Everyone handled the vintage differently,” Cate Kistler of [Occidental](#) told me. They picked on 18th August, not in response to the fire, but because that was when the first fruit was ripe. They didn’t do any micro-ferments or send samples to labs (“We’re not data-crunching people,” Kistler says). The cost of picking was, for them, “a drop in the bucket” in comparison to farming the vineyards the rest of the year, so they tried to do what they could.



Tasting with Cate Kistler at Occidental

“It was going to be either Occidental, or nothing,” she said with a shrug. They took their time, committing to making every decision as if it was a normal year, finishing on 6th September just as the Labor Day heatwave hit. They didn’t use everything they picked, but they made all five of their single-vineyard wines – and the 2020s we tasted are glorious.

Some, like Colgin, didn't make any wine at all, while many producers made around 40% less (such as Williams Selyem and Peter Michael). Many of the 2020s that will be released were picked before the fires struck. Cathy Corison had all her fruit safely in the winery more than two weeks before the Glass Fire hit, but the challenge was to keep the smoke out of the winery. She bought industrial grade air filters to shield her ferments. "They're beautiful," she says with a quietly proud smile.

At Dalla Valle, Maya Dalla Valle doesn't pretend that it was an easy year, but she's pleased with the wines they made (all with fruit picked before the Glass Fire). As ever, these are wines that speak of their year – which wasn't just the fires, but a hot, dry year that (along with a block that was being re-grafted) cut their crop to a mere 2,700 cases in total. At Dominus, they did micro-ferments after the Lightning complex, and had picked their last row of fruit on the morning the Glass Fire broke out.

Steve Matthiasson – the leading viticulturalist who also has his eponymous label with his wife Jill – told me how it was set to be "an epic season" before the fires hit. He highlighted how the smoke meant there was less UV light reaching the grapes, and that meant the fruit wasn't as phenolically ripe. They pick early, so had started harvest 10 days before the Glass Fire broke out. The Cabernet Sauvignon in their Phoenix vineyard was still out, but they managed to pick it the morning after the fire broke out, before the smoke was able to take effect.



Talking with Steve Matthiasson in the vineyard

Most who picked early are in agreement that the hot, dry conditions were in their favour. Promontory saw only eight inches of rain, versus the 30 of a normal year. But that hydric stress helped them – it meant the crop was small and the vines shifted to ripening the fruit earlier, so even though they picked on 22nd August they had no pyrazines. As Will Harlan says, in some ways, “The stars aligned”.

The 2017 vintage might have prompted people to start thinking about climate change, but 2020 was a real wake-up call for the region. It prompted Martin Reyes MW to try and create a community around climate action. Eventually, working alongside Anna Brittain, he founded Napa RISE (standing for Resilience Innovation Sustainability Empowerment), a climate and wine symposium that first took place in 2022 (with the 2023 symposium currently underway). It's early days, but they're "trying to build into the DNA [of Napa RISE] this notion of action". He's keen to avoid a conference focused on discussing concepts, but an industry convention that drives change.

One part of that conversation is inevitably fire – and a session last week focused on forestry management. "The relationship with fire we have is complicated – but it can be a healthy relationship," Reyes tells me.

Controlled burning has long been a part of life for indigenous peoples – both in North America and Australia, where wildfires have now become a threat. In the US, controlled burning was officially banned in 1911 when the Weeks Act was introduced, but California is gradually realising the need for its reintroduction.

"Agroforestry was happening before conservation took it off the table," Empting (of Domain W. Harlan) tells me. He talks about how when the previously evicted Miwok people were allowed to return to Yosemite, they were horrified by what they saw – where "conservation" had destroyed the ecosystems. For native peoples, seasonal work like controlled burns was a way of life – seen as their responsibility to the land. But it was a responsibility that colonialism robbed from them, and didn't take on.

At the Pepperwood Preserve, native peoples do controlled burns. Empting visited to explore the practice and see if it's something they could take up as part of their stewardship of the land. The challenge today is the paperwork – and politics. Permits are difficult to obtain, the fire department is reluctant and has to be involved, and then there are the neighbours to contend with.



A view across Alexander Valley, Sonoma County

Hobbs highlights that it's not just that there aren't enough controlled burns, but that manmade structures have taken over swathes of land – and they burn hotter, leading fires to rage in less predictable ways.

Of course, as with 2017, the 2020s are already being marred by rumour and reputation of a smoke-tainted year. The reality is so much more complex – and, although I haven't tasted enough to make pronouncements on the vintage, there are some brilliant wines. Of course you'll need to choose carefully, but for top producers there is nothing to be gained by releasing wine that is anything less than flawless.

While the fires have left scars, the land's capacity for renewal is remarkable – with vibrant vegetation flourishing in amongst the scorched trees. The 2020 vintage wasn't the first to see such challenges and it won't be the last. The soils can recover, and so can the people, but a sustainable way to manage these threats is essential to long-term survival.

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