

BREAKING Stocks plunge again, wiping out gains for the year

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TOP STORY

Wine Industry

Panel: 2018 a year of ease in Napa's vineyards

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The Napa Valley grape harvest is winding down, with vintners reporting a smooth growing season without extreme weather events.

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Pete Richmond remembers vintages by how difficult they were.

On the heels of a growing season in 2017 that forced Napa grape growers like him to grapple with excess rain, an intense late-season heat spike, a hail storm and ultimately a scourge of devastating wildfires, for Richmond, the 2018 growing season will likely be lost among the more challenging years.

“This will be a vintage that I don’t remember,” Richmond said. “It’s been seamless. And that’s not because of us. It’s just because of the forces of nature ... It hasn’t challenged us as growers.”

Speaking as part of a panel of growers convening Tuesday morning at Arkenstone Vineyards in Angwin to discuss the 2018 growing season, Richmond said his vineyard management company, Silverado Farming, still had about two weeks and 400 tons of Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varietals left to pick throughout the valley.

Harvest had recently wrapped on Howell Mountain at the northern end of the valley, said panelist Sam Kaplan, vineyard manager and winemaker at Arkenstone. At the opposite end of the valley in the Carneros, harvest was around 95 percent finished at Hudson Vineyards said panelist Kelly MacLeod, director of operations at Hudson.

Kaplan described a 2018 growing season on Howell Mountain that began 10 days to two weeks behind the last season, with a typical early-April bud break and a lack of frost issues.

At Hudson, easy rains in December and January helped germinate hillside cover crops planted post-wildfires, MacLeod recalled. Heavier rains came between March and April, she said, allowing the growing season to kick off with full soils.

A lack of severe weather throughout the spring and summer has resulted in a crop larger than usual this year. Vineyards of Cabernet Sauvignon on average yield about three and a quarter tons per acre. Richmond said yields this year were closer to four tons across the board.

“It’s big, but it’s not huge,” he said, drawing comparisons to the 1997 vintage.

And while harvest can often be complicated by heat spikes, as in 2017, or bouts of rain as the seasons shift, the panelists agreed those hitches were largely absent this year. In turn, the current harvest has been “a winemaker’s dream,” MacLeod said.

“We get to cherry pick at optimal ripeness,” Kaplan agreed, noting also that without any heat spikes, the sugar levels in the valley’s grapes were not driven up. In the red wines now fermenting, pH levels are also lower this year, he said, meaning brighter acidity, which MacLeod has also seen at Hudson.

In the end, the lower sugar levels and bright acidity will make for wines that are “great, rich, [and] ripe,” Kaplan said, “but not over the top.”

Apart from a smooth growing season and harvest, panelists also attested to a steady recovery this year in vineyards affected by last harvest’s wildfires.

At Hudson, which lost fewer than 100 vines to the fires, those that survived have bounced back considerably, MacLeod said.

For the vineyards he works with that saw damage, Richmond concurred. “I think we were a little stunned that they came back so quickly,” he said, while pointing out that it will take years to tell how the production levels and disease susceptibility of the affected

vines will ultimately play out.

Workforce woes throughout the year were minimal, panelists said, while a future of more mechanized vineyard work also began to take shape.

The smooth transitions of the vines from one growth stage to next made for few timing issues in terms of vineyard work. The result was a “labor-neutral” year, Richmond said.

Contrary to popular belief, he added, one of the busiest times for growers is not harvest, but the period from April to June when spring rains will force re-suckering of the vines, effectively doubling workloads. With the heavier rains falling in March and April this year, that time frame saw less need for the extra work.

Richmond noted that while wages for vineyard labor in Napa Valley rank among the highest in the country for hourly agricultural work, those wages continued to rise this year as well.

“People say there’s a labor shortage,” he said. “My argument is, well there’s a wage shortage. If we pay more, we’ll get people.”

At Hudson, the answer to the looming lack of labor has been to mechanize some parts of vineyard work. This involves a layer of mechanized pruning and leafing on top of the work done by crews. The property also recently planted a new vineyard of Cabernet Sauvignon, designed to one day be mechanically harvested.

“I think that we have to adapt and we have to kind of embrace some mechanization in order to stretch the resources that we do have,” MacLeod said.

At Silverado Farming, some of the company’s replanting work this year was carried out by GPS-driven technology over hand crews. For now, the company is still evaluating the potential cost savings of the work and whether the quality lives up to that of a human crew. The company is also running trials on mechanized leafing versus leafing by hand and testing the wines to gauge any differences in quality.

“It’s what jobs can we take away from the hand crews that we can use their talents other places,” Richmond said.

But overall in Napa Valley, he asserted, “I don’t think we’re ever going to be completely mechanized. We’ve got to have that hand-touch to the vineyards to fine tune everything. We’re going to continue to adapt where we can, but it’s still primarily going to be hand labor that does most of this work.”

Among the more pressing trends growers face today, he said, is how to keep a sustainable year-round workforce in the valley.

“What are those other things we’re doing as an organization and as a valley to make sure our workforce continues to want to come to work here?”

Despite a smooth 2018 in the vineyards, the growing season has come and gone with solutions to longer-term issues like housing costs and transportation yet to be found.

“We don’t have any answers,” Richmond said, “but we’re trying.”

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Henry Lutz covers the local wine industry. He has been a reporter and copy editor for the Register since 2016.

