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Wine Industry

That predawn roar? That's Napa Valley wine grapes fighting for their lives

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Jim Regusci from Regusci Winery in the Stags Leap AVA climbs one of his wind machines.

Photographer: Rex Gelert

The dull roar heard in the distance before dawn Tuesday morning was not helicopters or an invading army of locusts, as some Napa Valley newcomers might have feared.

It was the sound of grape vines surviving the night.

With recent nighttime temperatures approaching freezing and the threat of frost looming over budding vines, Napa Valley growers have turned on their wind machines — devices that stir the air, thwarting potential damage to young, tender shoots in the early weeks of the growing season.

In most cases, the growing season in Napa Valley begins earliest for Chardonnay, the fragile varietal that dominates acreage in the southern Carneros region.

A string of unseasonably warm days in February kicked off this year's bud break, the first green signals of vines to come. Today, breaking buds have taken hold of vineyards up and down the valley, coating vines in young green shoots from Carneros to Calistoga, though cooler temperatures linger still.

Cue the wind machines.

“Any time after bud break, your shoots become really sensitive to any frost damage,” said Kelly MacLeod, director of vineyard operations at Hudson Vineyards and Ranch in the Carneros. “So we run the wind machines any time the temperature looks like it might be close to freezing.”

Buds at Hudson began to break through several weeks ago, MacLeod said, and today all of the property's white varietals and half of its reds have broken. But when the cold sets in, protecting all of the ranch's 200 vineyard acres, of which 60-65 percent is Chardonnay, is near impossible.

"It's pretty unrealistic on most properties to protect everything," MacLeod said.

Instead, growers will strategically place wind machines in areas of lower elevation that are poised to collect cooler air as it sinks. Hudson uses six wind machines for its vineyards, setting them in the coldest pockets on the property.

"They don't protect a huge area. It's virtually impossible to protect your entire ranch with them," MacLeod said.

The Napa Valley Grapegrowers Weather Alert System warns growers and vineyard foremen of either frost threats in the early months of the growing season or of searing heat later in the summer when the rains have stopped and vines need irrigating.

An April 16 voice message from the frost alert system said temperatures would be approaching frost levels, though "most of the area will be frost free. But a little patchy frost is possible in the usually colder spots." The alert forecast lows to range from 32-37 degrees on the valley floor to 30-35 degrees in the Pope and Chiles valleys and 35-40 degrees in the foothills.

At Hudson, the six machines begin to whir at 34 degrees, MacLeod said. "Just so that we're kind of ahead of it actually freezing." The machines are set closer to freezing and not at a higher temperature to avoid running them for longer and using more propane, she added.

Damage from frost depends both on how extreme the frost is and how far along the vines are in the growth cycle, MacLeod said.

“The real danger is if you lost the whole shoot. Each shoot in a vine has two to three clusters. So if you lose the entire fruit you’re losing your potential harvest down the road.”

Rain and possible frost is not atypical for this time of year, she said. “Because we’re coming out of a drought the last few years, we’ve gotten accustomed to not having spring rains. But we’re thankful for any rain we get in California.”

“One of the things about growing grapes in Napa seems to be you’re always adjusting,” she said.

While not truly threatening now, persistent rain and frost could become more damaging during bloom, the next step of the vines’ growth cycle when the berries and clusters that will one day become the grapes that make Napa wines first appear.

“That’s when rain is really challenging because that can knock off some of the flowers and have not as good set for your clusters,” she said.

Warmer and drier conditions are forecast through the weekend.

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