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Napa's grapegrowers, more than halfway through with harvest, recount a 'smooth' season

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Scenes from harvest earlier this season. Growers said mild conditions allowed for a smooth harvest and precision farming.

Sarah Anne Risk

Napa's growers are, on average, about 75 percent of the way through this year's harvest, the Napa Valley Grapegrowers said at their annual harvest press conference.

During Tuesday's conference, which was livestreamed via Facebook, the group said this year's harvest had gone smoothly, citing the absence of bad weather.

The conference was moderated by Napa Valley Grapegrowers CEO Jennifer Putnam and featured Allison Wilson, the director of vineyard operations for Cliff Lede Vineyards, Jon Ruel, CEO of Trefethen Family Vineyards, and Erin Bright Russell, a partner at Rancho Chimiles. Discussion topics ranged from growing conditions and yield to assessing climate change and labor supply in the industry.

Ruel, who described the pace of the harvest as "calm," said the size of this year's yield had allowed Trefethen to be selective with its harvest.

"This was another vintage where the grower was really in the driver's seat," he said, adding that Trefethen is about 90 percent through harvest. "We got to go block by block – even vine by vine, thinning out grape clusters in the field rather than sorting through them in the winery."

This year's harvest was punctuated by county-wide two-day blackouts last week, the product of PG&E's public safety power shutoffs. Even so, the consensus was that the harvest had nonetheless gone positively. Bright Russell said that the outages hadn't impacted Rancho Chimiles' harvest schedule, adding that the wineries they had delivered to all had generators.

Wilson said this season's mild conditions had been favorable for growers. "We had extra hang time to develop the flavors," she added.

One of this vintage's signatures will be lower acidity, Ruel said. The acidity levels in the grapes lowers during warmer nights, he said, noting that Trefethen had moved quickly to harvest some of its blocks before acidity levels dropped further. He said the vintage would be flavorful and "soft on the palette."

The growers also discussed their respective labor forces – the three vineyards each have in-house crews of various sizes – and climate change as it impacts the industry. Bright Russell mentioned research demonstrating the carbon-neutral and even carbon-negative qualities of vineyards; Ruel spoke of the use of cover crops, which he said could also play a role in the carbon-neutral or carbon-negative footprint of a vineyard.

Cliff Lede Vineyards finished taking in fruit from its estate vineyards and growing partners on Monday, according to Wilson.

"We're excited to see it through the fermentation process and get that wine into the bottle," she said.

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