

California's droughts sometimes make better wine - but they're bad for the industry overall. Here's why

By Esther Mobley

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This year is shaping up to be a very dry one in California. Coming off of an already-dry 2020 — the third-driest year on record since 1895 — the state has gotten only a fraction of the precipitation it would need to replenish water supplies. Even with some possible rain on the horizon soon, experts say it's unlikely to make a difference in the overall situation.

In response to the deepening drought conditions, this week Marin County's water agency became the first in the Bay Area to announce water-use restrictions for nearly 200,000 residents. On Wednesday, Mendocino and Sonoma counties were next after Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a drought emergency for the areas. More cuts could be on the way, the State Water Board has warned.

For California's winegrowers, the dry conditions present a complex set of questions. Wine quality doesn't always suffer during drought years — in fact, it seems clear that certain wines can actually be improved by drought. But you won't find any winemakers out there rejoicing. They're expecting the drought to severely diminish grapevines' yields, reducing the amount of wine they can make and sell.

Not to mention the fact that this year's extremely dry landscape promises a scary wildfire season ahead of us, as my colleague J.D. Morris has reported.

"It's August levels of water down there," Napa winemaker Steve Matthiasson told me earlier this month, referring to the groundwater in his vineyards. Normally, by this time of year, there should have been enough rainfall that the soils would be fully saturated, but instead his tests show that the water levels go only a few feet down.

Napa has about 50% of the water that its vineyards really need, according to Kaan Kurtural, an associate specialist in cooperative extension in viticulture with UC Davis. That tracks with other parts of the state, too: Cris Cherry, owner of Villa Creek Cellars in Paso Robles, says his vineyard has gotten about 14 inches of water so far this year, half his area's historical average.

Like a human who's uncomfortably thirsty, a grapevine in drought conditions may simply have less energy to spend, resulting in a crop that's smaller than usual. "If we didn't have a big rain, we know the vines are not going to set a lot of crop," Cherry explains. "If a vine normally sets 20 clusters (of grapes), maybe it sets 16 smaller clusters instead."

No one in the business of selling wine wants to see their product inventory slashed, of course. But on the bright side, dry years have resulted in delicious-tasting wines in the past. The last drought cycle produced two of the most celebrated vintages in recent California history, 2013 and 2014. "What you see in drought years is concentration," Cherry says: Less fruit, but maybe more intensely flavorful fruit.

The other piece of good news is that grapevines handle drought a whole lot better than other types of plants. Many winegrowers here, including Cherry, practice dry farming, meaning they don't irrigate at all, relying solely on what falls from the sky to water their vines. Years like this one really put dry farmers' commitment to the test, but Cherry says it would take a bigger crisis than this year's to get him to change course. The vines are not in danger of dying.

"Our water footprint is awfully low compared to other crops, and grapes are more drought resistant," says Kur-

tural. Whereas almonds need about 4 acre feet of water to grow in California, he says, grapes demand only about 1 to 1.5 acre feet.

To put it clearly, Kurtural says: “Grapes are still the most efficient permanent crop in California.”

That’s not to say people aren’t worried. All that deliciously concentrated-tasting fruit could be a moot point if wildfires result in widespread smoke taint concerns, as they did in 2020, when many California winemakers found some or all of their crop ruined.

And regardless of how wine fares in any given year, the longterm implications of these drought cycles do pose a serious threat to the state’s wine industry. California has always cycled in and out of drought; that’s a normal part of the climate, says Matthiasson. But he believes the cycle has sped up, which is worrisome.

“In 2013, we felt like, OK, we’re in a drought, this will last for a couple of years and then the rain will come back,” he says. “But it’s come back a lot sooner than we thought it would.”

Kurtural is less concerned about wine regions close to the coast, like Napa, Sonoma and Paso Robles, than about the Central Valley, the true workhorse of California’s wine industry, including areas like the San Joaquin Valley. “In 20 years, it’s possible Napa could look a little like the San Joaquin Valley,” Kurtural says. “That would be OK. They’re still growing grapes there and doing a good job.”

But in that scenario, he continues, “What happens then to the San Joaquin Valley?”