Australia: drought then frost

12 Nov 2006 by JR

The Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation, unusually, sends the following report, entitled 'Individual pain, but Australian wine sector coping with drought and frost':

A cruel combination of drought and frost is causing heartache for many individuals in Australia's wine industry but wine drinkers should see virtually no difference in the year ahead, according to the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation.

Corporation chief executive, Mr Sam Tolley, said Australia will still have plenty to offer from all its known regions and across all styles and price points.

"The three biggest growing regions, the Riverland in South Australia, the Riverina in New South Wales and the Murray Darling areas that straddle NSW and Victoria which between them produce 60% of our wine grapes, are predicting minimal losses at this stage," he said. "The industry as a whole is resilient and still very productive, and we are expecting the quality to be as good as ever for next year's vintage. A little more rain before then would be good, however."

Late-season black frosts primarily hit cooler climate regions with the Coonawarra/Padthaway wine regions in South Australia as well as the States of Victoria and Tasmania reporting the greatest losses. Wine regions such as McLaren Vale and the Clare Valley in South Australia were also affected sporadically. [So the regions with the biggest glut seem likely to see the least crop reductions and vice versa, Shame. JR]

Mr Tolley said the full impact will not be known for some time as the season still has a long way to go before it is complete and growers have been able to assess how much secondary growth has occurred. The likely impact on the national vineyard, totaling about 150,000 hectares, in the 2008 season also can then be assessed.

"Despite many predictions we simply can't put a number on it at this stage," Mr Tolley said. "Australia's 62 wine regions are very different and we are getting varying reports on how they have been affected and how quickly they are bouncing back. In some areas re-growth started quickly, but in others it may be too late."

The lack of rain has been more widespread – most of southern Australia is affected by one of the worst droughts in living memory. Most grape growers have efficient irrigation systems and are able to water effectively, even where water allocations have been cut by governments. The situation will need to be continually monitored on the basis of future changes to water allocations.

"As with the frosts, different areas cope differently because of their individual conditions, the varieties of grapes they grow, and how long the drought has lasted," Mr Tolley said. "Overall though, we are expecting a good quality harvest next year, if possibly a smaller one after three above-average years in 2003, 2004 and 2005 which averaged around 1.9 million tonnes."

Mr Tolley said a continuation of the drought could have more serious impacts in the future, however, particularly if water allocations are more severely restricted and this year's secondary buds, which will fruit next year, have had a hampered beginning.

The Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation is the Australian Government statutory authority responsible for the global Wine Australia marketing program, regulating Australian wine exports, collating and analysing Australian wine sector statistics, assisting Australian wine producers and exporters with trade access issues, and defining and protecting Australia's wine regions.

Nov 20: *Tim Kirk of Clonakilla writes:*

Some difficult news.

On Thursday morning last week we suffered severe frost damage from the Antarctic air mass that settled across much of South Eastern Australia.

A frost this late is completely unprecedented. And unspeakably depressing.

We have lost at least 80% of our crop here at Clonakilla. In many blocks it is close to 100%. A couple of the higher Shiraz and Viognier blocks had somewhat less damage.

I can replace the SSB, Riesling and Cab Merlot with fruit from other local growers. I can't replace the Viognier or Shiraz Viognier which are necessarily estate grown.
If we make 20-30% of our usual amount of those two wines we'll be doing well.

One bright spot is that Young hasn't been affected so there will be plenty of Hilltops Shiraz out of 2007.

Insurance from Canberra frost risk was a key reason for our developing the Hilltops brand in the first place. Thankfully the Hilltops Shiraz has been hugely successful for us in its own right, so we now produce a significant amount (not far off 4000 cases out of 2006, for example).

So fear not, I will still be able to feed my children.

The other positive note is that 2006 was a wonderful and bountiful vintage for us.

I may yet release my secret project out of 06: a straight Clonakilla Syrah. I think Jean-Louis Chave should be very nervous...