Northern California vintages

3 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

2012 in California was a banner year, providing a useful exception to the short crops experienced so widely elsewhere. Ideal growing conditions seem likely to have produced the best vintage for decades. Virtually all varieties seem to have thrived. Quality with quantity at last.

2011 Miserable conditions made for a very challenging harvest, with mildew and botrytis rife in Napa and Sonoma. Volumes are therefore low for the second consecutive year, with the best quality only found where growers managed to pick ripe fruit before the rainstorms in October.

2010 A very cool start to the season, then sudden heat in August followed by torrential rain. The net result is greatly reduced yields, but some very good quality wines in a more restrained, higher acidity and lower alcohol style than the Californian norm.

2009 Good initial impressions of the fruit, with widespread reports of awesomeness, according to the winemakers, despite a very rainy end to the growing season giving rot problems to many.

2008 Sonoma's earliest harvest, and very early throughout northern California.

2007 Harvest began early, mid August in the warmer regions, then a cool September slowed ripening to a crawl, allowing physiological maturity to catch up with sugars. October warmed up, and most had their grapes in before late-October rains. Elegant, balanced wines are expected. Yields down 15 to 25 per cent.

2006 An unusually cool, wet growing season forced growers to drop substantial quantities of rotten fruit and pushed the harvest back to November. Far from a banner year, though the fruits of strict selection may surprise us.

2005 The first of two cool, damp vintages, although sugars accumulated at an even pace, and there is some restraint and good acidity in the wines.

2004 A switchback vintage with a particularly cool spring and an unusually hot summer leading to an exceptionally early harvest. Very heterogeneous.

2003 Rushed vintage as everything ripened at the same time after heat spikes followed rain and a cool May. Reduced crop.

2002 Summer started cool and continued very dry - quite exceptionally dry - so that the ripening process simply stopped and growers had to bite their nails through September waiting for anything like ideal ripeness. As in Europe, a difficult vintage, but for very different reasons.

2001 A respite for growers plagued by unusual conditions in both 2000 and 2002 with most varieties ripening evenly when expected, although some Cabernet vines shut down in August. A coolish September was a boon.

2000 Long, late, 'European' vintage thanks to an unusually cool, wet summer. There were very real concerns that Cabernet Sauvignon would never ripen in some vineyards. A particularly good year for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

1999 Very late, dry, cool growing season which depended crucially on ripeness being boosted by a late September heatwave. A late rush resulted in many varieties ripening simultaneously leading to a short, extremely pressurised harvest. Some luscious Cabernets were made as a result of the relatively new preoccupation with extended 'hang time'.

1998 The cliffhanger vintage that was as late as 1997 was early. Wines tend to lack stuffing, although some Cabernets took on surprising charm after 10 years in bottle.

1997 Early, generous harvest of widely admired wines with all varieties ripening at once. To drink now.

1996 Small crop of relatively lightweight wines, most of which should probably have been drunk.

1995 Yet another region in which a warm, dry autumn and late harvest saved the day after a difficult growing season. Reds, especially Zinfandels, may be even better than 1991. Small quantities pushed up prices, however.

1994 Generally compared to 1991, the slow ripening benefited the reds especially.

1993 Erratic growing conditions reduced eventual yields. A mixed bag.

1992 Plenty of good reds and whites, with Merlot, then increasingly fashionable, a highlight.

1991 A long growing season reflected in unusually fragrant, complex wines, with Zinfandel strong.

1990 A modest-sized crop, the top Cabernets and Chardonnays rivalled 1985.

1989 After autumn rains, poorly drained sites suffered, and many picked too early. Variable, especially the whites.

1988 A cooler summer yielded light, charming, early-maturing wines.

1987 A mixed year, but marvellous Zinfandels and Cabernets.

1986 Only slightly inferior to 1985 and successful for all varieties.

1985 Outstanding: elegant and stylish with the balance to age well.

1984 A very hot year, the whites faded long ago but you can still find the odd lovely decadent red.