

Yarra - the official view

12 Feb 2009 by Dr Tony Jordan

Here's a statement just issued (so recently that it is dated tomorrow) by Dr Tony Jordan, president of the Yarra Valley Winegrowers Association, keen that the 2009 Yarra vintage should not be seen as a write-off.

Fires throughout Victoria that started on 7 Feb have been an unprecedented disaster and tragedy in terms of the loss of life with nearly 200 deaths, particularly in the forested mountain areas north of the Yarra Valley. Damage has been extensive and the effect of the fires will be felt in human and economic terms for years to come.

This statement focuses on damage to vineyards, wineries and the grape crop in the Yarra Valley due to the fires and to the recent above-average hot weather. Some comments that have already appeared in the press and internet services have greatly exaggerated the impacts of the fires on wine and grape production in the Yarra Valley, this statement attempts to redress this.

Area impacted

About 25% of the Yarra Valley viticultural area was directly threatened or impacted by grass or bushfires.

The areas of the valley affected were in the north west and include St Andrews, Diamond Creek, Steels Creek, Dixons Creek, Chum Creek, Yarra Glen and the Coldstream area. Other areas (southern side of the valley and the Upper Yarra) were unaffected. The main bushfire damage and the large number of deaths occurred mainly in the forested areas to the north of the Yarra Valley although seven people died in the Steels Creek area.

Vineyard damage

From information to hand so far, the Yarra Valley Wine Growers Association estimates that 80 ha (200 acres) of vineyards have been damaged or destroyed. There will be no crops harvested from these vineyards in 2009.

Given that the area under vines in the Valley is about 3,000 hectares, 80 ha represents about 3% of the planted vineyard area. Thus the impact on the total grape crop in 2009 is not large. In saying this, the YVWGA recognises the considerable personal and financial loss to individual vineyards that have been damaged.

Property and asset damage

Roundstone winery / restaurant complex in the Steels Creek area was destroyed.

Punt Road winery in the Coldstream area lost a machinery shed but there was no damage to the winery.

Domaine Chandon winery experienced external damage to two warehouses due to a spot fire in storage crates outside the warehouses. The winery, visitor's centre and administration buildings were not affected.

Immerse winery lost three accommodation buildings and a barn.

Smoke taint

Because there was a wind change from northerly to southerly only hours after the fires commenced on Saturday 7 Feb, the valley has been kept largely clear of smoke and thus there is not expected to be any smoke taint in wines produced from the 2009 harvest.

Tests this week on juice samples show that there is smoke character in grapes from fire damaged vineyards. These grapes won't be harvested.

Similar sampling from a number of vineyards across the valley that were not fire damaged (97% of vineyards) showed no smoke taint.

Crop loss due to unseasonal hot spell in the weeks before the fires

Yarra Valley vineyards were variously impacted by the hot spell two weeks before the fires. Upper Yarra Vineyards were virtually unaffected but some on the valley floor suffered losses up to 15% due to vine stress and direct sunburn on bunches. Across the whole valley the crop loss due to heat is not expected to be more than 5% and the quality of wines is expected to be very good. [Got that? JR]

Business back to normal

Harvest has started and most wineries are operating normally and are open to visitors. Wineries are concerned that the public will have the wrong picture of the valley after the fires and not visit. Much of the valley is unaffected and wineries are looking for their support and hoping to welcome them.

Summary

The impact of the disastrous and tragic fires on Yarra Valley vineyards and wineries has been far less than might have been expected.

About 3% of the Valley's crop has been lost to fire.

About 5% of the Valley's crop has been lost to hot weather that preceded the fires.

Smoke damage is not expected to be a problem in the 2009 vintage wines.

Quality of the 2009 vintage is expected to be good. Grape intake for 2009 vintage is proceeding.

Consumers can expect good quality and adequate quantity from the 2009 Yarra Valley vintage.

Most wineries are again operating normally with grapes being crushed and they are open to visitors.