

Foothill wineries working hard to keep frost from vines

By Kathryn Reed

PLACERVILLE – As winter lingers at Lake Tahoe, grape growers at lower elevations in El Dorado and Amador counties are hoping spring weather becomes the norm.

Most of the vineyards are still dormant, with the Chardonnay grapes just beginning to bud. It's that bud break combined with freezing temperatures that can destroy a harvest.

Thin-skinned grapes like Pinot Noir are more vulnerable to inclement weather, too. Cabernet grapes tend to survive nasty weather because they bud late.



No frost damage on these El Dorado County vines.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Madrona Vineyards owner-winemaker Paul Bush has been posting regularly this month to Facebook about the cold temperatures. An April 12 post says, "On the drive home, I did happen to see a wild dogwood tree blooming. Technically, it did snow on the dogwood today. And if you believe the old wives' tale that

once it snows on the dogwood it won't freeze again in the spring, then we should be in the clear. I must say I am not superstitious, but I've never seen this wives' tale to fail."

Bush has a weather station in his Placerville vineyards. He keeps a close eye on air and leaf temperatures, and wind speed.

Raymond McKay at Chateau Rodin said buds were not coming out 3.5 weeks ago when he pruned. The Chardonnay is now beginning to push – which means the green is coming out.

The earlier vines are pruned, the earlier budding occurs.

"One advantage to being on a slope is you have constant air drainage. Frost only does damage when it's still," McKay said. He has 17.5 acres in Placerville.

That's why vineyards in low lying areas or in valleys often use wind machines to stir the air so frost can't settle on the vines. Frost can cause damage at about 31 degrees after about 30 minutes. It's the hours of 3-5am that are most worrisome as the mercury falls to its lowest point.

Amador County has the low Shenandoah Valley. Wind machines are more apt to be whirring there than in El Dorado County. With so much Zinfandel planted in both counties, those hearty vines are doing fine. No reports of severe damage have come in.



Boeger's grounds are in full bloom.

Greg Boeger said he and his colleagues in the wine business wouldn't begin to breath easy until the second week of May when the threat of a freeze should be long gone.

"It's been really exciting," Boeger said of the spring weather. He owns Boeger Winery in Placerville. "For the most part to date we have dodged a bullet."

He's been running sprinklers on the higher elevation vineyards to protect against frost. Sprinkler systems raise the temperature in the vineyard.

Charlie Jones, vineyard manager at Lava Cap Winery, said, "During a hard frost late in the spring, a winery could lose half of its fruit or more."

Rain isn't a concern; it's the temperatures.

Richard Stading, owner-winemaker at Auriga Wine Cellars in Camino, is hoping all the moisture will mean a bountiful harvest like what occurred in 2005, 2007 and 2009.



Richard
Stading

"A lot of white wines will probably come in early. The reds will probably be good if we wait," Stading said.