

'11 vintage has winemakers apprehensive; '10 looks OK

By Kathryn Reed

SOMERSET – Take a bottle of Zinfandel from any two years and they won't taste the same. In large part that is because the weather wasn't the same those two years.

While winemakers can work some magic with fermentation and blending, Mother Nature plays a huge role in what comes out of the bottle. But there is usually a consistency in flavors from an individual winery. The exception plays out with extreme weather. The 2011 vintage may just be that exception. The answer will be known down the road.

With the last two years being wetter and cooler than normal, many wineries in El Dorado County are certain the flavors will be less fruit-forward than years past. And the number of bottles will likely be less for 2011 because some of the grapes could not be harvested.



Wineries are hoping the 2012 harvest is better than a year ago.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

The area received 60 to 70 inches of rain the previous two winters. About 26 inches have fallen this winter. Pam Miller with Single Leaf Winery said 30 inches is what the vines like to have.

“We lost an enormous amount of crop last year,” Miller told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Zinfandel, which by the ton is the No. 2 grape in El Dorado County behind Cabernet, has a thin skin. Bunch rot can set in quickly. Then the season is over.

“I’m very reluctant to speak of 2011. Some is OK, some will take a lot more cellar work,” Single Leaf winemaker Scott Miller said.



Scott Miller, right, of Single Leaf talks about his wines with Pam Valentine and Tom Ward.

However, both Millers are excited with how the 2010s are coming out. Some started to be bottled a couple weeks ago. The Zins won’t be released for three years, but the Barbera will be out late summer.

“Our ’10s are just spectacular,” Pam Miller said.

Elliot Graham at Busby Cellars told *Lake Tahoe News* the 2010 and 2011 vintages are not going to have big fruity flavors.

“2010 and '11 are different than any (before) because it never got warm,” Graham said. “So, it will be a different style.”

He is starting to bottle some of the 2010 vintage.

At Skinner winery the 2010 Mourvedre was being poured during the first weekend of Passport – the annual two-weekend wine tasting put on by El Dorado Winery Association. Only 800 acres of this varietal are planted in California, with 3 acres belonging to Skinner.



Elliot Graham of Busby is cautiously optimistic about 2010 and 2011.

“We are excited by the '10 whites,” Chris Pittenger, Skinner winemaker, said. “They are pretty elegant wines.”

He’s in the process of doing blending trials with the reds.

Pittenger isn’t sure how the 2011 vintage will fare, but said with the similarity of weather to 2010, it might be better than people anticipate.

John Latcham, winemaker at Latcham Winery, is optimistic what ends up in the bottle from 2011 will be good, but he shakes

his head thinking about what it took to make it through the harvest.

“Last year was a devastating year to the wine industry. We were picking between raindrops,” Latcham said. “We literally handpicked every bunch.”

That takes time and is an expensive process.

His crew was out there regularly putting down a mildew spray. But the rains came and just washed it away. It became a daily application.

The most upbeat winemaker was Rich Rorden at Cantiga.

“I’ve never witnessed a bad year, just differences,” Rorden said. “If all the wines tasted the same, we would be Gallo. The weather always plays a role, but the grapes always ripen.”

Facts from El Dorado County’s 2010 harvest (the most current year available):

- \$4.9 million, the total value of grapes based on average open market prices
- 2,200 acres of wine grapes (this is twice the acreage of 12 years ago)
- \$1,279, average price per ton of wine grapes. This was a slight increase compared to 2009.
- 4,700 tons, amount of wine grapes grown.

Info:

Tickets are still available for Passport by going online. They are \$70, which includes the whole weekend – April 21-22. Thirty-two wineries are participating. The event is 11am-5pm each day.

