

# Vineyard managers expect early grape harvest



The wine grape harvest is expected to be early this year in El Dorado County. Photos/Kathryn Reed

**By Kathryn Reed**

PLACERVILLE – Coming off one of the warmest Julys on record, a June that saw several triple digit days and an August that has a forecast for the 80s later this week – being a winemaker can cause one’s head to spin or the need to open another bottle to take off the edge.

No one said growing grapes was easy. Mother Nature makes sure of that.

But with all the heat that has been absorbed by the grapes in El Dorado County, it’s looking like the harvest will be early this year. And that means some of the white varietals will be

picked this month.

What the end result will be remains to be tasted.

The last time temps were like this was in 2007. And oenophiles remember that year for California wines – especially the reds. There are not enough positive superlatives for many of those bottles.

Wine is big business throughout the state. In 2012, the grapes were worth \$3.2 million, which became \$34 billion worth of wine.

Debbi Bogen, tasting room manager for Fenton Herriott Vineyards in Placerville, told *Lake Tahoe News*, “This is going to be a phenomenal harvest. Everything is perfect. The grapes are looking fantastic.”

Veraison is already occurring. This is the “onset of ripening” when the grapes begin to turn red.



Veraison – when grapes turn red – is happening at Fenton Herriott and other vineyards.

Vineyard managers will soon start to use a refractometer to check the brix – or sugar content – of the grapes. It must be at a certain degree for optimum flavor. The brix changes. So

one day a vineyard might be ready to pick and the next it isn't.

With the slope and elevation variations of many vineyards in the county, it means the harvest can be staggered. It already is when it comes to varietals. And depending who grows what where, the "normal" time to harvest already varies.

Mari Wells Coyle, winemaker with David Girard Vineyards in Placerville, said it could be the third week of August when the first grapes are picked.

"The warm weather is helping grapes that grow in this climate," Coyle told *Lake Tahoe News*.

But too much heat can be a problem. That stops the grapes from continuing to ripen.

Diane Stading, co-owner of Auriga Wine Cellars in Placerville, said there were seven days in June when the mercury topped 100 degrees, with one day hitting 114.

"The heat has not been nice to us. They won't take up water when it's 100-plus degrees," Stading said while pouring wine on Saturday.

She said this could lead to there being no canopy to protect the grapes, which causes the grapes to be burned by the sun and shrivel like a raisin.

Auriga typically starts harvesting at the end of September, but this year it's more likely to be early next month.

At Narrow Gate they've been known to pick a vineyard twice if clusters don't come in evenly. While it's twice the work, their philosophy is quality is of the utmost importance. The Viogner was picked in stages last year.

Besides dealing with the heat this summer, the valley that Narrow Gate sits in in Placerville sustained a major frost on

May 24 that overall damaged 35 percent of its vines. It took out at least 50 percent of the Primitivo.

Most vintners point to 2010 and 2011 as being difficult years because of the coolness that delayed the ripening process.

Two years ago Fenton Herriott was wrapping up its harvest as snow was falling.

If the grapes crack they are useless because mildew can ruin the fruit.

With the harvest expected to be early, it also means a lot of bottling is going on now to free room for the next vintage to begin its fermentation process.