

Drought forces early grape harvest

By Jennifer Chaussee, Reuters

DAVIS – At the University of California's prized winemaking institute near Sacramento, a sleek metal wine crusher on Thursday morning let out a deep rumble and began to shake, jostling grapes made sweeter by the state's ongoing drought into sticky juice.

Dry conditions have made this year's crop ripen early, and winemakers across the state are picking and crushing their grapes weeks ahead of the usual harvest time as the lack of water has caused them to ripen faster than usual.

The early harvest has stoked winemakers' concerns that ongoing drought conditions could pose a serious threat to wine quality next year, since grapes that ripen too fast can become too sweet for winemaking.

The grape crop has mostly been protected, as many growers have managed to spend extra cash on underground well water to protect the quality of their vines. But well water is an expensive and limited resource, and underground wells throughout the state are becoming drier.

Already, this year's grapes have reached their peak sweetness faster than last year's. If the trend continues, it could be difficult to make good wine with the 2015 crop.

California is the fourth-largest wine producer in the world and brings in more than \$60 billion in state revenues each year.

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