

How El Niño is impacting the wine industry

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In 1998, heavy rains hit California mid-winter in what was described as one of the strongest El Niños to date. It caused flooding, abnormally high waters, and multiple storms that led to substantial damage. That year, the wine was different, too.

Winemakers at the time prepared for what they knew was going to be a rough year. Vineyards, indeed, do need rain. But extreme, uncontrolled, and prolonged showers are hard on any crop – especially so for wine grapes. Sure enough, after the 1998 vintage was bottled and sampled, critics furrowed their brows: The wine was different, less bright, and simply not as good as years past. The likely scapegoat was the strong El Niño, but was this climate phenomenon really to blame for a lackluster vintage?

In 2016, the West Coast faces a similar reality. Yet again, 'tis the season of El Niño, aptly named with a Spanish flair for its arrival's proximity to the birth of the central figure of Christianity. The impending severe weather may be welcomed with more open arms than in the past, due to the drought in California. But the change in weather patterns will yet again affect how crops develop and transform into consumable goods.

The effects of an onslaught of winter rain are hard to predict for this year's wine crops. Harsh weather conditions could forever besmirch 2016 vintages, or rains could revive parched soils. We asked the leading wine and climate experts what havoc this winter could wreak.

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