

Sonoma County: The 2022 vintage report

A warm vintage in 2022 was the early verdict in Sonoma County. As one of the country's most diverse and varied wine regions the reality is much more complicated than that. Sonoma correspondent, Ana Carolina Quintela offers her verdict on the wines of the vintage.



Ana Carolina Quintela
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The 2022 vintage in Sonoma was quickly labelled as a 'hot year', a designation that often suggests boozy, fruit-bombs – overripe and oversimplified, with a narrative that sells the vintage short.

Warming trends



Occidental Vineyard in spring. Credit: Clive Pursehouse.

Yes, the brutal Labor Day heatwave in early September had some growers panic-picking as temperatures spiked past 115°F (46.1°C), even, surprisingly, at cool-climate sites along the [West Sonoma Coast](#).

While it's natural for extreme weather events to grab the headlines, a vintage story is rarely defined by a single week.

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That character becomes even more apparent after previewing some of the 2023s, which revealed a lighter, more ethereal side of the region, almost the polar opposite of 2022 by comparison.

Looking at the 2022 vintage as a whole, it wasn't, unfortunately, an abnormally warm year when viewed in the context of steadily rising temperatures over the decades.

Statewide, average annual [temperatures have increased](#) by approximately 2.5°F since 1895, with the rate of warming accelerating in recent years.

In other words, growers in Sonoma have become practised at handling increasingly warm conditions. However, it's important to note that 2022 felt even warmer when contrasted with the following 2023 vintage.

So to understand how the wines still achieved such depth and intensity while maintaining balance that vintage, we need to look beyond the heatwave and consider a few key aspects of the growing season that set the stage.

Autumn rains turn to a dry winter



Jasmine Hirsch of Hirsch Vineyards.

The winter was indeed drier than average, but early rains in October 2021 proved to be a saving grace. That month brought California its third-wettest October since 1895, delivering above-normal precipitation across much of Northern California.

Those rains were crucial in replenishing parched soils after the summer and providing the vines with the reserves they'd need to face the challenges ahead.

So when January and February followed with almost no rain at all, vintners understood that the end-of-the-year moisture had helped sustain vine health through what might otherwise have been a far more punishing start to the season.

As the season progressed and vines pushed through bud break, spring brought its own set of challenges.

There was frost in some areas, particularly in the Russian River Valley, followed by cool, erratic, windy conditions during flowering that disrupted fruit set, especially on the West Sonoma Coast.

'Flowering started at the wrong time, it dragged on, and there was a lot of shatter,' detailed Ted Lemon from Littorai.

The difficult weather conditions during springtime resulted in dramatically lower yields across Sonoma, especially for Pinot Noir crops (while Chardonnay managed to dodge the worst of it), down as much as 55% in some vineyards, particularly at Hirsch Vineyards in Cazadero.

And for producers like Hirsch, the dramatic drop in yields meant slashing production volumes.

'The San Andreas Fault Pinot, for example, we normally make around 3,000 cases of this wine; that year, we made only 1,000 cases. Same for the Maritime Pinot, one of the most affected vineyards; we were only able to make around 126 cases,' said winemaker Jasmine Hirsch.

A stark reminder of how unforgiving a challenging spring can be – and how resilience and quality often come at the cost of quantity.

The heat spike and picking decisions



Tom Rochioli has seen nearly 40 vintages making wine in Sonoma County. Credit: Kim Carroll.

Then the final test of the September heatwave arrived, forcing some growers and winemakers to make tough decisions.

‘It was definitely a year where you had to know your blocks. One of those vintages where vineyard experience really mattered,’ said Tom Rochioli of his [Russian River Valley](#) vineyards.

‘If you knew how to handle it – irrigation timing, canopy work, choosing which fruit to drop – you could still make elegant wines.’

In 2022, winemakers faced the dilemma of either picking fruit earlier than ideal or leaving it to hang a little longer, risking some heat damage. That was a standard narrative that year in Sonoma.

Rochioli’s opinion is that, ‘people who reacted too fast, picked everything in a panic, probably lost out on some flavour development.’

Some growers and producers believed that the vintage required distinct strategies for each vineyard. ‘We didn’t treat all sites the same,’ said Ted Lemon.

At Littorai, some sites were picked before or through the heatwave, while others were deliberately held back. Though it was risky, the fruit wasn't ready by his standards.

His philosophy is that the readiness of each vineyard trumps any uniform, defensive picking strategy. As ever with Littorai, 2022 reinforced the value of site-specific farming and thoughtful winemaking.

'The thing that's most extraordinary about '22 to me is that we never saw the "raisining". It was load after load of perfect fruit. And that's shocking,' Ted added.

'One thing about Littorai: people always think that we always pick early. No – when it's time to be patient, we can be really patient. More patient than anybody.'

The impact of site specificity

In the Alexander Valley, an AVA where Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon are a significant part of the plantings, Stonestreet Estate Winery offered a unique perspective on how site-specificity influences harvest decisions.

'Here, we got everything in before that heat event,' explained Chris Jackson. 'But you have to keep in mind where we are, especially in a warmer vintage. And with the low yields from spring, ripening happened even faster.'

The decision to pick before the extreme heat also reflects Stonestreet's broader philosophy – one increasingly shared by other Cabernet producers in Sonoma, particularly in high-elevation sites like Stonestreet's own vineyards in the 'soon-to-be-designated' Pocket Peak AVA and the [Moon Mountain District](#) – prioritising freshness and restraint over pure opulence.

Despite the challenges of the vintage, and perhaps because of them and the discipline they demanded, the quality of the fruit that came in was remarkable, and growers from all parts of Sonoma were almost unanimous in their praise.

'Honestly? I think the wines turned out better than people give the vintage credit for,' said Rochioli. 'It's not a desired cool year, sure, but we kept the sugars in check and got good flavour concentration. Some really pretty fruit, actually.'



Chris Jackson of Stonestreet. Credit: Jackson Family Wine Estates

Ana Carolina's conclusion

The added punch that the vintage lent to the grapes shows up in the wines in a variety of ways.

In wines that are typically light and delicate, like Hirsch's West Ridge Pinot, you can taste a little more weight and an interesting and welcoming depth that falls outside its usual nature.

Or there's the 'aromatics on steroids' version of wines such as Occidental-Kistler's Bodega Headlands Vineyard – Cuvée Elizabeth; more full than usual with lovely florals and crunchy red fruits.

In contrast, wines that tend to lean 'bigger' showed a new sense of balance within their style in 2022 – likely the result of more conservative picking decisions and meticulous sorting.

This was evident in several wines from Aperture Cellars in Alexander Valley and Williams Selyem in the Russian River Valley, where savoury elements and nuanced complexity stood out over pure fruit notes.

The 2022 vintage makes for a fascinating comparison with 2023, and it's a tasting exercise worth doing now, as these wines continue to age and evolve.

Side by side, they tell a clear story of two very different growing seasons, two very different moods of Sonoma.

Where 2023 is starting to reveal all lightness and lift, 2022 brings depth and density, yet still with balance. It's a reminder of just how much range this region – and its winemakers – can deliver, even when the weather throws them a curveball.

Sonoma County vintage 2022: A selection of 25 wines



Far Mountain, Montecillo Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Moon Mountain, Sonoma County California, USA 2022

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Beautiful forest aromas beguile from the Far Mountain Montecillo Cabernet, perched nearly 2,000 ft (600m) along the ridge that divides the Napa and Sonoma appellations. Bergamot and fir tips, wild blue...

Points 95