

THE 2019 NAPA VALLEY VINTAGE IS EXCEPTIONAL, THANKS TO IDEAL GRAPEGROWING CONDITIONS

BY JESS LANDER

In winemaking, an uneventful year often translates to a good year, leading to some very beautiful and memorable wines.

That was the 2019 vintage in Napa Valley. Uneventful. Normal. Smooth. The growing season moved along swimmingly without interruptions from frost, fire or other unwelcome weather events.

As for the wines?

Famed wine critic Antonio Galloni of *Vinous* called 2019 another “stunning” vintage after 2018 with wines that have “a bit more depth and energy” than the year prior.

Ryan Knoth, winemaker at Sinegal Estate Winery, used similar language in predicting that the 2019 vintage “will be a stunner, as the wines have picked up amazing depth and nuance in barrel.”

“There appears to be a good consistency of quality, from bottom to top,” wrote Lisa Perrotti-Brown in her 2019 Vintage Report for Robert Parker’s *The Wine Advocate*. “Take advantage of 2019 while it lasts.”

It won’t be long before consumers finally have a chance to experience this “stunning” vintage firsthand, as wineries will begin releasing the 2019 reds this fall. The wines will also be a major focus of Premiere Napa Valley in February 2022, but until then, here’s a look back at the 2019 vintage and what you can expect from these wines once they arrive.

SMOOTH SAILING



Left to right: Seven Apart winemaker Andy Erickson, general manager Yannick Girardo and assistant winemaker Patrick Nyeholt.



Rombauer Vineyards winemaker Richie Allen.



Sinegal Estate Winery.

THE 2019 GROWING SEASON

Two factors made 2019 a smooth and even growing season: rain and minimal extreme heat events.

“The beginning of the 2019 growing season was defined by copious rainfall and late soil moisture,” says Aaron Pott, winemaker at Fe Wines. “The vines started their season with plenty of water in reserve.”

This was a complete turnaround from 2018, when there was virtually no rainfall during the late winter and early spring. Most of the 2019 rainfall came in February, when Napa Valley saw an average of 16 inches, but there was also considerable rainfall in January, March and April.

As in all agriculture, water is one of the most important components of growing a quality and bountiful crop. While winemakers can still produce great wines from a vintage that’s lacking in rain, precipitation is always welcomed with open arms while the vines are dormant and beginning to awaken for the next growing season. Rain is like a head start that gives the vintage a nice little advantage out of the gate.

Bud break kicked off slightly earlier than normal due to warm March temperatures and there was even some late rain in May. Sometimes, this can be cause for concern, as the buds are starting to flower (this looks like bunches of tiny flowers sprouting from the vine, which if fertilized, will turn into berries). Flowering is a very delicate stage in the grapegrowing process, so heavy rain

or hail has the potential to destroy the flower before it can set and develop into a hard and protected berry. Luckily, the May rains didn’t damage the 2019 crop.

Knoth describes the year’s rainfall as “just enough precipitation.” The 2019 rains helped to grow healthy cover crops and feed the soils with ample nutrients, which in turn grew healthy vines and grape clusters. But the rain also pushed the vine canopies—consisting of the green foliage (vine leaves and shoots) that grows out from the vine, in addition to the fruit—to grow early and vigorously.

One of the most important jobs of a viticulture team during the growing season is management of these canopies to keep the vine in balance. If the vine is more focused on growing the foliage, for instance, it’s not giving enough attention to ripening the berries (or allowing enough sunlight to break through), so vineyard teams go in and essentially trim back these canopies to allow for the best possible ripening environment.

Moreover, having too much fruit can affect quality as well, so sometimes growers will drop some of the clusters to ensure that the berries they do crush come harvest are nice and concentrated for wines that burst with rich flavors.

This is all to say that in 2019, canopy management was where vineyard teams across Napa Valley truly shined to produce an incredible vintage.

“With the good winter rain, you had to be on point

“WITH THE GOOD WINTER RAIN, YOU HAD TO BE ON POINT TO MANAGE CANOPY GROWTH AND CROP LOAD. ... IT WAS KEY TO THE PRODUCTION OF HIGH-QUALITY WINES.” —RICHIE ALLEN, WINEMAKER, ROMBAUER VINEYARDS

to manage canopy growth and crop load,” recalls Richie Allen, winemaker at Rombauer Vineyards. “We had to be on top of moderating yields through careful thinning at times. It was key to the production of high-quality wines.”

“The crop needed to be controlled via canopy and crop management strategies for each specific site to achieve optimal success,” confirms Patrick Nyeholt, assistant winemaker at Seven Apart. “Timing and strategies really set this vintage apart.”

As usual, the summer was warm and dry—just how vintners like it—but winemakers and growers across Napa Valley held their breath at the potential threat of extreme heat events or, worse, fires. Harvest started about a week later than in 2018, according to Knoth, and winemaking teams, many without a backup generator, battled several planned power outages from PG&E, which were put in place to prevent wildfires.

A nuisance, yes, but Napa Valley winemakers have proved their resilience time and time again. “Some of the harvest and winemaking conditions in 2019 were not ideal, but if there were harvest trade-offs to be made because of the power outages, they do not show in the wines,” wrote Perrotti-Brown.

Ultimately, the 2019 vintage was a model year, and Pott uses the word “ideal” to describe it. The grapes enjoyed a nice, long hangtime, which means that vintners had the luxury of picking the grapes when they reached their optimal ripeness. “There was no pressure from heat to harvest early,” says Pott.

“In hindsight, we would all love another 2019,” says Allen. “Everything went along as it should.”

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE 2019 RED WINES

Across the board, Napa Valley vintners are very excited about how the 2019 vintage is evolving, both in barrel and in bottle. One of the most common sentiments is that there is a notable “purity” of the fruit that reflects Napa Valley’s stellar terroir in the glass.

The 2019 red wines are poised to make a big first impression before the nose even hits the glass. Knoth describes the 2019 reds as “some of the darkest and most colored red wines I’ve made in a long time.” Pott says that aromas are “fresh and intense without being prune-like or stewed.” This is the result of the rain and the absence of high-temperature days.

On the palate, these wines are extremely expressive and fresh and have moderate to high tannins but are “polished,” says Knoth, while Nyeholt refers to them as “plush and approachable.” Allen suggests



Sinegal Estate Winery winemaker Ryan Knoth.



Fe Wines winemaker Aaron Pott.

that the vintage is “very classic Napa in structure,” which will enable these wines to stand the test of time—though they are approachable now, if you simply can’t wait. As for acidity, it’s moderate and a little less than 2018, “yet still balanced with the fruit and tannins,” he says.

Translation: These wines are simply outstanding.

Nyeholt predicts that this class will be one for the books. “In terms of a vintage, we think the 2019s will be a standout, along with the 2018s, as one of the best vintages of the last decade.”

To see Napa Valley vintage charts and recaps since 1990, visit nrvv.li/mg12-winetasting.

Jess Lander is a freelance wine, food and travel writer based in Napa Valley. Her work has appeared in Decanter, Wine Enthusiast, VinePair and The San Francisco Chronicle.