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Winegrowing for a Warming Planet

Our beautiful region is blessed with diverse microclimates and an unsurpassed array of grapes that we can grow well. But as members of the agricultural community—a highly climate-sensitive industry—we understandably receive many questions about how we are affected by extreme weather events and a shifting climate. The short answer is that yes, we are deeply affected. But it is not as hopeless as it may sound.

For more than a decade, the wine industry has been studying the phenomenon of climate change and its impact on wine growing. Globally, all wine regions are (or will eventually be) affected by a rise in average temperature. However, not all regions are impacted equally or in the same ways. In Napa, for example, increasingly severe heat waves are taking a toll on the cabernet for which it is so well known, suggesting a future in which this grape might no longer reign supreme. In contrast, vineyard plantings in once-too-chilly southern England are now booming, producing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay of a quality that might eventually rival those of Burgundy. For Willamette Valley in Oregon, the warming climate is a mixed bag. While the increased average temperatures have brought more consistent ripening in some grape varieties, they pose a challenge to Pinot Noir—the grape for which the region is best known. The higher alcohol and softer acidity that come with a warmer growing season are not as well suited stylistically to this grape.

What affects wine growers more drastically are the extreme temperature spikes and dips that accompany the shifting patterns. For example, the Okanagan Valley in BC recently lost two entire vintages due to record-breaking cold snaps, while enduring the threat of heat-fueled wildfires in the summers. We can relate, as we lived through what we refer to as the “years of fire and ice.” El Dorado vineyards experienced catastrophic crop losses during the Caldor Fire of 2021 due to smoke taint, and then again in 2022, this time due to heavy frost during the April bloom. As we’ve learned, with sustained heatwaves comes an increase in frequency and scale of wildfire. And while frost has always been a foe of the farmer, the earlier that vines come out of dormancy due to heat, the greater the risk of a killing frost.

But when the going gets tough, the tough get going. These new challenges are bringing about an explosion of research and innovation. Great strides are being made on understanding how to prevent or fix smoke taint. As an industry, we are learning to address drought by becoming more water efficient. Some vineyards are introducing new technologies, such as Stag’s Leap’s installation of overhead misters to cool the vines during heatwaves, thus protecting their legacy Cabernet. UC Davis is studying the temperature resiliency of different cultivars, and growers are experimenting with planting warmer-climate or heat-resistant varieties such as Tempranillo. (Here is where New World wine regions can be nimbler than the older, more tightly

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controlled appellations in France and other parts of Europe, where they are limited by strict rules around varieties, blending and watering.)

As winemakers, perhaps our biggest challenge is phenolic ripening and balance in our grapes. Hotter growing seasons mean earlier harvests and less “hang time” for phenols (molecules responsible for aroma) to fully develop. It also means higher sugars (and therefore higher alcohol), and lower acidity. There was a time when our wines would generally “make themselves.” The warm days and cool nights would ripen the fruit to perfection, with excellent acidity and phenolic development. We can no longer depend on this. Increasingly, we find ourselves reaching into our winemaking arsenal to coax the wines into balance, adjusting acidity and experimenting with subtle blending to the extent that our minimal intervention philosophy permits. It can be challenging, but it also forces us to grow and hone our skills. We feel a sense of accomplishment that through the challenges the seasons have thrown at us, we have been able to maintain the quality and character of our wine. All in all, we feel hopeful about the future of our region and industry, which possess an abundance of the creativity and innovative spirit required to adapt to change.

Included in your shipment:

2020 Verdelho, Sierra Foothills

Harvest Brix: 23.2 pH: 3.65 TA: 6.00 Alc: 13.6% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases: 206 Aging: 1 year in stainless steel

With summer approaching, we thought it would be fitting to offer a second round of this unique, limited-release Portuguese white varietal. Grown in neighboring Shenandoah Valley and made in our classic, fruit-forward style for the dinner table, this wine is medium-bodied and dry, with lush lychee, citrus and apricot fruit. Verdelho is a heat-loving white that thrives in our region.

2019 Grenache, Estate

Harvest Brix: 25.4 pH: 3.93 TA: 5.07 Alc: 14.9% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases: 294 Aging: 2 years in mostly neutral European oak

Our Estate Grenache is another go-to as we move into spring and summer. This medium-bodied Rhone varietal is pure, balanced, lively and floral with lush strawberry notes. Our region is known for growing ultra-premium Rhone-style wines, where late-ripening, heat-loving Grenache gets ample “hang time” to develop its distinctive flavors and aromas.

2015 Library Syrah, Baby Rattlesnake Vineyard

Harvest Brix: 26.4 pH: 3.82 TA: 5.30 Alc: 15.4% RS: 0% ML: 0%
Cases: 225 Barrel age: 3 years in mostly neutral European oak barrels

We are delighted to include a “library” offering of one of our favorite vintages of Syrah! Its rich blackberry fruit blends with notes of chocolate, bacon and smoke. This one is developing beautifully with age. A grape that is well-adapted to hot climates, Syrah particularly shines in areas like ours that have broad diurnal temperature shifts.

NOTE: Professional Winos also receive a 2011 Library Syrah , and Ambassadors of Oenos also receive a 2011 & 2012 Library Syrah.