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Article

The amazing resilience of wine grape vineyards

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The amazing resilience of wine grape vineyards[☆]

As wildfires raced through Napa Valley and Sonoma County in October 2017, many newscasters forecasted the destruction of the vintage and even of the region. But as the famous writer, Mark Twain, was reported to have said, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” The same held true for the northern California wine region, because, within a matter of a few weeks, the majority of the nearly 1000 wineries in the region were open again for business and encouraging tourists to return. Furthermore, since more than 95% of the grapes had already been harvested, the drop in production was minimal.

Probably the most amazing aspect of the terrifying experience, however, was the role that the vineyards played. With hundreds of fire personnel and first responders flying in from around the nation to help control the blazes, they discovered that, in many cases, the vineyards served as natural firebreaks. That is, when the fire would reach the edge of a vineyard, it would burn the first few rows, and then stop. This happened many times, with the vineyards actually protecting houses, buildings, and other structures, in some cases. In other situations, vineyards that were established higher on the hillsides, served as firebreaks for oak forests or grasslands. This feat, though not unknown to viticulturists and other scientists, was surprising to many members of the community, who, after the wildfires, came to view vineyards in a more positive fashion than they may have before the frightening event.

Indeed *University of California Davis* research proves that grape vines are very hardy (UC-Davis, 2017). If not burned too badly, the vine can recover and produce grape clusters again the following year. Leaves that were covered in smoke will not impact the quality of the wine the following year, because grapevines naturally drop their leaves and grow new ones. The few existing clusters that had not yet been harvested were tested for smoke taint, with some wineries rejecting the grapes if issues were found, or reassigning them to a less expensive wine that could benefit from a slightly smoky flavor, such as syrah-based blends.

Statistics show wildfires had limited impact on wine industry

Though the images portrayed around the globe by news media, illustrating raging fires destroying wineries and houses, were horrifying; when the wildfires were finally contained, the actual statistics show there was relatively little impact to the local wine industry. According to a *Wildfire Impact Study* (SSU, 2018), conducted by the *Wine Business Institute at Sonoma State University*, which surveyed more than 200 vineyard and winery owners across the five impacted counties, the only negative statistic was a slow-down in wine tourism. Some of the highlights of the study were:

- 99.8% of vineyard acres (138,937 of 139,204) in the North Coast region were unaffected by the fires
- 99.5% of the total crop value was recovered (based on calculations using 2016 crush report).
- 93% of wineries (950 of 1025) were unaffected by the fires in terms of structural damage or long-term impact.
- 90% of affected wineries and grape growers reported that vineyards would not need to be replanted or replaced, and of those that do, most would be less than 10 acres.
- 71% of survey respondents reported an immediate drop in tasting room traffic compared to the same period last year, although this trend started to recover by November 2017.
- 62% of respondents reported a drop in tasting room sales compared to the same period last year.

Luring wine tourists back after a crisis

The northern California wine region is not the only one that has faced the challenge of luring wine tourists back after a natural disaster. New Zealand and Chile faced the same issue when many of their wineries were destroyed by earthquakes. French wine tourism was negatively impacted after the Paris and Nice terrorism attacks. This issue is a critical one, because wine tourism is often the most important economic driver of these regions, employing thousands of people and supporting even more through the industry supply chain. More research in how a wine region can recover from a crisis situation is sorely needed.

[☆] A Letter from the North American Editor
Peer review under responsibility of Wine Economics and Policy.

As with other regions, northern California responded in very innovative ways. Napa and Sonoma wineries and associations launched fun and inspirational videos inviting tourists back, such as Castelo di Amorosa and Sonoma Strong. A multitude of fundraisers were organized to assist those who were impacted by the wildfires. Wineries reached out to wine club and mailing list members to reassure them that everything was fine (Thach, 2017), and social media networks were on fire with intense conversations of support. Wine lovers were encouraged to travel back to the region as a sign of care, and if they could not travel, to purchase a bottle of wine online or at their local wine shop – which many did.

Wildfires – the new normal?

What is probably more worrying than the temporary decrease in wine tourism and the destruction the wildfires wrought in 2017 is the fact that many scientists predict that there will be more frequent wildfires in the future. This is primarily due to global warming and the resultant impact of more radical weather patterns. Indeed while most international attention was focused on the wildfires in the Napa/Sonoma region, due to its fame as a world-renown high quality wine region, neighboring counties of Mendocino, Lake, and Solano were also impacted. The wildfires that ravaged southern California and the wine region of Santa Barbara a few weeks later did receive attention, but huge wildfires in Oregon and Washington State earlier in the summer of 2017, that covered vineyards with thick smoke for days, did not receive much media attention either. This means that wildfires raged up and down the West Coast of the US, and even into Montana and Idaho, destroying thousands of acres of land.

Though, to date, the wine industries of California, Oregon, and Washington have not grieved too much due to wildfires,

the potential of worse weather and fierce wildfires, brought on by global warming, could change that. And even though vineyards are resilient, and did in some places protect homes from being destroyed, the sad statistic of the October wildfires in Northern California is that 42 people lost their lives and 8400 buildings were destroyed (Nix, 2017). This indicates that much improved warning systems are needed to alert people of wildfire danger, and more action needs to be taken to alleviate global warming.

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