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Winemakers surprised as 2014 vineyards thrive in severe drought

By Luke Sykora Published 6:02 pm, Friday, August 21, 2015

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Field worker Eduardo Segoviano dumps out a bucket of Riesling grapes picked from dry-farmed vines at Wirz Vineyards in Hollister (San Benito County).

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Over the past year, you may have seen some version of the Map: Most of California is covered in a dark-red band indicating a state of "exceptional drought."

Right in the center of that dark-red "exceptional drought" patch, you'll find El Dorado County, where vineyards are increasingly making their mark amid the orchards and pine forests of the Sierra foothills. That's where Steve Edmunds of Berkeley gets the fruit for Heart of Gold, his annual blend of Vermentino and Grenache Blanc.

When you think about vines running out of water, you might imagine grapes turning into raisins on the vine. That's not exactly what happens. Instead, the vine will grow slowly, producing a tiny crop of small berries that might fail to ripen properly: not raisins, but rather underripe or unbalanced fruit.

Yet the 2014 rendition of Heart of Gold, grown in a drought vintage, is completely balanced and refreshing, the flavors tangy as pink grapefruit, with a pretty honeysuckle scent that lingers.

Toward the end of the 2014 season, Edmunds was visiting his foothills vineyards two or three times a week to keep an eye on them. He was surprised by what he saw. "The vines certainly looked perfectly happy: putting out big clusters, the canopies big and strong," he recalls. "They did not look like there was any major stress at all ... and interestingly, (the farmer, Ron Mansfield) did not do any substantial watering during the growing season."

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His theory about why the grapes from 2014 ended up being so balanced: A crucial spring rainstorm got the vines off to a healthy start. Then, as the water started to be depleted, the vines got the message that they needed to ripen fruit. Yet temperatures remained moderate, so as the grapes built intense flavors, the sugars stayed low and the grapes held acidity. Ergo, wines that show intense fruit driven by bright acidity, yet moderate in alcohol — a vinous trifecta.

It turns out that on the right soils and cultivated carefully, vines that are dry-farmed or minimally watered haven't just survived the drought, but thrived. Think of wines from those vines as windows into the drought itself, and into the adaptations that grapevines make to survive and even thrive with limited water.

Many red 2014s are still in barrel, but if you want to taste an early example of a completely dry-farmed wine from the vintage, you might check out the Y. Rousseau Colombard. It's made by Frenchman Yannick Rousseau of Napa, who works with a 40-year-old Colombard vineyard in the Russian River Valley. Colombard used to form the base of many cheap California jug wines, but Rousseau's a native of Gascony, the grape's homeland, and he thought he could make something interesting with it.

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"The vines are 42 years old now," he says. "They know how to get the water that they need. In 2014 the berries were smaller than usual. I think that's really the direct impact, a little bit, from the drought — Colombard berries can be really big. But we cannot say the vineyard really suffered from the drought yet. It's pretty amazing, because everybody expected a lower crop. And it didn't really happen."

His 2014 Colombard is crisp and crunchy, with a green streak that might bring to mind the freshness of cucumbers and Granny Smith apples. With a few friends and a dozen Kumamoto oysters, it might disappear in minutes.

Or you could try the 2014 Small Vines Rosé, a delicate, floral, salmon-colored wine from four Pinot Noir vineyards in the Russian River. It's made by Paul Sloan, who farms his vineyards organically, employing composting and winter cover crops to boost the water retention of his soils.

Strangely, Sloan found that he had to irrigate in rainy years like 2010 and 2011, whereas in 2014, he was able to dry-farm.

"What I see in those wet, rainy years is that you get worse root developments, which is critical to the support of the vine later in the year," he says. "In the drier springs we get this much better root flush. You think, 'It's dry, so we're going to have to irrigate more.' But actually, in 2014 we saw healthier canopies, and fresher and brighter wines."

Jason Haas of Tablas Creek has thought a lot about the drought during the past two years. His family farms a 120-acre estate in the limestone-rich hills of Paso Robles, where a county ordinance has put a virtual moratorium on new vineyards and other well-dependent developments. His three-part post about dry farming on the Tablas Creek blog is a must-read for anyone interested in delving further unto the complexities of vine spacing, rootstocks and rainfall patterns that surround dry farming in California.

One third of the vineyard is dry-farmed, and the roots are able to penetrate deeply into the fractured, water-retaining limestone bedrock. Ten years ago, they dug a trench in the young dry-farmed block, and the roots were already 10 feet down.

"The vines didn't look like they were on their last legs," he says of 2014. "Yes, you assume that now that we've had three years in a row of roughly half the normal rainfall, this has to show up somehow. But the vineyard looks great this year, too."

Meanwhile, for the parts of the vineyard that are irrigated, they've moved toward long, deep irrigations once or twice a year, training the roots to follow the water downward rather than staying near the surface waiting for another drink.

Tablas Creek's flavorful, juicy 2014 Vermentino — not dry-farmed, but minimally irrigated — is an early look at how, even in dry Paso Robles, the drought doesn't necessarily mean compromised wines.

So far, raising a toast to the 2014 vintage isn't a case of fiddling while Rome burns. Growers across the state report that grapevines seem to be holding up as the 2015 harvest arrives, tolerating the fourth parched year in a row.

For many vineyards 2015 has marked the earliest harvest on record. That's an oddity, but how much of that is directly related to the drought is an open question. Warm weather early in the year pushed everything ahead of schedule, while a warm summer kept the vintage speeding along. The crop is also

light, but that's mostly because cool May weather across the state interrupted grape pollination.

Almost all growers that irrigate have been able to find enough water — for now. Once again, thanks to careful farming practices, Yannick Rousseau's Colombard and Paul Sloan's Pinot Noir didn't receive a drop of irrigation water in 2015.

And that historically early harvest, potentially caused by the drought? "It's interesting to me that everyone is finding 2015 so early," says Haas. "For us, it looks like it will be at more or less normal, and definitely later than 2013 or 2014. Overall, the vineyard looks remarkably healthy.... The 2.6 inches of rain that we received from the remnants of Hurricane Dolores on July 19 has helped keep things vibrant, too. So, while we don't expect much fruit, what we're anticipating looks strong."

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