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Vineyard manager Geraldo Alfaro, right in orange jacket, removes stems and leaves from tubs of grapes being picked and dumped into a larger bin for transport on Sunday, Sept. 11, in Marcey's Vineyard on School Street in Calistoga. The vineyard is owned by Jack and Marcey Smith.

Heat spike sparks harvest activity

By Anne Ward Ernst
For the Tribune

Blistering temperatures last week put some nerves on edge in Calistoga's grape growing community, as vineyard managers and winemakers worried about what the triple-digit heat coupled with persistent drought might do to the grapes.

Jack Smith, owner of Calistoga's Marcey's Vineyard, said he "was quite nervous" about the heat wave, but "I'm not disappointed by any stretch of the imagination" at the quality of the crop.

That sentiment was repeated by other winemakers and growers in Calistoga who reported relief that the quality of the grapes was uncompromised by six days of extreme heat.

Pete Velleno, winemaker at Castello di Amorosa, said they picked earlier than usual due to the high temperatures and saw that the berries had "started shriveling, raisining." They were concerned that the quality and balance — such as the sugar-to-acid ratio — wouldn't be up to their standards.

"But it's not going to be a problem. The cabernet (sauvignon) surprisingly

tastes really good. Even though the sugar levels are really high, the flavors are really great," Velleno said.

Tom Eddy of his eponymous Tom Eddy Winery has been making wine for more than four decades and said he doesn't remember a heatwave lasting more than a few days. Calistoga, known for its diurnal temperatures, didn't get the nighttime drops typical of the region, he said. Eddy reported vineyard temperatures on Howell Mountain reaching 120 degrees, and 117 in Calis-

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Harvest 3 and harvest
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Michael Baldacci, director of winemaking and vineyards at Baldacci Family Vineyards, said the heat pushed them to harvest a little earlier, too.

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istoga, but those high temperatures don't guarantee failure.

There is a "potpourri" of factors that can affect crop quality, including but not limited to age of the vines, farming practices, irrigation, location and variety. Younger vines, for example, don't have the root depth to find water on their own, making irrigation more important to them, he said.

Smith, who has had water diversion rights out of the Napa River since 1967, said the drought is a major factor, too.

"I've never seen the Napa River dry up before," he said.

Canopy cover helps protect grapes from direct sun exposure, and is a decision made during the season potentially at a time no one can know if a heat wave is coming.

Bill Dyer of Dyer Strain Wine Company said canopy cover protected his grapes from being desiccated.



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Vineyard workers harvest grapes on Sunday, Sept. 11, from Marcey's Vineyard on School Street in Calistoga. The vineyard is owned by Jack and Marcey Smith.

"The clusters that were protected by leaves looked good. Thanks to an optical sorter all individual berries that were negatively impacted were removed. So, we are optimistic regarding quality of the finished wine," Dyer said.

Irrigation, shade cloth, removal of sun-damaged fruit, and patience are paying off for Knights Bridge Winery, said Laura Kirk Lee, vice president of sales and marketing.

"I'm happy to report that we were very fortunate in Knights Valley since our grapes were not ready to pick leading into the heat wave. Over the past two days we have seen the fruit rebound with cooler temperatures," she said.

Those who did harvest ahead of schedule reported a slight drop in quantity, in part due to recent weather, and likely what happened earlier in the season.

"In terms of yield, our tonnage is down approximately 16 percent from our historical average," said Louise Pogg, of Pogg Winery. "The cold temperatures/frost in early May impacted fruit set and then the excessive heat last week caused shriveling across approximately 30 percent of our vineyard and some berry raisining — particularly in that portion of the site where the soils are quite gravelly/rocky and on the 'sunny-side' of the vines."

Pogg said a "normal" harvest is

late September with their latest ever starting on Oct. 5, 2019.

Smith's vineyard was picked earlier this week, which is a little bit earlier than a typical year and tonnage "a little below average," he said, adding, "The heat wave kind of sped up the timetable."

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"This year, harvest is the earliest it has been in my 10 years, and for a lot of winemakers across the valley that have longer experience than me," Baldacci said.

Smith said the bigger problem

in the vineyard this year was white flux.

"The whole valley had an infestation of them," he said. They get under the leaves and chew, leaving behind "big brown spots," Smith said he didn't realize how destructive the pests were until he saw the effects.

As climate change evolves, said Eddy, vineyard managers will likely adapt their farming practices, too. Established vines can withstand the heat and recover with cooler temperatures, but as evidenced this season, the berries can only handle so much heat before they begin to wither.

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Lopez-Ortega time to find and hire a new lawyer "who is more expert in this type of case."

Bossensmeder granted a continuance to Oct. 11 at 8:30 a.m. in his courtroom, and no further discussion was held.

Lopez-Ortega's appearance on Monday followed a preliminary hearing that took place on Sept. 2. At that time, judge Ella Ortiz was presented evidence from the District Attorney's Office that it said backed up the four felony charges filed against her last August following two separate incidents at the Cielos Care House where Lopez-Ortega was owner and administrator. The accidents involved the same resident, 80-year-old Terrence Ponsford, who suffered from dementia and lived in the facility full time.

After viewing several video clips showing interactions between Lopez-Ortega and Ponsford on June 29, 2021, and July 4, 2021, and after hearing testimony from both the lead investigator on the case and from Lopez-Ortega herself, Ortiz reduced the charges from the June accident to misdemeanors. However, she ruled that based on the evidence, felony charges were warranted in the July 4 accident.

Lopez-Ortega testified on Sept. 7 that she had known the victim for many years as a resident of Calistoga, and that when his dementia worsened, at the request of his wife she agreed to take him in at The Cielos. She said she was very difficult to handle at times, becoming combative, harassing other residents and causing and making racist comments at her and staff. She said she never intentionally tried to hurt him, rather she was just trying to control him and keep him from hurting her or others in the home.