

Weather

## Rains are right on time for winegrowers

By Carmela Guaglianone | Examiner staff writer | Jan 11, 2023 Updated 8 hrs ago

As sheets of rain and hail pounded parts of San Francisco Tuesday, Michael Baldacci, owner and winemaker at Baldacci Family Vineyards, looked out his window at the renowned Stags Leap District in Napa County and saw his cover crops coming to life.

Although intense storms continue to wreak widespread damage across the state, the wet weather is a boon for winemakers, who have long been waiting for the rain.

"It just feels like we've been kind of praying for this," said Baldacci. "The rains really have been something that we've welcomed the last couple of weeks."

Had this storm surge come later in the season, vintners may have been whistling a different tune. But the grapevines are currently in their winter dormancy, a stage between harvest and bud break when the vine drops its leaves and goes into a protective mode for the winter months.

During dormancy, "all rain is good rain," said Justin Leigon, viticulturist and board member of the Napa Valley Grapegrowers.

That means there won't be any direct impact on the grapevines or the wine that they produce, said Megan Bartlett, a plant biologist at the UC Davis Department of Viticulture and Enology. However, wet and humid conditions could increase the chance for fungal disease later in the season.

For the most part, all this water is priming grapes for a healthy growing season by replenishing the soil with moisture and washing away salts that might have "built up around the roots from irrigation or fertilization deeper into the soil, away from the root," said Bartlett.

"During bud break, you want the soils to be drying out and warming up. You don't want them to be flooded or waterlogged," said Leigon. "But early season, winter rains like this allow us to have nice healthy canopies after bud break. The soils are able to provide the water that's needed."

Bud break, when dormant buds start to wake up and green shoots begin to emerge on the vine, usually begins between March and April. Rains this early on in the season won't have much of bearing on when bud break happens, said Leigon.

"Part of the bud break process usually involves the soils warming up and draining, but that's far enough out that it's at this point that it's really inconsequential."

The timing of bud break is usually determined by the type of weather the region gets in February and March. And as these unexpected rains have proven, weather is getting less predictable and more intense as the climate changes.

"Weather systems have been a bit more extreme in recent years," said Leigon. "But it's hard to pinpoint how that might be related to any sort of shifting of the climate."

What can be predicted from these rains are happy canopies and plenty of vigor, or overall growth of shoots, grapes and leaves, said Baldacci.

Healthier canopies act as a "sugar factory" for the grapes, said Leigon. Fuller leaves support photosynthesis as the fruit ripens later in the season. Typically, these early season rains also support a fuller yield. The challenge for growers will be maintaining a balanced vine.

The county has seen more than 20 inches of rain in the last 30 days, a stark contrast to the last four years of severe drought conditions, said Linda Ong, a public information officer for Napa County. Like San Francisco, Napa County has experienced heavy winds during the recent storms, but no vineyard damage has been reported to the county so far.

"Winds vary from one location to the other in the county," said Ong in an email to The Examiner. Winds on Mt. St. Helena or other high elevation sites could reach damaging speeds, while the valley floor remains far less affected.

That valley, about 30 miles long and a few miles wide, boasts much of Napa's wine growing region. It's bisected by the Napa River, which is running flush with rainwater these days, said Baldacci.

The rain also has helped "fill the ponds and reservoirs, and the vineyard soils are saturated now. So that's great to see being at the full water holding capacity," said Leigon.

It's a relief for winegrowers who have had to be stingy with their water use during the past several dry years. The rains are recharging aquifers and bolstering wells, giving wine growers more freedom to irrigate when necessary. In dry years, irrigation may start in early to mid February. With a wet winter, growers can potentially wait out the whole growing season.

"We're always mindful of irrigating," said Baldacci, "because we don't know when we're going to draw on that last bit of water."

With more storms forecasted, Baldacci is considering how best to make use of the resource. On his properties, that means making sure wells are cleared to gather rain and irrigation lines are free of leaks.

"We're extra careful with all the water that we do have," he said, making sure "that it's not being wasted."