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Lamorinda Nouveau - First Impressions of the 2011 Harvest

By Sophie Braccini



Photo provided by Bill Scanlin

years old."

Susan Captain of Captain Vineyards has been a keen observer of the local grape and wine markets for some time. The industry's grape production was very light this year, she said, "Grapes in general were in demand and wineries were scrambling after growers for their grapes...normally it is the other way around." She added that Captain Vineyards harvested five and a half tons of grapes this year, down from eight tons last year. "For us, dry farming and the nature of the year did affect our quantity, but, I believe the quality will be amazing," said the enthusiastic winegrower.

Deer Hill Vineyards' owner Bill Scanlin has been harvesting in Lafayette for more than 10 years. This year's harvest was 90% of his maximum. "Like last year, we had a cool summer and some early rain a couple weeks before we harvested," he said, "but the clusters were very nice, well formed and full, and the grapes tasted good. The sugar percentage was about 24, so we may have a little less alcohol- which is okay and in the right range anyway."

Dave Parker, of Parkmon Vineyards, may have been more impacted by the cold in Moraga, like the Captains. "Our yield was about 30% less than last year, and the sugar content is also lower," said Parker. "We had a damp and cool winter last year, the bud-breaking (when little leaves start appearing on the bare vine shoots) was two to three weeks late," he recalled, "with the cool and mild summer we fell further behind and by August 1st we were about one month late." Parker said became very concerned because he knew he would have to leave his grapes on the vines longer for them to reach maturity, at the risk of stormy weather in October. Luckily, warmer days finally arrived in mid-August and September that really helped the maturation process. "What we harvested is very high quality," said Parker, who is happy to produce wines that will have a lower alcohol content but more flavor. "As my palate develops I appreciate more this type of wine, closer to the European wines, and they go fantastically well with food."

According to industry predictions, less grapes and less wine mean higher prices. "If the market supports it, the price of wine will go up within 18 months to two years when we release these wines," says Parker. "Everybody in the area has seen a drop in quantity. The evolution of the market might also be impacted by how the climate affected the southern hemisphere; we might see more wines coming from South Africa or Australia." But Parker is not concerned for the Lamorinda growers. "Beyond the appeal of drinking a local wine, our products sell well because we win a lot of prizes, including gold medals, at blind-tasting events," says the winemaker.

The monthly gathering of local winegrowers and friends on December 15 was a cheerful affair, and despite the cold weather guests drifted between the courtyard and warmer interior of the Moraga Barn, the women in festive holiday attire and men in casual chic.

Local wines were tasted, many of them made from the 2011 harvest, the wine 'nouveau' - by reference to the Beaujolais nouveau, the French wine ritually sold mid-November, two months after the harvest. Although 2011 has been reported as a bad yield year in the neighboring Napa Valley due to cold weather, the mood of Lamorinda winegrowers did not appear to be dampened.

Carol Haag was not the last winegrower to brag about her first 'Nouveau' at the Lamorinda Libations that night. "This is our first 'Nouveau' and our first wine," said the Moraga resident and owner of Rheem Valley Vineyards-Haag lost her harvest to raccoons last year but was able to bring in 700 pounds this year.

"My harvest this year was better than last year," said Mary Leigh Miller, who produces wine under her Bare Ash label, "2010 was my first harvest; my vineyard is only three



Photo provided by Susan Captain

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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