

## SNOW on WINE



## A TRIPLE THREAT TO HARVEST 2020

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Imagine trying to harvest possibly “smoke-tainted” grapes, during COVID-19 with socially distanced grape pickers in face masks, as rescue crews rush to evacuate winery personnel from wildfire endangered homes nearby. That is the reality of harvest 2020 in some specific areas of West Coast wine country.(2)(3)

The problem is smoke affecting the grape skin, and in white wine production the juice and skin are separated before fermentation. So, white lovers need read no further but pity the poor lover of reds. *“Smoke taint occurs when grapes are exposed to wildfire smoke which releases aroma compounds called volatile phenols that can be absorbed into the skin of the grapes and bond with the sugars inside to form glycosides. Once the phenols bond with the sugars, the smokiness cannot be detected by taste or smell. But during the grapes’ fermentation, the glycosides are broken down and the smoke can once again be detected,”* is how James Herrera succinctly summarizes the problem. Vintners can’t tell by tasting grapes whether their quality warrants picking. An expensive proposition if one later finds the wine badly tainted. As Jason Smith, owner of Valley Farm Management in Salinas describes, *“...it may smell OK but the back of the mouth gets the ashtray...”*(3). But never fear my beloved red drinking friends, for *“consumers will never taste it,”* says Eva Dehlinger, vineyard manager at Dehlinger winery in Healdsburg.(6) Because of course winemakers would pour it on the ground first, and at considerable cost.

One sophisticated wine lab, ETS in St. Helena, California, and Healdsburg, Oregon, can measure glycosides from grape samples, but alas they have a 6-8 week backlog(2)(3)(4)(5) For grape growers and wine makers there is real cost both to NOT harvesting good grapes (since crop insurance only covers about half the costs up to harvest) or harvesting bad grapes and thus adding further cost which now can’t be recovered (3). Some winemakers are now fermenting small batches of grapes, or what is now called, “micro fermentation,” which helps them decide in a timely fashion to pick or not pick. And all my sources, academic, press, and industry agree that the problem is site specific. Primarily limited to vineyards near fires with dense fresh smoke and long exposure. One rare exception is in Monterey, according to Jason Smith, who *“...estimates that overall in the Santa Lucia Highlands, 75% to 90% of those wine grapes may be rejected because of smoke taint”*(3). And there are dramatic examples of spur-of-the-minute decisions to harvest. Willamette sparkling wine, a growing part of production, requires earlier crush. At Hillsboro’s Ruby Vineyard, the winemaker pressed such grapes the morning after winery owners Steve Hendricks and Flora Habibi were evacuated from their nearby home threatened by the Chehalem Mountain-Bald Peak fire...even as aircraft overhead were dropping water to fight the fire.(2)

So, it is the red wine which is at risk, because grapes are able to tie- up the foul “smokey” flavor chemicals in their skins, and it is skin contact during fermentation which again releases the “ashtray” taste into the wine. Most affected vineyard areas will be identified, and the grapes left to hang, although some uncertainty still exists. This may decrease the supply of 2020 red wine, and perhaps market forces will raise prices a bit, but red wine is in oversupply already. But I do derive some comfort that I am a person with many “untainted” red bottles in my cellar.

### References

- 1) Snow on wine, “Smoke Taint”, Dr. Jeff Snow, Spokane Ecological Society, Wineminder, October 2018.
- 2) “Will wildfire smoke damage the 2020 Willamette Valley wine harvest?”, Emily Teel, Salem Statesman Journal, Sept 12, 2020.
- 3) “Smoke taint threatens Monterey County wine grapes; Clock ticks on harvest as growers wait for lab test results,” - James Herrera, Monterey Herald, Sept 12, 2020 & Sept 14, 2020.
- 4) Personal interview with Lori Mueller of Mueller Winery, Windsor, California
- 5) Personal interview with Judi Scherrer of Scherrer, Sebastopol, California
- 6) Personal interview with Carmen Dehlinger of Dehlinger Winery, Sebastopol, California