

Pour Decisions

By Brett Chappell

Vintage vagaries

With a few exceptions, a wine's vintage refers to the year in which the grapes used to make the wine are harvested. Vintage began to play an important role in wine collection with the invention of the long-lived cylindrical glass bottle. Before bottles, merchants received, stored and sold wine from barrels. They were partially drained and then backfilled to inhibit oxidation. This topping off created a solera system, or blend of vintages in a barrel.

Light, water and weather make up a vintage. Light is the source of most of the earth's heat in wine growing areas. In France, sunlight hours range from 1,600 to 2,700 per year. Slight variances in these hours affect the growth and ripening of the vines and grapes. Wine growers plant earlier blooming and ripening varieties like Pinot noir or Riesling in cooler areas with less sun hours.

A shot of warmth in the spring can bring the vine out of dormancy in a cool region, but returning cold and frost can be destructive. In 2021, French wineries overall lost about 30 percent of their crop to frosts. Earlier this year in April, Burgundy witnessed frosts after an early budding during a beautiful March. As of this writing, vigneron think losses were minimal but remain cautious until all chances for frost have passed entirely.

Ample sunlight before *veraison*, when grapes change to their ripe colors, is tolerable and desired. However, intense heat and sun after *veraison*, and closer to harvest, can cause sunburn and fruit degradation. For example, Europe's 2003 vintage was uncharacteristically hot. White grapes that were in the process of being harvested fared worse than the reds that needed longer hang time before *veraison*. The reds were not as developed when the heatwave hit.

Water is welcome just after fruit set and throughout the summer before harvest. At harvest time, though, rain dilutes the fruit's flavors and causes splitting and rot. If water should fall as hail, a crop could be ruined in a matter of minutes. This violent precipitation can rip leaves and knock fruit from the vine, leaving it to spoil on the ground. During the summer of 2021, after losing some crop to frost, certain regions of France saw historic flooding, and many areas suffered quick, three-minute hailstorms with egg-sized stones that destroyed entire crops.

The rest of the wine world is not without its own weather perils. The Southern hemispheres also suffer hail, thunderstorms and floods. Yet, some areas have natural safeguards against violent weather. Northern California's coastal and Mayacamas ranges protect the Sonoma and Napa valleys from storms, and any mention of frost or hail here is referred to as *freakish*. Drought seems to be California's nadir. Lack of rain creates dryness, and that creates fodder for wildfires. California has been consistently ravaged by wildfire in the 21st century. With historic fires in 2020 and 2021, some producers have lost nearly all, and those that produced have small crops and steep premiums.

Praising or damning an entire region's vintage harvest is painting with a wide brush. Vineyard aspect, topography and adjacency to a body of water can help mitigate or aggravate a poor vintage. The most important moderating factor in a weak vintage, though, is the vigneron. Winemakers assure growing the best raw material through vine training, optimal harvest time and intense grape triage.

Great winemakers will make good wine in so-so vintages. They tweak wine-making techniques to highlight the qualities of the harvested fruit. Some even

declassify what could be greater wine to a lower tier. Anyone can make great wine in great vintage; in tough vintages, you learn who the great winemakers are.

How does the wine buyer navigate this vintage chatter? 1. Do not discount any wine for any one vintage, nor discount the vintage for any one wine. 2. Enjoy the vagaries of the vintage. Wine is an agricultural product; it varies. *Vive la différence*. 3. Drink what is ready. Lesser vintages are great for drinking while the blockbuster years age. 4. Look for the best producers in bad years. They can't afford to sully their reputation. 5. Drink second level wines from great producers. They will contain good fruit that would be made into the best wine in a great vintage.

Brett Chappell is a French Wine Scholar, Certified Sommelier and Wine Educator. He and his wife, Jen, a Wine and Spirits Education Trust Level Two, own MF Chappell Wine Merchant in Atlantic Beach. Their website is MFChappellWine.com, and the phone number is 252-773-4016. In 2022, each month they pair a six pack of wines, an overview article, and a virtual meeting to a chapter or two of Karen MacNeil's The Wine Bible for a vinous world tour.



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PICK-UP DATES**
May 10, 31



**PKS RECYCLE
DATES**

"A" Week: May 9, 23
"B" Week: May 2, 16, 30

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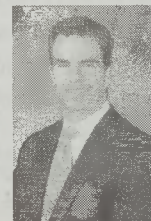
Please clearly mark recycling containers to ensure that recycling is not picked up by the trash truck. Stickers for this purpose are available at town hall. Contact Charles Rocci at town hall at 247-4353, ext. 13, or clerk@townofpks.com with questions.



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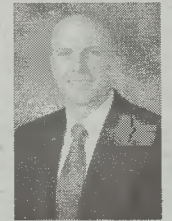
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