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10.14.2011

### El Dorado Wine Harvest Panning Out

Wacky season produces lower yields but ripe flavors

by Jane Firstenfeld



El Dorado wineries like Madroña Vineyards are hoping for warmer weather to continue harvesting varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon (shown here). Photo: Beiron Andersson

El Dorado County, Calif.—Sporadic but heavy fall rainstorms followed a cool summer, a spring freeze and a late snowstorm that blanketed high-elevation vineyards in late May, but the intrepid winemakers of El Dorado County resumed harvest this week. Barring further unseasonable weather events, many expect crush to be complete by month's end.

Sacramento, Calif.-based public relations pro Jolaine Collins reported last week that El Dorado winegrowers had started picking Chardonnay in mid-September, but harvest was interrupted by a drenching rainstorm Oct. 4, followed by near-freezing overnight temperatures that stalled sugar development. Rain returned unexpectedly on Monday, but temperatures have since rebounded to normal, with overnight minimums in the 56°F range in the Sierra Foothills.

**Lynn Wunderlich**, University of California Cooperative Extension farm advisor for El Dorado and neighboring Central Sierra counties Amador, Tuolumne and Calaveras, maintains a weather station. The Oct. 4 deluge brought 2.7 inches of rain, she said, "then it got cold." Yesterday, she told *Wines & Vines*, "It's looking good; beautiful and 80°F. We should start moving sugar again."

Fruit set was generally erratic, she said, because of frigid spring temperatures and problems with bud formation due to an also challenging 2010 season. Damage varied by variety, with Grenache grapes especially prone to shatter, and El Dorado's signature Zinfandel "spotty," depending on vineyard location. Looser clusters, Wunderlich noted, were, "in some way, a blessing," reducing threat of rots during the damp fall.

**Paul Bush**, winemaker/owner of 12,000-case [Madroña Vineyards](#) in Camino, farms 70 acres: At up to 3,000-feet, they include some of the highest elevation vineyards in the county. Yesterday he was pressing Zinfandel and sampling Riesling, Merlot and Petite Sirah grapes "like there is no tomorrow." Before the rain he harvested some Zin at 24.6° Brix, with 355pH and acid at .61, which, he said, "Should drop nicely with malolactic fermentation."

Phenolics are developing nicely, although before the rain, he said, his Bordeaux varieties showed greenish skins and high acid. Merlot has now ripened, and he planned to harvest today. "I think

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- **San Diego Chargers kick off**

**a Cabernet**

The San Diego Chargers teamed up with winemaker Anthony Bell of 15,000-case Bell Wine Cellars, Yountville, to release a limited edition Cabernet Sauvignon.

■ **Washington state promotes wine in India**

Winemakers from Washington state launched a marketing campaign in India during September. Winemakers hosted a series of trade tastings and winemaker d...

■ **Brock receives \$2.8 million for Ontario research**

Gary Pickering, Brock University Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute researcher, professor of biological sciences, psychology and wine sci...

■ **Aluminum bottles now legal in New York**

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■ **French oak mill celebrates 20th anniversary**

Tonnellerie Quintessence announced the 20-year anniversary of its French oak stave mill, Merrain International. Tonnellerie Quintessence aims for wood...

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6th Australian Wine Industry Environment Conf.

■ **October 20**

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11th annual Kohler Food & Wine Experience

■ **October 21-23**

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we'll end up picking on the lower side of normal Brix," he said, because the grapes are ripe, acids are dropping quickly. "If we have weather like this for two-and-a-half weeks, we might be done," he said, noting that in some seasons, harvest has lingered until Nov. 23.

**Summing up the season**

"What we're seeing is the culmination of the whole year's weather—everything is delayed, and the crop lighter than usual," said [Greg Boeger](#), president/vineyard manager at 20,000-case [Boeger Winery Inc.](#) in Placerville. "We got in maybe 30%-40% of our grapes before the first set of rains," including most of the Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Sémillon on his 95 vineyard acres.

Most of his Zin is also in, albeit with a lighter crop than usual. "I'd say the crop will be down by 20% overall—some varieties down 60%—because of the spring conditions," Boeger said. Although he's hoping to wrap up harvest by Halloween, "I'm afraid it will go well into November."

"It's going along, but slow, in a holding pattern," [Jon Latcham](#) said of the crush at 8,000-case [Granite Springs Winery](#) in Somerset. Latcham is VP of vineyard management, farming about 50 acres. "Whites came in just fine: Sauvignon Blanc at 24°Brix and Chardonnay at 23°Brix."

About one-third of the crop is in, including some Zinfandel and a little Merlot. "We had a little bunch rot in the lower ends of fields where water holds a little more," Latcham said. Rounding up and keeping crews has been more difficult than usual. "It's hard to schedule when it's off and on," He said.

"If everything goes according to plan, we'll finish next weekend—if I can keep the guys going and the weather holds. That's what I'm shooting for."

Or, as farm advisor Wunderlich said, "Pray for more sunshine."

According to WinesVinesDATA, there are 74 bonded and virtual wineries in El Dorado County. For more information, visit [El Dorado Winery Association](#).

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