



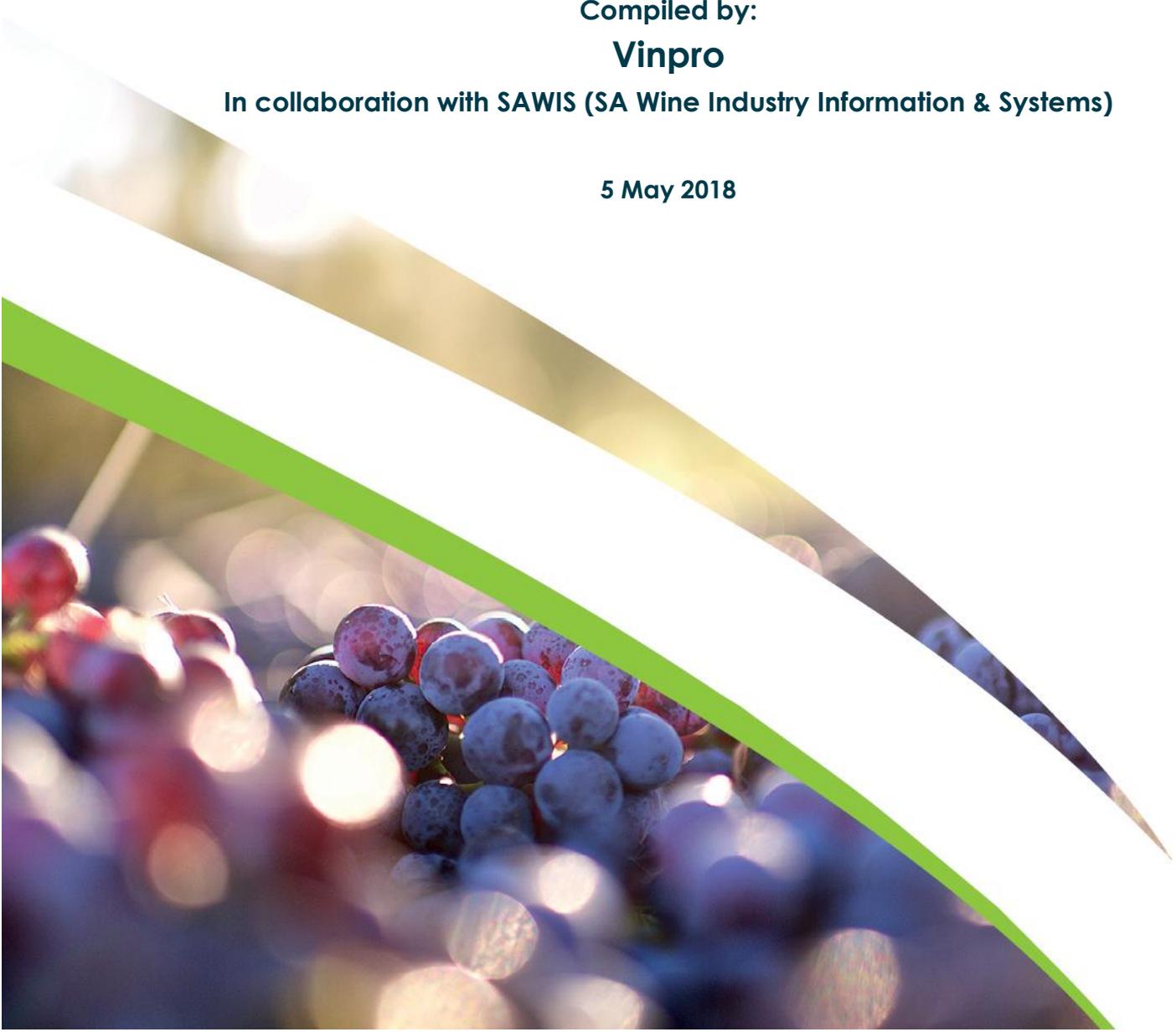
SOUTH AFRICAN WINE HARVEST REPORT 2018

**Big challenges in the vineyard,
big surprises in the cellar**

Compiled by:
Vinpro

In collaboration with SAWIS (SA Wine Industry Information & Systems)

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I INDUSTRY OVERVIEW

SA WINE HARVEST 2018: BIG CHALLENGES IN THE VINEYARD, BIG SURPRISES IN THE CELLAR

Wine grape producers and cellars in South Africa are positive about the quality of wines from the 2018 harvest, despite challenging conditions resulting in one of the smallest crops in more than a decade.

According to the wine industry body Vinpro, the 2018 harvest, that is at 1 220 920 tonnes, 15% smaller than in 2017, was initially expected to be even smaller.

“The 2018 harvest season was really challenging, due to a prolonged drought which some believe to be the worst in 100 years, and accompanied by water restrictions and frost damage in some areas,” says Francois Viljoen, manager of Vinpro’s viticultural consultation service.

All regions except the Breedekloof reported a smaller wine grape crop, with the Olifants River region being hit hardest due to a water allocation amounting to only 20% the region’s normal allowance from the Clanwilliam Dam. In addition to water shortages, some vines in the Breedekloof, Worcester and Robertson areas were affected by frost damage in September and October 2017. The Northern Cape region, where water supply was sufficient, also had a decrease in production as vines recovered poorly from frost damage earlier in the season.

The dry weather throughout the season did have its advantages as vines were healthy, with little or no pests and diseases being recorded in most regions.

“The South African wine industry is already very diverse due to the variation in climate and terroir between the respective regions. But this year it was exceptionally difficult to generalise as the conditions would differ significantly from one region, and even one farm, to the next, depending on access to water, the prioritisation of other crops on the farm and how the vineyard was managed to cope with the drought,” said Francois.

The amount of grape bunches looked promising at first, but the berries were much smaller than usual, which affected the total tonnage. “Smaller berries usually have good colour and flavour intensity and this, along with cooler weather during harvest time relieved some pressure on vines and bode well for quality,” says Francois.

“We feel very positive about the prospective quality of the grapes from the 2018 harvest as this is one of the most important issues that we are focusing on as an industry,” says Siobhan Thompson, CEO of Wines of South Africa (Wosa).

“It is imperative that the standards of the wines we sell both locally and abroad can compete with that from the rest of the world. It shows true character, not only in the quality of our terroir, but also from our winemakers, to adapt and overcome such challenging conditions in order to remain viable,” she says.

“I take my hat off to South African wine grape producers and winemakers for adapting their practices in the vineyard and cellar to decrease the effect of the water shortages. We hope that the 2018 winter breaks the drought and that the vines will recover sufficiently in the run-up towards the 2019 wine grape harvest,” says Francois.

South Africa is the eighth biggest wine producer world-wide and produces about 4% of the world's wine. The wine industry contributes R36 billion to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and employs nearly 290 000 people.

Total crop size:

The 2018 wine grape crop is estimated at 1 220 920 tonnes according to South African Wine Industry Information and Systems (Sawis) at the end of April 2018. This is 15% lower than in 2017.

The 2018 wine harvest – juice and concentrate for non-alcoholic purposes, wine for brandy and distilling wine included – is expected to amount to 948.3 million litres, calculated at an average recovery of 777 litres per ton of grapes.

2017/18 Growing season:

In many areas vines kept their leaves for longer than usual in the post-harvest period (April and May 2017), which was beneficial for the accumulation of reserves for the coming season.

Winter arrived late in most regions, but was cold enough to break dormancy. Day temperatures were notably warmer and night temperatures colder than usual due to the dry conditions. All regions received much lower rainfall, with the Olifants River, Bredekloof, Paarl and Swartland reporting less than half their long-term average rainfall and the Klein Karoo only 20%.

Bud burst started later due to cooler weather extending into August and September. Uneven flowering and berry set was common due to windy conditions, cold periods and precipitation in most of the areas, while the Robertson region obtained good berry set due to warm, dry weather and sufficient irrigation during flowering.

Some wine grape producers in the Bredekloof, Worcester, Robertson and Northern Cape regions experienced frost in September and October, which resulted in crop losses.

After slow shoot growth initially, vines picked up the pace as temperatures rose towards the end of November. Although December and January were hot, with temperatures reaching 35°C, none of the usual heatwaves were present.

The rest of the growing season and harvest were notably cooler than normal. By the end of February the nights became cooler, which was beneficial for colour and flavour formation in the (especially red) cultivars that ripen later in the season.

Harvest time kicked off seven to 14 days later in most regions and some wine grape producers were still harvesting until the end of April, much later than usual. Most cultivars were harvested in their common order, which meant that cellar space wasn't under pressure.

Vineyards were healthy with limited incidences of pests, diseases or rot thanks to the dry weather.

Wine potential:

"Consumers can look forward to some really good wines from the 2018 vintage," says Francois.

Winemakers are very happy with the general wine quality at this stage in spite of the challenging conditions earlier in the season and limited water resources.

The dry, warm weather resulted in healthy grapes and small berries with good intensity. Greater variation between night and day temperatures during the ripening stage gave the colour and flavour formation a further boost, which are indicative of remarkable quality wines.

Overview of regions:

Breedekloof: Very healthy conditions and the fact that new Colombar and Pinotage plantings came into production contributed to a somewhat larger wine grape crop.

Klein Karoo: Although a smaller crop, red wines will have a richer colour due to smaller berries and the white wines have fresh characteristics.

Northern Cape: Chenin Blanc production increased somewhat, but Colombar, which is the largest contributing cultivar, was affected most by frost damage in some areas.

Olifants River: The region hit the hardest by water shortages, experiencing the biggest drop in production.

Paarl: The amount of wine grape bunches were trumped by much smaller berries, which resulted in a lower yield, especially in dryland vineyards.

Robertson: A smaller, but very promising wine grape harvest, despite frost damage in some areas.

Stellenbosch: Despite irrigation challenges and a smaller harvest, wine grape producers and winemakers expect some great wines.

Swartland: An unexpectedly good year in terms of wine quality from a much smaller harvest due to water stress in this dryland region.

Worcester: One of the most challenging seasons yet due to water restrictions and frost, but wine grape producers and winemakers were innovative in the vineyard and cellar to produce good wines.

See www.vinpro.co.za for the full harvest report per region.

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II OVERVIEW OF THE REGIONS

BREDEKLOOF

Overview

“The Bredekloof region undeniably experienced one of the driest growth and ripening periods ever in the 2017/18 season,” says Leon Dippenaar, Vinpro’s viticulturist for this region. “However, we gained some valuable experience regarding the efficient use of irrigation water.”

The 2018 wine grape harvest will be larger than in 2017, the grapes are healthy and the analyses are positive. The colour, flavour and richness of this year’s wines stand out.

Production trends

The 2018 wine grape harvest is larger than initially expected, partly due to good production of the late red cultivars and the fact that it was an exceptionally healthy year.

The region’s Chenin Blanc grapes performed very well, which Leon attributed to the minimal occurrence of rot and newly planted vineyards coming into production. A great deal of newly planted Colombar and Pinotage vineyards also came into production this year, which had a positive effect on the harvest.

Climate and viticultural trends

The vineyards’ canopies were healthy in the post-harvest period and the leaves remained on the vines later than usual, which implies that there was sufficient time to accumulate reserves. However, there were a few exceptions, specifically in Pinotage vineyards where the canopies didn’t recover in the post-harvest period.

The effect of leafroll disease on cultivars such as Cabernet Sauvignon which ripened at a later stage was significantly less prominent in the post-harvest period this year and there was a minimal occurrence of diseases in the post-harvest period.

The beginning of the winter was one of the driest ever with only 12.2 mm rainfall that was measured at the Du Toitskloof Weather Station in April and 1.5 mm in May. The most rainfall was measured in June, 186.7 mm. However, the region only still received half of the average long-term rainfall in this region. Only 342.1 mm rain was recorded at Du Toitskloof Cellar from April to August. The area also received significantly less snowfall in 2017, which was also the case in 2016.

Cold day temperatures during August constituted overall slow bud burst and growth in the vineyards. However, the bud burst and initial growth were even. Vineyard growth was sped up by relatively warmer weather from mid-September and the vineyards experienced bud burst about a week later than usual.

The flowering period was characterised by uneven berry set. This uneven berry set was quite typical of the entire season and led to both uneven véraison and ripening. Almost no rain occurred during the growth period from mid-November to the end of January.

The average temperatures were significantly cooler than the previous season – a tendency that was noticed last year as well. The night temperatures were considerably cooler than the previous season.

Apart from two to three extremely warm days, the ripening period was also cooler than usual and very dry. The vineyards initially started to ripen about ten days later than in 2017.

The early cultivars experienced no problems with ripening in general, but some of the later cultivars struggled to reach optimal ripeness.

General comments

Almost no diseases occurred this year, due to the dry weather conditions. Powdery mildew and botrytis rot were only present in exceptional cases. Frost occurred in some areas in the region during October 2017, which caused some damage, but much less than the same time in 2016.

The vineyards experienced good growth with no excessive or vigorous growth. The water supplies, although limited, were sufficient for the majority of the vineyards to ripen their crops optimally and for producers to apply post-harvest irrigation.

Grape and wine quality

“The Sauvignon Blanc flavours are very promising and the red wines have very good colour,” says Leon. “The fixed acidity levels appear to have improved in general compared to the previous two vintages.”

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KLEIN KAROO

Overview

The vineyards were healthy in the Klein Karoo despite the immense pressure that limited water resources placed on irrigation. The harvest is smaller, but the wines from this region will be impressive at this stage, according to Hennie Visser Vinpro's viticulturist for this region.

Production trends

The 2018 harvest is much smaller than the previous year. The continuous drought and insufficient irrigation water contributed to small canopies, as well as small wine grape berries.

Climate and viticultural trends

The vineyards retained their leaves longer than usual during the post-harvest period due to a reduced occurrence of powdery mildew and downy mildew. The vineyards therefore accumulated sufficient reserves.

The dry weather conditions continued throughout the autumn and the winter set in late. The day temperatures were consistently warmer and the nights were colder due to the dry weather.

The winter was cold enough to break dormancy, but only 20% of the normal winter rainfall occurred.

The vineyards experienced bud burst later than usual, but it was even. The dry weather conditions continued throughout the spring, with the region receiving less than 80% of the normal rainfall. The maximum temperatures during the spring were not unusually high, but March was a significantly cooler than usual with lower than normal night temperatures.

The grapes ripened generally later than usual. There were exceptions where crops inevitably had to be reduced due to insufficient irrigation water.

General comments

The pressure from diseases was much lower due to the reduced rainfall, with a low occurrence of downy mildew, botrytis rot and powdery mildew. Frost and hail damage during September had an adverse effect on the harvests in some parts of the region. Sour rot occurred especially in grapes that suffered hail damage, as well as some of the late Chenin Blanc grapes.

The biggest challenge for the producers was to manage the limited water resources sensibly and distribute it between the different crops. The vineyards' vigour was low and the berries were significantly smaller due to the shortage of irrigation water.

Grape and wine quality

"The red wines are considerably darker due to the smaller berries and the white wines are fresh with beautiful colours," says Hennie. Wine quality is very promising at this stage.

The cellars didn't experience major capacity issues thanks to the smaller harvest. Some cellars reported lower recoveries due to the smaller berries. The acidity levels are also lower, with high pH levels.

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NORTHERN CAPE

Overview

The Orange River region, now known as the Northern Cape region, didn't have as much water shortages as the rest of the wine industry, but still produced a significantly smaller wine grape harvest due to poor recovery from frost damage earlier in the season and the uprooting of vines, says Henning Burger, viticulturist at Orange River Cellars.

Production trends

The 2018 wine grape harvest in this region is considerably smaller as a result of the uprooting of wine grape vineyards, losses due to frost damage in September 2017 and lower harvests.

"The Lower Orange River region's dam levels are looking good and there were no water restrictions during the 2017 or 2018 seasons," says Henning.

The total harvest for Chenin Blanc was somewhat higher than last year, but Colombar's wine grape harvest – which constitutes a big part of this region's total cultivar composition – decreased significantly due to frost damage in the eastern areas of this region. The red wine cultivars also produced smaller harvests on average.

The table and raisin cultivars such as Sultana and Merbein Seedless performed very well with higher average production than in 2017.

Climate and viticultural trends

The post-harvest period was warm and dry with almost no rain, after a very wet 2017 harvest season. The vineyards were therefore healthy, with only powdery mildew occurring in some, more susceptible cultivars where spraying programmes were insufficient.

The vineyards retained their leaves well because of the moderate temperatures during May, without the occurrence of frost.

The first temperatures below freezing point occurred during the second week of June with concurrent wide-spread frost. Producers only started pruning the vineyards from mid-June and postponed final training or pruning back until July.

The cold units in the vineyards were measured as an average of 200 at the end of June – somewhat higher than at the same time last year. However, July was exceptionally cold, with significantly lower average day and night temperatures than in June. The night temperatures fell to below -5°C during the third week of July. Regular frost occurred and the cold units were measured at 295 at the end of August – somewhat less than at the same time the previous year.

Bud burst occurred at least ten days later than the previous year. Uneven bud burst and symptoms of growth-arrested disorder were specifically observed in Chenin Blanc and some Sultana blocks. September was warm in general, which led to accelerated bud burst and shoot growth.

A strong cold front on the morning of 28 September led to wide-spread frost damage, specifically in the Groblershoop and Grootdrink area, with limited damage in the other areas.

The first wine grapes were received mid-January 2018, which is seven to ten days later than in 2017.

General comments

No rain occurred during the season, which led to healthy, disease-free vineyards with vigorous growth. November was relatively moderate, but December was exceptionally warm with heat wave conditions, which contributed towards this.

It was evident in January 2018 that the vineyards that suffered frost damage during September 2017 took longer to recover than expected.

Grape and wine quality

“The quality of the wine is overall good and the juice recoveries were about the same as in 2017,” says Henning. On the other hand, the average pH levels were significantly lower and the acidity levels were higher than in 2017.

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OLIFANTS RIVER

Overview

“The Olifants River region experienced the biggest decrease of all the regions in their wine grape harvest, due to the fact that only 20% of the normal water quota was made available to wine grape producers,” says Gert Engelbrecht, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Olifants River.

The effect of the drought will most definitely have an impact on the 2019 and 2020 harvests because of the minimal availability of water during the post-harvest period.

Production trends

“Both the red and white grape cultivars produced significantly smaller crops in general, but we differentiate between the cultivars,” says Gert. Hanepoot, Shiraz and Merlot yields in particular decreased substantially compared to 2017, partly due to a decline in new plantings of these cultivars.

Although the harvests for Pinotage and Sauvignon Blanc were also much lower, they are the only cultivars that decreased less than the overall average decline for the region. Both these cultivars matured early and the vines are younger.

Climate and viticultural trends

The drought conditions that the region suffered during the past few years became even worse during the 2018 wine grape season.

The post-harvest period was not only extremely dry, but it was also warmer than on average. Leaf fall occurred without any consistent pattern. Some vineyards had early leaf fall and started bud burst again due to the drought and water stress. A great deal of the vineyards' leaves browned, but only experienced leaf fall in June because of the warm weather conditions in April and May.

A second bud burst was common in 2017. The warm weather conditions during May led to the winter occurring at a later stage. The night temperatures in June, July and August were lower than usual. The accumulation of cold units therefore only started late, but picked up rapidly and was measured above-average in the end.

The total rainfall during the season in the Olifants River region was 50 mm compared to the long-term average of 150 mm. The catchment area of the Clanwilliam Dam experienced the same trend and the dam only reached a maximum capacity of just above 40% during September.

The cooler weather conditions during August and September led to the vineyards experiencing bud burst at a later stage. The bud burst was overall good and even in vineyards that accumulated sufficient reserves. However, there were quite a lot of vineyards that had very uneven bud burst with patches that really developed late, due to poor growth and a consequential insufficient accumulation of reserves during the previous season.

The effect of the previous dry season is now starting to have an impact on the region's vineyards. However, it wasn't as evident during the flowering and berry set period and this growth phase mostly occurred smoothly. Cold fronts during October did however have an adverse effect on berry set of certain vineyards.

The weather conditions were mostly cooler than usual during the growth season, with the exception of slightly warmer nights in January, as well as an intense heat wave that hit the region at the beginning of December.

The harvest season kicked off later than in 2017 and ended up to two weeks earlier than usual. The sequence of intakes was also inconsistent between the cultivars due to the drought.

General comments

The dry weather conditions averted any serious diseases. Mealy bug control still remains a priority, with this pest occurring widely this year.

The low water level of the Clanwilliam Dam dictated the season and the limited water resources led to reduced vigour, smaller canopies and significantly lower yields.

The heat wave during December was the turning point in the season, after which the vineyards suffered because of water stress, as there wasn't sufficient water available to replenish the shortages. The canal supplying water to the region flowed for the last time at the beginning of March – there was therefore no water available for sufficient post-harvest irrigation and fertilisation.

Grape and wine quality

“The grapes were very healthy in general due to low pressure from diseases, although cases of late powdery mildew occurred sporadically,” says Gert.

Water stress due to the drought and greater sunlight exposure led to definite style differences in the wines. “We observe less fruit flavours in the white wines and the Sauvignon Blanc has a significantly less ‘green’ character. The colour and concentration of the red cultivars look very good,” says Gert.

The juice extraction was also less in the white cultivars.

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PAARL

Overview

“Despite a promising amount of wine grape bunches in the Paarl region, the berries were small due to the drought, which resulted in a significantly smaller wine grape harvest. However, the quality of the wines are promising,” says Hanno van Schalkwyk, Vinpro’s viticulturist for this region, which includes Paarl, Franschhoek, Wellington and Tulbagh.

The harvest year was characterised by a cooler spring and pre-summer, with a sudden change to a very warm and dry ripening period. Cultivars matured on time and the cellars were never under any pressure due to simultaneous intakes.

Production trends

The continuous drought conditions led to smaller berries and most of the producers reported that their loads were “light”. The Chenin Blanc vineyards suffered during véraison and thereafter and therefore delivered smaller berries and crops in particular. The Merlot harvests were also much lower due to the looser bunches.

Climate and viticultural trends

The post-harvest period was exceptionally warm and dry and very few of the producers could apply post-harvest irrigation. Despite the dry weather conditions, it was also very warm, which led to the vineyards retaining their leaves for a long time and experiencing leaf fall at the normal time.

Cover crops (where applicable) were sown late because the region received winter rains at a later stage. Good rainfall and cold weather conditions occurred in June, which were sufficient to fulfil the vineyards’ needs. The rainfall during July and August was very low and the total rainfall was only half of the long-term average for the Paarl region.

Major storage and farm dam levels were considerably lower at the beginning of the new growth season than at the same time the previous season. Cover crop growth was poor in general and in most cases they were sprayed with herbicides before bud burst due to the drought.

The early spring was characterised by relatively cool periods and the night temperatures were particularly low. The Chardonnay vineyards that were treated with products to break dormancy experienced bud burst towards the end of August. The bud burst was very even. The vineyards that were not treated, experienced bud burst about a week to ten days later than the previous season. A considerable amount of Shiraz and some Cabernet Sauvignon blocks had slightly uneven bud burst. The cultivars experienced bud burst over a relatively long period due to the cooler weather conditions.

The vineyards started growing faster towards the end of September. October and November were characterised by above-average rainfall and relatively cool weather conditions. Berry set was good in general, except for Merlot which delivered looser bunches. Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot suffered uneven berry and bunch development in many cases. However, the amount of bunches and vigour were both good in general.

The shoot growth accelerated in November and December after an initial slow shoot growth. The canopies were therefore big enough to ripen the grapes. The shoot growth particularly accelerated suddenly after thunder storms in November.

The harvest period initially kicked off a bit later and was relatively sluggish at first, although the heat waves during January and February, as well as a shortage of water accelerated the ripening process. The temperatures decreased from mid-March and the nights cooled down. This led to some of the late cultivars ripening slowly.

General comments

Powdery mildew was observed sporadically and mealy bug breakouts became a bigger problem from the beginning of January.

Early hail storms occurred sporadically in the vineyards in the Perdeberg, Northern Paarl and Drakenstein areas.

Soils showed saline symptoms more prominently in the vineyards due to the drought.

Minimal sunburn damage occurred after the heat waves during the harvest season, since the grapes could recover during the nights and the producers applied more efficient suckering techniques due to the drought, which also helped to acclimatise the grape skins to the sun.

Water supplies were under immense pressure and strict water restrictions were applied. Producers only received about 40% of their usual water allocation and the availability of water from the Berg River Water Scheme was terminated at the end of January.

Grape and wine quality

“Consumers can expect wines of very good quality from the Paarl region, with Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Pinotage and Shiraz showing good potential,” says Hanno.

Grape analyses were very good at the beginning of the harvest season, but the pH levels increased during the second half of the season. Titratable acidity was slightly lower due to the malic acid levels which were metabolised already at an early stage.

The colour development was good, although cultivars that experienced late véraison and water stress took very long to complete the colour development process completely in some cases.

Some Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and in particular Merlot bunches developed unevenly. Grapes matured at lower sugar concentrations in many cases.

The juice recoveries of the white cultivars were particularly lower than usual.

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ROBERTSON

Overview

“The Robertson region experienced a smaller but surprisingly good harvest year with promising wines awaiting the consumers, despite frost damage and an ongoing drought,” says Hennie Visser, Vinpro’s viticulturist for this region.

The 2018 season was very warm with little water available for irrigation.

Production trends

The Robertson region harvested one of the smallest wine grape harvests in the past few years in 2018 after a record crop in 2017.

The season was exceptionally dry, which led to the vineyards being healthy with almost no losses due to rot or downy mildew. The smaller harvest could mainly be ascribed to frost damage, a decrease in the total area under vines as more vineyards were uprooted than were newly established, as well as a restriction on the available irrigation water.

Sauvignon Blanc and White Muscadel had good yields, but Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay produced much smaller crops. The red cultivars’ productions were also lower than the previous year, but higher than initially expected.

Climate and viticultural trends

The vineyards’ leaves were retained on the vines for longer than usual after the 2017 harvest and the canopies were impressive late in the season. It could be ascribed to lower levels of low powdery mildew and downy mildew, as well as dry weather conditions that continued from the previous summer to the 2017 winter. This led to a good accumulation of reserves.

Robertson only received 70% of their normal rainfall. The winter months experienced significantly higher maximum temperatures than the long-term temperatures, but the minimum temperatures were significantly lower. Frost was also more common than usual due to the dry environmental conditions. The winter cold was sufficient to break dormancy.

The vineyards experienced bud burst seven to ten days later than usual. Bud burst occurred even in general, due to good reserves and sufficient cold. Some of the vineyards had uneven bud burst due to lower reserve levels in cases where insufficient post-harvest irrigation was applied and leaf fall occurred early.

The Robertson Valley experienced a normal spring with slightly higher rainfall than the long-term average. The initial shoot growth was good and even, but decelerated and stagnated as a result of windy conditions, cold nights and less irrigation water. The maximum temperatures were higher and the minimum temperatures were lower than the long-term temperatures. There was therefore a bigger variation between the day and night temperatures.

The summer was exceptionally dry on the other hand, with only about 40% of the normal rainfall occurring in the region. The summer temperatures were also consistently higher than the long-term predictions. Berry set was generally good and better than the previous year, particularly in cultivars with a tendency towards poor berry set such as Ruby Cabernet. This could be ascribed to the warm, dry weather conditions and sufficient water provision during the flowering period.

No heat waves occurred despite high maximum temperatures, but the growth stopped early and the berries were noticeably smaller.

The harvest season went smoothly due to a minimal amount of rainy days. The wine grapes in the region generally matured ten to 14 days later than usual. Cultivars also matured without any consistent patterns at times, for example Cabernet Sauvignon that matured before Shiraz.

General comments

The disease pressure was very low due to lower than normal rainfall. No downy mildew occurred during the growth season. However, some cases of powdery and downy mildew infections occurred later in the season.

Botrytis rot and sour rot occurred sporadically during January, especially in Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc blocks, but it dried up quickly. Rot occurring at a later stage wasn't problematic due to the dry weather conditions. Mealy bug breakouts were more common than usual.

Wild animals such as bucks, hares and baboons caused many problems due to the dry season, as well as the natural vegetation being very dry.

Wide-spread frost damage was reported after the occurrence of frost in October.

Water restrictions and low dam levels placed most of the producers under immense pressure with regard to irrigation scheduling. However, the vineyards coped very well with the warmer temperatures, as well as the limited irrigation water and surprisingly little sunburn damage were evident on the grapes. Vineyards also had a very high water need due to the warmer weather, which placed more pressure on the limited water supplies.

Grape and wine quality

"We are looking forward to good wines from the 2018 harvest. The colour of the red wines in particular is excellent, due to smaller berries and the great variation between day and night temperatures," says Hennie.

The pH levels were high as opposed to the acidity levels being low, due to the warm weather conditions and water shortages.

Cellars could manage the intake of the grapes on time and process it efficiently, due to a smaller and later harvest, and because the space and facilities weren't under as much pressure as usual. Lower juice recoveries and higher sediment percentages are expected as a result of the smaller berries.

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STELLENBOSCH

Overview

"The expertise of wine grape producers and cellars in the Stellenbosch region were definitely put to the test by the effect of extreme warm and dry climate conditions. A smaller harvest was taken in and certain cultivars are showing some promise," says Conrad Schutte, Vinpro's viticulturist for the Stellenbosch region. This region includes Stellenbosch, Durbanville, Constantia and parts of the Cape South Coast.

Unusually uneven shoot growth and ripening tested the producers' expertise and management inputs to harvest at optimal ripeness, as well as the winemakers' ability to manage the grapes in the cellar. Cool night temperatures and sporadic, light rain showers buffered the challenging conditions to a certain extent.

Production trends

The Stellenbosch region's vineyards had good bunch quality overall, although bunches were lighter than usual with less and smaller berries per bunch due to the drought conditions and water shortages. This led to a smaller wine grape harvest than in 2017.

Chardonnay in particular had lower crops. There were some exceptions in the region where the vineyards were planted on good soils and producers managed to accumulate sufficient water in irrigation dams.

Climate and viticultural trends

Leaf fall occurred earlier than usual in the post-harvest period due to a shortage of irrigation water. The soil was also dry, which hindered the seed bed preparation for the establishment of cover crops. Cover crop growth appeared to be poor throughout the season.

Many producers still made use of products to break dormancy, despite an increase in cold units during May and June – a decision driven by a shortage of water for post-harvest irrigation.

The winter months only cooled off later with higher than normal temperatures. The region received only 80% of the expected winter rainfall.

A warmer spring caused earlier cultivars such as Pinotage and Chardonnay to experience fast and even bud burst. The rate of the shoot growth varied a great deal in reaction to the temperature fluctuations necessitated faster suckering actions in some cultivars.

Above-average rainfall during the flowering and berry set period affected the berry set of Cabernet Sauvignon adversely in particular and led to very unevenness between the berries and bunches. This rain, together with high temperatures and thunder in the middle of the growth season led to fast shoot growth, which necessitated the producers to apply more intensive canopy management.

The night temperatures were cooler than usual during the ripening period, which constituted good colour and flavour development.

The harvest kicked off somewhat later than usual, but accelerated in February due to above-average warm days and concern from producers that the vineyard blocks were to be harvested earlier as a result of the limited amount of irrigation water. This tendency changed later in the harvest season due to light rain showers and cool night temperatures.

General comments

Warm temperatures during December and January led to major mealy bug breakouts and therefore additional control actions were needed.

Two hail showers – one before véraison in the Bottelary and Simonsberg areas and the other after véraison in the Elgin area – caused sporadic damage.

The irrigation scheduling was under immense pressure. The Theewaterskloof Water Scheme's water allocation was cut to only 40% in November and to 32.5% in January. Producers with diversified farms allocated their remaining water to other more profitable agricultural crops with a greater water need. This also led to some parts showing poor vigour.

Unusual saline patches occurred in some vineyard blocks.

Heat waves were limited to very short periods during December, January and February. The occurrence of sunburn damage was therefore minimal, mainly due to cool night temperatures,

good suckering action and the prevalence of light rain showers from time to time in certain parts of the region.

Grape and wine quality

“Stellenbosch’s Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon wines hold great promise this year,” says Conrad.

Wine grape analyses were looking good during the first half of the harvest season. Acidity levels were mostly higher and the grapes generally matured at lower than usual sugar levels.

Many of the vineyards ripened sluggishly later in the harvest season, which decelerated the rate at which grapes were harvested. The acidity levels were slightly lower during this time. Many of the red cultivars also took longer to ripen their bunches evenly.

The cellars experienced less bottleneck situations in general. Juice recoveries were normal to lower than usual.

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SWARTLAND

Overview

“The wines from the Swartland region are exceptional this year, despite a smaller harvest and the third challenging dry season in a row,” says Hanno van Schalkwyk, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Swartland region.

The climate conditions and vineyards experienced a quick turnaround during véraison which is evident in a much smaller harvest, after a reasonably moderate pre-summer with good prospects.

Production trends

The total harvest in the region is much smaller than in 2017 due to poor shoot growth and much smaller berries due to the dry conditions. Many producers recorded “lighter” loads.

Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon in particular had very low yields.

Climate and viticultural trends

The Swartland region experienced extremely dry and warm post-harvest conditions for the third consecutive year. Vineyards that suffered during the harvest season had early leaf fall. In cases where the producers were able to irrigate to a certain extent, the vineyards had later leaf fall, even until May. Cover crops could only be established at a later stage and many of the producers didn’t sow whatsoever.

The first good rains with associated cold conditions only occurred at the beginning of June. The vineyard’s cold needs were satisfied. The rest of the winter was very dry and the total winter rainfall was 50% less than the long-term average. Cover crop growth was very poor and cover crops were predominantly sprayed with herbicides before bud burst.

The vineyards experienced bud burst about seven to ten days later than in the 2017 season, which could be regarded as a more normal bud burst date. Bud burst occurred relatively even with the exception of some Shiraz and Chardonnay blocks. The initial growth was very sluggish due to cooler periods during the spring, but improved at a later stage.

The canopies were overall smaller and saline conditions played a major role in many cases to inhibit growth. The windy conditions during the flowering period led to poor berry set and therefore looser bunches in a considerable amount of Merlot vineyards. Small, green berries occurred in the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes during the ripening phase, which also indicated poor berry set and uneven development.

The harvest started slightly later and progressed relatively slowly. High temperatures occurred for some time during February, which accelerated the rate and quickly halted the harvest process. Blocks that were severely infected with the leafroll virus, as well as the late cultivars such as Cabernet Sauvignon, ripened sluggishly towards the end of March and were harvested at low sugar levels in most cases.

General comments

The grapes were very healthy overall and almost no incidences of powdery mildew were observed. Mealy bug breakouts occurred sporadically.

The heat waves during the harvest season were characterised by short periods of intense heat. The vineyards appeared to look very good until the end of December, although the combination of the dry soil and warm periods caused water stress already since véraison. Low water pressure in the berries was already observed just after véraison, with specific reference to Chenin Blanc. The water supplies and soil water levels were limited due to the continuous drought.

Grape and wine quality

“The 2018 vintage is an exceptional year for wine quality, in particular Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay and Pinotage which already showed potential early in the season,” says Hanno.

Grape analyses were initially consistently good, along with good colour development in the red cultivars. The acidity levels decreased significantly in the second half of the harvest season.

Cultivars matured on time and the cellar space wasn't under too much pressure. Juice extractions were low, although the quality of the recovered juice was very good.

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WORCESTER

Overview

“The 2018 wine grape season will be remembered as one of the most difficult ever, but producers and cellars are making the best of a smaller wine grape harvest,” says Pierre Snyman, Vinpro's viticulturist for the Worcester region.

Producers had to be resourceful to use their water efficiently, including suckering practices, crop management, good weed management as well as good irrigation monitoring and scheduling. Apart from the drought, crop losses were experienced due to frost and delayed frost observed later in the season.

Production trends

The Worcester region's wine grape harvest is significantly smaller than in 2017.

Sauvignon Blanc and Pinotage are the two cultivars that were probably the least affected by the seasonal trends and they both delivered relatively normal productions. The early cultivars showed major decreases.

The red wine grapes ripened without any consistent pattern, for example some Merlot wine grapes were harvested long after the Shiraz grapes.

Climate and viticultural trends

The post-harvest period was dry with moderate temperatures and the disease pressure was also low. These conditions were favourable for the accumulation of reserves. Leaf fall occurred more or less at the same time as the previous year.

It was a very dry winter and certain regions only had a maximum rainfall of 15 mm compared to the average rainfall of 220 mm per year. Good and sufficient cold units were recorded. Producers had to drill for water on a large scale due to the low rainfall. Dams that received their resources from rainwater were already dry early in the season.

The vineyards experienced late but relatively even bud burst. The initial growth was relatively even, but the first signs of a challenging season were the uneven patterns in the flowering period.

This trend of uneven berry growth continued until the ripening period and led to a more challenging harvest.

This year will be long remembered for spring frost which caused great damage. The region experienced frost on two mornings in October which was worsened by the drought conditions. The eventual crop losses were much more than initially expected.

The harvest expectation was promising before the frost incidences, as sufficient bunches were present, but the drought also led to smaller berries which had a direct impact on the size of the harvest.

The temperatures during the growth season were a further factor that impacted the ripening process. The maximum temperatures were slightly higher than the previous year, but the minimum night temperatures were lower, especially since the beginning of March. These variations in temperatures were favourable for good colour in the red wine grapes.

The harvest season kicked off ten to 14 days later than the previous year, which was unusual since a lighter harvest is normally harvested earlier. The normal sequence of the ripening process between the cultivars was also inconsistent, in particular the Pinotage blocks that were only harvested in April.

General comments

It was a very healthy year with regard to diseases and pests. Mealy bug breakouts occurred sporadically during the harvest season.

The water supplies were consistently low and were a major concern for the producers. The soil water levels were never replenished sufficiently and it had a negative impact on the root development. Salinity levels also caused a further adverse effect. Producers also couldn't apply normal post-harvest fertilising practices, which might have a negative effect on the 2018/9 season.

Grape and wine quality

It's surprising that the warm, dry weather conditions had no negative impact on the quality of Sauvignon Blanc.

The colour of the red grapes was consistently good, due to canopy management practices such as leaf removal techniques, but also because of major variations between the maximum and minimum temperatures. The acidity quality was problematic and the winemakers had to work around the clock to make the necessary adjustments. The later cultivars also had some problems with high pH levels.

The cellar space was fortunately not such a problem this year, as the wine supplies were removed fast and promptly beforehand, as well as due to the smaller harvest. The harvest window also didn't reduce as was expected.

“And finally, everyone is excited about the prospect of higher wine prices as well as the expectation that major rain showers are in the forecast,” said Pierre.

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