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2006 Oregon Harvest Report

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2006 OREGON HARVEST REPORT

Plentiful Yields Combined with Mature Flavors Will Increase Consumer Access to Quality Oregon Wine

PORTLAND, November 6, 2006 – Throughout the entire state, a warm and dry growing season with little precipitation and no disease pressure resulted in a harvest that wine grape growers and winemakers throughout Oregon say is a rare combination of robust yields and great quality.

Thanks to favorable weather at bloom and an extended warm growing season with no weather pressures, growers with heavier crop loads than in the past were blessed with fully ripened and mature fruit. Overall, yields are well up from the previous two harvests, where smaller fruit sets and other weather pressures produced lower than average yields.

“The surge in popularity of Oregon wine has led to a noticeable shortage in the marketplace. The rare combination of greater yields and ideal flavor development will allow our industry to restock those empty shelves and continue to satisfy adventurous wine lovers,” said Ted Farthing, Executive Director of the Oregon Wine Board.

“Mother Nature smiled down upon us toward the end of the growing season, ensuring that our fruit was optimally ripe,” said Matt Novak of Results Partners in McMinnville, a firm that oversees vineyards throughout the Willamette Valley. “For Pinot noir, historical yields in the Willamette Valley have been between 2 and 2 ½ tons per acre. This year we are looking at about 3 tons per acre on average, which will not negatively affect quality but will provide additional fruit to help with wine supply. This puts us back in the game.”

Wine negociants who source fruit statewide and provide value-priced, quality Oregon wines will benefit from these increased yields, as will smaller boutique producers who keep production to 5,000 cases or less but have been experiencing shortages.

“It’s a win-win harvest for the industry,” said Stirling Fox, general manager of Oregon Grape Management, who farms 300 vineyard acres in 25 sites throughout the Willamette Valley. “Those who wanted to thin to produce ultra-premium wine could and those who could benefit from a little additional yield could do so successfully this year.”

Fruit develops full flavors with slightly higher sugars and moderate acidity

“Sugars and resultant alcohols are a tad high, requiring good balancing in winemaking, but compared to 2003 -- the only vintage warmer than 2006 -- natural balance and flavors are

better,” said Harry Peterson-Nedry, owner of Chehalem in the proposed Chehalem Mountains AVA of the Willamette Valley.

Despite increased sugars, the ability for the fruit to fully ripen and flavors to develop in the latter part of the growing season will likely mean that Pinot noir, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and other red varieties will still shine.

“2006 seems to be a combination of 1998’s ripeness and 1999’s depth and three-dimensionality,” Peterson-Nedry said. “Close to perfect.”

White wines will also shine this year. In the Willamette Valley, Sam Tannahill, winemaker for A to Z Wineworks and Francis Tannahill Winery, can’t wait to see the wonderfully ripe and high acid whites continue to develop. Dai Crisp, vineyard manager for Temperance Hill Vineyard in the Eola Hills AVA and winemaker for Lumos Wines, predicts a stellar year for Chardonnay, Pinot gris and Pinot blanc. In Southern Oregon, Gus Janeway, winemaker for RoxyAnn and Velocity Cellars, predicts Pinot gris will be a standout.

For farmers, weather did not present significant challenges

Fruit set was ideal with a mild Spring, although wetter in some regions than others. Months that followed were warm and dry, with short-lived heat spikes in June and September, advancing fruit ripeness. Heat did cause minimal sun damage with some berries in selected vineyards. But as is the course for Oregon, where small vineyards allow winemakers and vineyard owners to be intimately in tune with each row, berries affected by sun and heat were manually removed one by one in the latter part of the growing season to preserve the overall quality of the remaining cluster.

Continued warmth in September and October, despite intermittent cooling rains, resulted in a compressed harvest and a frenzied pace for many wineries. “A screamer for sure” is how Dai Crisp describes it. “Full intensity for an entire month. Fast and furious.” Alison Sokol Blosser of Sokol Blosser Winery in the Dundee Hills AVA concurs. “The harvest of 2006 will certainly go down in our record books as being one of, if not the, fastest harvest ever.”

The rain did cool the fruit down, slowing sugar development and allowing flavors to catch up. In Oregon, the last month of the growing season is always the most important, according to Dai Crisp.

“In Oregon, you can have great weather or wet weather. We lucked out. That’s the game you play every year. You set things up to minimize risk, you are conservative about crop levels but you never know. We were lucky to achieve full ripeness. If you can ripen the heavier yields, you can still have a great quality vintage.”

REGIONAL HARVEST OVERVIEWS

Willamette Valley

Increased yields brought average tonnage throughout the Valley back to historic levels and beyond. Advanced ripeness produced higher sugars and moderate acids but also concentrated flavors and balance.

Todd Hamina, winemaker for Maysara Winery and Momtazi Vineyards in McMinnville, reports that the McMinnville AVA will see fruit that maintains acidity, even if pH levels are slightly lower this year.

“For the most part, the Pinot noir will be true to form,” Hamina said. “We’ll have increased alcohol levels but we won’t see over the top ripeness that occurred in 2003. I’m stoked. I anticipate wine with a fruit-driven nose with a sense of earth and smooth tannins. Dead sexy.”

“Harvest 2006 is likely to be one of the best Oregon has seen,” Peterson-Nedry said. “I’ve not seen any better fruit and wines in barrel from our oldest vineyard, Ridgecrest, than we got in this year. I couldn’t be more pleased. What more can you expect with disease-free fruit, no bird damage, full ripeness and yields, and a dry, moderately warm harvest season?”

Bill Kremer, winemaker for King Estate Winery outside of Eugene, reports “excellent quality overall with velvety tannins and feminine Pinot noir. There is a French sexiness.”

“Softer, dark and blue fruits that are more generous will define Pinot noirs from this year,” Tannahill said.

Growers thinned but ultimately saw larger crop loads, though with full phenological maturity.

“You were still seeing growers thinning to the traditional one cluster per shoot, but this year we saw much bigger berries,” Crisp said.

Southern Oregon (Umpqua, Rogue and Applegate Valleys)

A warm, wet Spring initially slowed development of grapes but warmer weather moved in, providing ideal fruit set and advanced state of phenology. Weather resulted in even and full ripeness for varieties that sometimes struggle to ripen in cooler years. Bottom line... more structured wines with maturity and aging potential.

“Great ripening weather gave us fruit with almost textbook-perfect chemistry,” said Kara Olmo, owner/winemaker for Wooldridge Creek Winery in the Applegate Valley. “2006 has fantastic potential.”

“It’s going to be a really good Cabernet (Sauvignon and Franc) year in Southern Oregon because of advanced ripeness and a long, extended growing season with dryness and warmth,” Olmo said. “Ripening is not always a given since we are on the edge of available heat units in the Applegate Valley.”

Dr. Greg Jones, a climatologist specializing in climate change and its effects on the wine industry and professor at Southern Oregon University in Ashland, Oregon, offers a unique perspective on the region. Jones monitors a number of reference vineyards in the Applegate, Rogue and Umpqua Valleys throughout the growing season.

Early September arrived with many growers indicating that plant and fruit development was between one and three weeks ahead of schedule, with mature flavor development and higher than average yields, Jones reports. A cool-down during the third week of September slowed sugars and allowed for additional flavor evolution. Harvest started earlier than usual (mid-September in most cases) and lasted through October.

“A common theme among growers and winemakers in Southern Oregon is that it appears to be a very good vintage with great flavors and good yields,” Jones said.

“From what I am hearing, those who waited until October to pick saw good balanced fruit and good acid,” said Lee Mankin, owner of Carpenter Hill Vineyard in the Rogue Valley and president of the Rogue Valley Winegrowers’ Association. “It was a topsy turvy year because there was a lot of variety.”

Gus Janeway, winemaker for RoxyAnn Winery and Velocity Cellars, concurred, suggesting that this year did not deliver a conventional ripening schedule. “All rules were out the window,” he said. “Flowering was all over and you had to pay careful attention to every block. Some later season varieties were picked early and some early-ripening varieties were picked late.”

Janeway is particularly excited about the potential for Pinot gris. Yields were up significantly and the fruit for the RoxyAnn label was picked early to capture the green fruit character.

“2007 will be a great year for consumers of Oregon Pinot gris,” he said. “There will be lots if it and it’s good. Prices will remain very accessible.”

Diverse growing regions and varied microclimates define the Umpqua Valley. There you will see Pinot noir in the cool northern part of the Valley and Spanish varieties in the warmer regions of the Southern Valley. Like in other parts of Southern Oregon, the Umpqua Valley was able to fully ripen all varieties grown there. Warm days and cooler nights toward harvest ensured balanced fruit with good acidity.

Mid-Valley, Steve Reustle of Prayer Rock Vineyards reports significant yields and fruit with “sugars and acids almost in perfect harmony.”

Abacela Winery Owner Earl Jones reports excellent fruit profiles for his Spanish varieties – deep, dark aromatics for his Tempranillos and tropical Albarinos – which grow on 58 acres in the southern part of the Umpqua Valley AVA.

“We continue to be enthusiastic – this is a breakout year for Southern Oregon,” said Tannahill, who sources a significant amount of Southern Oregon fruit for A to Z Wineworks and Francis Tannahill Winery.

Eastern Oregon (Columbia Gorge, Columbia Valley and Walla Walla Valley)

A delayed growing season eventually caught up with warmer temperatures in July, setting the stage for increased crop loads but balanced wines with full flavors.

“Relaxed” is how Bob Morus, owner of Phelps Creek Vineyards in the Columbia Gorge AVA, describes this harvest.

“Typically we endure rains, wind and birds – sometimes in Biblical proportions – as the vines ripen toward perfection,” Morus said. “This season all the fruit was in tank prior to the weather turning wet.”

Lonnie Wright, owner/winemaker of The Pines, has a vineyard that straddles the line between the Columbia Gorge and Columbia Valley AVAs. Wright also manages vineyards throughout the Columbia Gorge AVA. He saw the season start a week to 10 days later than usual, although things caught up toward the end of the growing season. Wet conditions in the Spring resulted in bigger berries at set and the region will benefit from higher yields.

Overall crop sizes in the Walla Walla Valley are expected to set a record, according to Casey McClellan, owner/winemaker of Seven Hills Winery. Much of this is attributed to higher yields but also increased number of bearing acres. But there were some reports that yields of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah were down from 2005.

A cool, wet Spring delayed development by approximately one week and July brought extreme warm temperatures. A cool-down period returned in late September, slowing the ripening period. Harvest came at a moderate pace, with a four to six week period for most producers that ended before freeze set in at the end of October.

Lynne Chamberlain, owner of Spofford Station Vineyard on the Oregon side of the Walla Walla Valley, grows 60 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. Wet conditions in the Spring resulted in smaller berries at set. But those berries, subject to a long and moderately warm growing season, were able to ripen and the cool nights helped concentrate flavors.

“We’re going to see big and bold wines with a softness and elegance wrapped in,” Chamberlain said. “The plants have come into their own and all the elements have come together. This is a banner year.”

McClellan says consumers can expect to experience in the bottle “wines that have full ripeness but lower alcohols. Very balanced wines.”

Like Chamberlain, McClellan is particularly encouraged by Syrah. “It’s going to be fantastic,” he said. “Those grapes love the heat, and our July and August temperatures led to some wonderful, strong Syrah varietal characters. These are really aromatic wines in the fermenters.”