

CAFE 541: Nicholl: Climate change having real impact on Oregon vineyards

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Body

Jan. 29--A few months ago while we were prognosticating over how the 2019 grape harvest was shaping up, I mentioned how the (growing) seasons were significantly warmer than they were 10 years ago.

The style of a wine any individual vineyard site produces is intrinsically linked to its mesoclimate -- that is, the **climate** that is prevalent in a zone measured in the tens to hundreds of meters.

"So what?" you might say? Well, as grape/wine growers we pay very particular attention to each season's growing conditions and have done so (in some instances) for centuries. We do this because as crafters of the vinous beverage we are always striving for a particular character/mode or style.

Most winemakers, whether they were born into the business or have been drawn into the wonderful vortex of the wine industry, live very deliberately where they do for the opportunity to make the styles of wine produced in that very region. This is the passion you hear of in all the marketing blurbs -- it is real.

I have for many years described Oregon as a winemaker's "Spice Kitchen," the great diversity in growing conditions/**climates** affords our industry to grow a great range of grape varieties from crisp aromatic whites to big and luscious reds.

I have, however, in the 13 years I have been in Oregon, noticed two significant **changes**: One, fruit is ripening earlier in the season, and, two, the styles of wine being produced (particularly with regard to pinot noir) are becoming richer and bolder. This on the surface sounds great and indeed the consumer (and industry) is benefiting through more consistent wines and elevated quality.

The reason? Warmer temperatures throughout the growing season. Yes, I am talking about **climate change**. It is real. It is happening. And, yes, we are experiencing it.

Now this said winemaker also mentioned in a previous article something about laying on a beach post-harvest. Indeed a genuine attempt was made, however, these said beaches were in Australia. Did someone say, "Do you smell smoke?"

I'm sure you have heard by now about the catastrophic fires that South Eastern (principally) Australia has been experiencing. There is no need here to be repeating some of the statistics and (still mounting) devastation to flora and fauna, human life, property and livelihoods.

However, I do wish to share a couple of more personal observations/experiences. Just before Christmas, I traveled to Adelaide where I studied winemaking many moons ago to catch up with an old friend and discuss a winemaking

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project idea. We tasted a range of wines, a number of which were from producers I knew from my student and wine retailing days.

Wine, like many other things in life, tends to be driven by fashions (think oaky, buttery Chardonnay and insert which ever emoji response that evokes). What struck me was how much wine styles had changed; they had become richer and bolder.

While I was in Adelaide the region was experiencing extreme heatwave conditions -- 44.6 degrees Celsius (112 degrees Fahrenheit). The day after I left, bushfires erupted in the Adelaide Hills, a region known to be a cooler climate area (for mainland Australia) and a reputed Pinot Noir growing region. In all, more than 1,100 hectares (2,700 acres) of vineyards were destroyed by the fires, or in more vinous terms, potentially more than 525,000 cases of annual wine production!

Now let me be clear, as I write this article, I wish it to be as apolitical as possible. However, climate change is real and regardless of your views (informed or otherwise), action is required.

After several years of raging fires in Washington, Oregon, California and now Australia, it is clear that the wine industry is being affected by the dramatic change in climate. It must be possible for us to band together as humans to come up with effective ways of addressing climate change for the better, retain what the wine industry has become after thousands of years of evolution and still have a strong economy.

Recommendation, sit with your dearest friend over a bottle of wine and discuss the opportunity you have to protect our beautiful wine country (and planet).

"Wine can be a better teacher than ink, and banter is often better than books."

-- Stephen Fry, English actor/writer

Mark Nicholl owns Oregon Wine Lab in Eugene and is the winemaker at William Rose Wines.

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