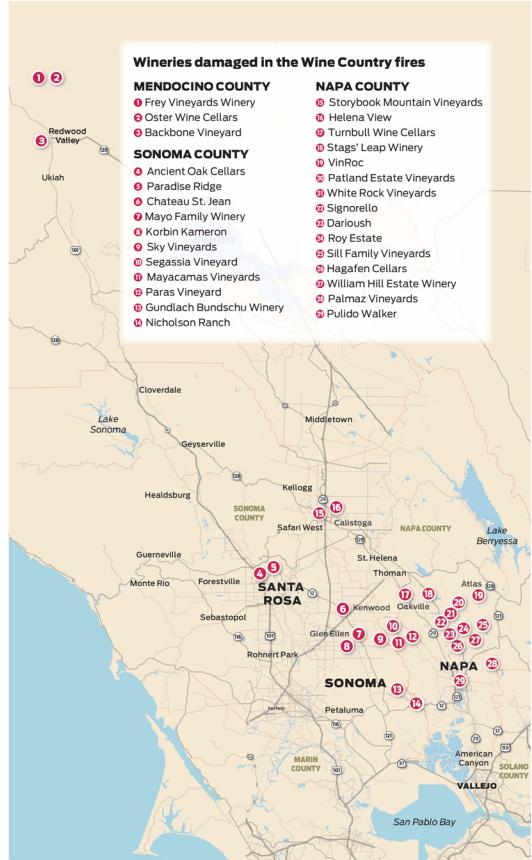


## WINE COUNTRY FIRES



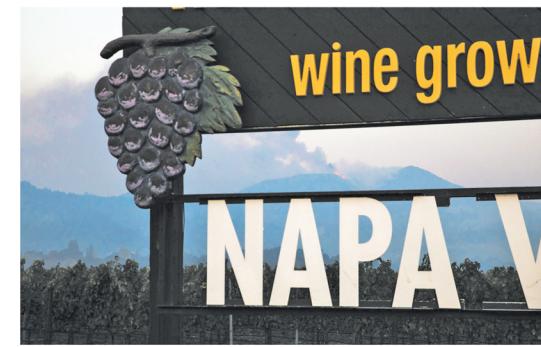
Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle



Esther Mobley and Tam Duong Jr. / The Chronicle

# HOPE AS OWNERS RETURN

Wineries from page A1



Though inventories of bottled wines were destroyed, including at least 15 percent at Napa's White Rock Vineyards, above, in last week's wildfires, the grapevines are likely to survive.

wine shelves for years, vintners are reckoning with the future of their businesses — and their overwhelming sentiment is one of hope.

According to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, 45,341 acres of grapevines are planted in Napa and 59,509 acres in Sonoma. Together, the counties employ more than 10,000 workers, and the business of wine is worth more than \$27 billion to the local economy.

From a cultural perspective, from a heritage perspective, from an emotional perspective, Wine Country's mark on California's identity is indelible.

It is a place where business is fueled by parents handing down farming traditions to children, by neighbors lending each other

equipment, by friends sharing bottles with friends. Napa and Sonoma may have worldwide renown, yet in many ways, they still feel like small farming towns.

That sense of community helped vintners remain optimistic this week, even as they watched with horror as the fire

grew, and as many lost their own homes.

The first piece of good news is that the grapevines themselves are probably fine — or will be within a couple of years.

"Fire doesn't kill vines," said viticulturist Daniel Roberts of

Sonoma County's Integrated Wine Growing. Fire "can burn them back, and then won't have crop next year. But I've brought vineyards back after fire."

In fact, vineyards served as highly effective fire breaks, guarding nearby buildings from blazes. That's because a standing vine will have a moisture

content of as much as 50 percent, even in a dry year," explained Joe Zicherman, a fire safety expert and owner of Zicherman Roemer Vineyard in Anderson Valley. For a vine to reach its fiber saturation point — where it could burn through — requires a prolonged heating period. "And wildfires move fast," he said.

Still, some vineyards and the word "salvageable" does not come to mind. At Old Hill Ranch in Sonoma Valley, most of owner Will Bucklin's 140-year-old vines were spared. Others were reduced to piles of white ash.

"Looking at some of the affected areas, you'll see fire and smoke in the vineyards," Zicherman continued, "but I don't foresee a lot of damage to the vineyards themselves."

According to Roberts, you can tell whether a vine has been burned by cutting into its cane and seeing whether there's still green tissue. If the cane has died, the bud, which would eventually become next year's grapes, has died, too. In that case, a vine would not bear fruit in 2018, he said, but he would expect it to come back the following year.

Roberts farms vineyards all over Napa and Sonoma counties, and many of them remained inaccessible at week's end, so he still had not been able to assess the damage. Either way, he feels positive. He's dealt with fire-damaged vineyards before.

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able inventory losses. Red wines usually age in barrels for one to three years before bottling, and many winemakers then hold on to bottles for a year or more before releasing them to the public. That means wineries affected by the fire may just be facing reconstruction of their buildings. They could also lose three or more years' worth of product.

"Ninety percent of the crop is in for the county, which is a very lucky thing," said Steve Dutton, co-owner of Dutton Ranch, one of the largest grape growers in Sonoma County. In Napa, White Rock Vineyards General Manager Heather Conlin said they were about 80 percent finished; Ray Signorello, whose namesake Silverado Trail wine is now on the ground, said only about 3 tons hung over the vines.

"It's probably fair to say that the fruit's still hanging will have some smoke taint," Conlin said, in which case they would not make the wine. From an optimal ripeness perspective, she added, "At this point, the fruit has probably been hanging a little too long."

Though the fires largely halted harvest activity in Napa and Sonoma, especially since road closures kept employees away, some crews returned to the fields to pick up what was left of the 2017 crop. Andy Beckoff, owner of Beckstoffer Vineyards, confirmed that his company had harvested fruit on Monday, and Pete Richmond of Silverado Farming Co. said on Wednesday that his crews would be picking grapes.

Others, like Eppie Orlaz of Palo Alto Vineyard Manage-

ment, said they would not send workers to pick when air quality was poor.

Vineyards are one thing. Smoke taint inside wines is another matter entirely — one that Napa and Sonoma wine-makers had never confronted before this week.

Fermenting wines this week were left open to the smoky air within winery structures. Fermentation cannot be done in bright sunlight because they are producing carbon dioxide. Tanks full of fermenting wine have to be vented; many winemakers, in fact, opt for fermentation vessels with fully open tops.

"I don't even know what happens to the vintage now," said Joe Nielsen, winemaker for Donelan Family Wines. On Cedar Lane in Santa Rosa, the Donelan winery is near the devastated Coffey Park residential neighborhood. The wine remains intact. But the smoke in the air is thick.

Nielson and no idea whether the smoke in the air could infect the nascent wines. "This is a completely unpredictable situation," he said.

*Esther Mobley is The San Francisco Chronicle's wine, beer, and spirits writer. Email: emobley@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @Esther\_mobley*

By Catherine Ho

"I keep thinking the worst is over, and we're getting surprised," said Taylor, who brought his German shepherd Greta with him to the Basque Boulangerie Cafe. "The cafe became a gathering spot Saturday for residents to exchange tales of the past week. Some hadn't been able to check on their homes since they fled the flames late Sunday."

On Wednesday, Taylor's 58th birthday, police officers burst into the downtown Sonoma square, the square was largely deserted.

"All these people have no place to go. We all stick together. That's what's so good about the town."

Stephen Moore, sports bar owner</