



New York Winemakers Comment on the 2010 Vintage

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I was talking with Vinny Aliperti of Atwater Vineyards and Billsboro Winery late last week, and he was looking like most winemakers tend to look this time of year: purple on the hands and bags under the eyes. I asked for his thoughts about the season: “It’s been a good year. There’s not a whole lot more to say.” Looking at him, I got the impression of someone who just watched a tornado go past his house. Instead of doing lots of damage, however, the rain cleaned out the gutters and the wind actually pushed the leaves into neat piles and made the garden look neater.

Juan Micieli-Martinez, winemaker at Martha Clara, called it a roller coaster, but “I would get back on again though. There have been other roller coaster years that I would decline getting back on.” A roller coaster, a freak storm, a year where mid-September to mid-October contained some of the most intense and concentrated work many wineries have ever seen and where the degree days accumulated like the score on a pinball machine - this was 2010 in New York.



Late Harvest Vignoles at Anthony Road Wine Company was one of the few unharvested blocks remaining in the Finger Lakes by October 22.

Early heat. “The season started out with a lot of heat,” says Matthew Spaccarelli of Benmarl, and the early heat led to some frost problems in the Hudson Valley. The upside for vineyards that didn’t see frost was that “the burst of hot spring weather got everything right out of the gate,” according to Juan Micieli-Martinez at Martha Clara. The heat held as the rains came and went, and Finger Lakes Viticulture Extension Specialist Hans Walter-Peterson noted that Geneva had accumulated more growing degree days by the end of August than it had at the end of October last year. Nowhere was there more heat than on Long Island. The amazing degree day accumulation led to what Rich Olsen- Harbich of Bedell Cellars calls the earliest harvest on record, or at least the “earliest in the modern era of bird-netting.” Riverhead was able to top Geneva in jaw-dropping statistics where the GDDs August 31 were roughly the same as Napa and Sonoma combined.

September crush. The result of the heat was that September, a month where many wineries twiddled their collective thumbs last year, became the setting for the majority of the crush. “For a small, under-staffed winery like us it was a lot to handle,” reports Matt at Benmarl. “Lots of stress,” agrees Kris Kane at Presque Isle, but in return “everything that was early was spectacular. Even the Chambourcin got ripe.” As Chris Stamp of Lakewood Vineyards says, 2010 has been “so much easier in the cellar, because you don’t have to balance

the juices. They came in balanced. You squirt it in a tank, clarify and add yeast.” (Ed. Note: Trained professional. Results may vary.) At Presque Isle, the sugar bill “is a third of last year’s.” The downside? Pinot Noir shot past 20° brix during Labor Day picnics, challenging those who wanted to make sparkling wine.

Rain. It was against a backdrop of frantic but joyful harvest that a large part of the state got a forced break in the form of some heavy and sustained rain. Had it happened in California, this weather pattern would currently be the subject of congressional hearings. As it happened here, however: “two-week break,” says Lindsay Stevens of King Ferry Winery. As Chris Stamp puts it, “if you could edit out that rain, the year would be perfect.” At this point I feel compelled to admit that I was trying to get my house painted in early October, so sorry about that. Chris continued, however: “Given a choice, I’d take a season like this every year.” His sentiments are echoed across the state, as hopes are high for everything, red wines in particular.

Heat without drought. One interesting note was that in this year when neither heat nor water was limiting, development occurred in different ways in different places. “There was not the normal spacing between varieties,” reports Juan from Martha Clara. “We are a farm of 14 different varieties and for the most part things were out of the normal picking sync.” Some winemakers reported getting the brix where they needed but still seeing high acids, while others saw the acid numbers getting frighteningly low and picked accordingly.

In the end, however, Rich Olsen-Harbich sees the delightful combination of “soft acids with low pH,” Pinot noir looks “fantastic” according to Lindsay Stevens (and others) and Kris Kane’s red hybrids are “quite pleasant.” If Kris could have had anything, it would be “more of everything.”

As I write, the last grapes have been crushed at the Vinification & Brewing Lab in Geneva and about half the wineries I talked with reported having everything in. Overall, everyone agreed on three major points:

- Although different places had different paths, the overall fruit quality is excellent,
- Despite rain early, late and in between, most grapes were kept remarkably clean as long as humanly possible, and
- It’s been intense.

Once again, there was an “excellent partnership” between vineyard and winery, as Chris Stamp put it, not only in terms of fruit quality but also in the logistics of getting things harvested rapidly. As things finally slow down, and Vinny can get some sleep and some SO₂ on his stained hands, the year is still looking pretty darn good.

How good? I asked Rich Olsen-Harbich to compare it to a recent year and he had some fairly encouraging words: “I’m not sure there is a comparable year. I don’t see it comparing to anything else. For us, for the reds, it’s been special.” Maybe we should plan to get the house painted more often.

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