

Harvest 2013: lower yields and good quality with variability the key note

White harvest – resilience in the face of contrasting extremes

(Assessed in mid-to late-January)

Starkly contrasting conditions greeted the white winegrape harvest preparation. There were early January heatwaves across SA and the eastern states in addition to some bushfires in the southern parts of SA and Victoria. Almost at the same time there were drenching, cyclone-inspired rains that swept down the eastern seaboard and some way inland, from south-east Queensland almost to Sydney.

On the eastern seaboard, Queensland's Granite Belt appears to have escaped the full force of the rains although the Burnett region was more in harm's way. Rain in the Lower Hunter arrived late in the white harvest and therefore had little impact. Further inland from the NSW coast, in Mudgee and Orange, the rain on the margins of the seaboard activity was a bonus since on-farm dam storages were depleting in hot, dry conditions that existed inland from the coast.

Bushfires in the more southern growing districts of Australia raised concerns but luckily there was no evidence of widespread damage or significant impacts on the national harvest outcome. Concerns about smoke taint did not arise because of the early stage of development and less sensitive state of the fruit, the general separation between fires and winegrape growing districts and - where the drift of smoke did reach vineyards - prior dispersal of volatile smoke compounds that were therefore not absorbed.

There was widespread agreement early in the harvest that tonnes per hectare yields were below average. Until more quantified results are available, it will not be possible to determine if the yields in 2013 will match or be lower than the yields of the last two seasons, which were also lower-yielding seasons. Nevertheless, general agreement places yields in 2013 in the range of 5% to 10% down on the longer term average.

While the early-January heatwaves were cited as having an influence on yields, this factor was considered to be less significant than the lower yield potential in 2013 stemming from the fact that 2013's fruiting buds were first forming in the latter part of 2011 - a horror year for coolness and damp which meant poor conditions for the development, and therefore the potential, in 2013 fruitfulness.

The impact of the heatwaves is widely believed to have been mitigated by satisfactory winter rains (prior to the onset of drier conditions commencing in spring) that filled soil moisture profiles, plus ample availability of water for irrigation in the river districts, giving healthy vines with resilience in the face of the heat, including canopies that protected the fruit from sunburn.

Nevertheless, the heatwaves were a factor in lowering 2013 yields although the impact varied from location to location. The role of water in mitigating the effect of heatwaves became critical in these conditions and differences in application also contributed to the yield variability in 2013 (irrigated versus dry land growing, cost, watering technology or water management practices).

The general dryness of the season and absence of disease has been a large factor in a good quality white harvest. Also contributing to an expected good quality crop are: steady vine and fruit development prior to the heat in early January, shrivelled fruit simply dropping from the vine leaving clean bunches and cooler nights that have allowed character development.

Red harvest – warm, dry conditions mean a condensed harvest

(Assessed in mid-March)

At the time of assessing the 2013 red harvest, it was about to, or had just commenced in the cooler districts like the Coonawarra and Adelaide Hills as well as Western Australia, while in the more northerly temperate districts like the Hunter, Barossa and Clare Valleys the red harvest was well underway as it was in the warm inland districts, namely: Riverland, Murray Valley and Riverina. Tasmania had just commenced picking whites for sparkling in early March.

The most advanced harvests appeared to be in the Hunter (complete at the time of review) and the Murray Valley (just about to finish).

The weather that greeted the final maturation of the red winegrape harvest had moderated since the heatwaves that greeted the maturing whites in early January. Nevertheless, while the extremities of the earlier period were not present, warm and dry conditions were the dominant theme and influence.

The Bureau of Meteorology reported that the 2013 summer had been the hottest on record and some areas were reporting it had been the driest in 25 to 30 years.

The 2013 harvest has been widely reported to have started two and even three weeks earlier than the long-term average with rapid rises in sugar levels bringing harvesting schedules forward. The condensed nature of the vintage provided logistical challenges for harvest contractors and processors as well as challenges for growers and winemakers who were trying to achieve the ideal balance of sugar, acid, colour and flavour in the circumstances where sugar was racing ahead.

Frequent reports of rain incidents in late February/early March were considered a blessing at best because they improved quality by slowing the frantic pace of sugar development and allowing other characters to catch up, or harmless at least because of their brevity and lateness in the crop's development thereby precluding impacts on quality.

Meanwhile, Western Australia experienced favourable seasonal conditions with the absence of extreme heatwaves, a slightly wetter spring and ideal dryness for ripening in January and February. While the warm and dry conditions in Tasmania were not as intense as in the rest of Australia, it was nevertheless warmer and drier than average for these cooler climes, which is expected to contribute to tonnages being something like 30% higher in 2013.

Update on white harvest in mid-March

Reflecting on the white harvest that has largely finished, tonnes per hectare were generally average to below average, with an exception appearing to be Adelaide Hills Sauvignon Blanc for which high yields are reported. Whites are likely to have better quality outcomes than reds given less exposure to the challenges of 2013.

While the final story for reds is yet to be determined, Merlot is widely reported to have yielded well while Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz are widely reported have be lower-than-average yields, (particularly Shiraz).

Red flavour is widely reported as 'bright' and concentrated while full development of colour, depending on the location, may have been hampered by the dry, warm conditions.

Variability the key note in 2013

As mentioned above, variability has been a strong theme in 2013 with the conditions reported in the foregoing passages being patchy.

This variability makes 2013 total tonnages difficult to predict.

Prices disappointing

Indicative winegrape prices announced early in the season were disappointing - and confusing - to growers. While higher-grade fruit appeared to attract good prices, consistent with the current strong demand for higher-priced wines, mid- to lower-grades of fruit were attracting prices that were the same, and more frequently, lower than last year. Grower confusion comes from the contradiction between these price offers and talk in the industry of a turnaround.

As expected with the emerging view that tonnages were down in 2013, prices appeared to generally edge up from the early season indications but have nevertheless remained unremarkable.

Moreover, when combined with lower-than-average tonnes per hectare, returns to most growers from the 2013 harvest are destined to be less than cost again in 2013.

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