

Vintage Report 2010



VILLA MARIA
ESTATE
NEW ZEALAND

Marlborough and Waipara

The 2009 winter saw average levels of rainfall for the two regions. We saw considerable amounts of snow in the mountains but this had no impact on the vines at this time of the year. Bud burst was slightly early due to an unseasonably warm August. Fortunately given this early start we didn't experience any frost issues but there were plenty of cool nights. Temperatures only dipped below zero on a few nights in the cooler parts of Marlborough & Waipara and were easily managed with frost protection. The cool spring in Marlborough meant the region tracked below average for heat accumulation; Waipara was about average. No problems with disease

Flowering was slightly slower for the early varieties (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir & Pinot Gris) but with average to good fruit set. Sauvignon Blanc depended on the sub-region but over all vineyards reported slightly below to slightly above average fruit set.

By late January the summer had continued to be cooler than average, though reasonably dry. At that stage I suspected that we would run around a week to 10 days behind normal. As it turned out the growing season tracked 1-2 weeks behind the Long Term Average (LTA) by way of Growing Degree Days accumulated.

Initiation (bunch & flower numbers) was average to slightly above average. Most Sauvignon Blanc vineyards were within specifications and therefore did not require any thinning. With other varieties it is site dependent and most tracked to meet our harvest specifications. Fruit thinning this year is low to moderate (i.e. normal) for varieties with lower yield specifications. Yields across all varieties were more moderate than the previous year due to the natural set or timely intervention. This meant the vines were not burdened with excess fruit to ripen hence flavour development was not compromised.

Although this year tracked slightly cooler than average, all varieties were on target or close to desired specifications all season. We adjusted our leaf plucking policy to open up canopies on Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris & Riesling a little more which helped maintain flavour development and ensure normal acid degradation in the lead up to harvest in these varieties. Sauvignon Blanc canopy growth has been a little slower than in previous seasons so densities were not excessive and over all canopy health was excellent. This ensured good flavours and ripeness despite slightly cool conditions. This is an El Nino weather pattern which tends towards a dry summer and autumn.

As was projected, with the vintage tracking late, coupled with well moderated yields, the region was at risk of having a condensed vintage with the vintage end point remaining constant. This eventuated with the main flow of harvest starting on the 6th of April and 90% of the volume safely in the winery within 14 days. Logistics, staff and equipment were tested in this period and came through relatively unscathed. Having the ability to pick, process and turn around quickly is paramount when it comes to the climax of the season.

At the beginning of April Marlborough experienced 3-4 mornings in a row where temperatures reached zero degrees. Whilst nothing was frosted the vines did begin to shut down and senescence kicked in. This coupled with the warm nights and unseasonal north-westerly winds caused a small amount of dehydration concentrating sugars, acids and flavours and created substantial urgency to get the fruit in.

Yields for all varieties were generally very close to expected with the exception of Waipara where all varieties were down to varying degrees. This was due to a number of factors including issues with water late season, poor flowering due to the cool easterlies and the resonance of a poor 2009 vintage due to hail.

The quality of the fruit across the board for both Marlborough and Waipara was generally very good with little or no disease issues and as previously mentioned well moderated yields. Moderate yields, no disease and no rain meant for good vineyard flavour concentration in both regions.

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The harvest crew and equipment worked very well this year with a noticeable quality difference between fruit harvested with Villa Maria Estate's 'Selectiv' Pellencs and other machines. The 'quantum leap' in the quality of the sample ie, whole berries and absence of material other than grapes is remarkable. This difference will demand attention when looking at fruit harvested by other machines in the future.

In summary Vintage 2010 will be remembered for its moderately tempered growing season, clean fruit, higher than normal Brix, concentrated flavours and perfect weather. It was a vintage that should see wines of quality and concentration especially in Pinot Noir and the more aromatic varieties. It was a vintage that emphasises the importance of processing space when the pressure is on to harvest.

Hawkes Bay

The winter months of June and July 2009 were a lot cooler than average making conditions difficult for the pruning gangs around Hawkes Bay. Rainfall in winter was around average which meant that the soil moisture levels were topped up ready for the growing season.

Budburst in the early varieties such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir was a lot earlier than normal with most blocks well out by late August. This was thanks largely to the very warm second half of August in which we experienced no frosts and almost a week where average temperatures were around 15°C. A cooler September meant that later bursting varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon weren't as early.

With spring growth we had the potential for frost losses. This spring we experienced a number of frosts so many helicopters, wind machines and water flippers were in action. A lot of the frosts were around the 0°C mark so decisions weather to fly helicopters were made more difficult with costs in mind. Overall correct decisions were made with minimal damage. An unforecasted event late on in November caught many growers by surprise with some damage experienced, mainly in dips and low lying areas.

Aside from frosts, average temperatures over the spring were well below long term averages, particularly in October where they were more than 2°C below making it the coldest October in many years for Hawkes Bay and much of the country. The reduction in temperatures had put the season well behind in Growing Degree Days, pointing to a later harvest. This resulted in slower shoot growth around the region and many blocks struggling for substantial canopy area before flowering and leaf plucking.

Flowering in Hawkes Bay was a mixed bag. Early blocks like Chardonnay seemed to get through OK but some Merlot and later Chardonnay blocks felt the full force of the weather conditions. Most regions of Hawkes Bay were confronted with over 70mm of rain in early December and temperatures under 18°C for a week. This weather resulted in a lot of Hen & Chicken in most Chardonnay across the region, and many other blocks with poorer fruit set, ultimately resulting in smaller bunches and lower crops. The pressure from this weather has made spray timing and coverage vital during this period to ensure maximum protection against any botrytis infection around the flower parts.

Summer started very poorly with undesirable conditions over flowering. However the rest of December had temperatures frequently reaching above 25°C and little rainfall during the berry development growth phase. January started very promisingly with high temperatures, often getting above 30°C and the headlands and hills around the region browning off with the low soil water levels. However, mid January brought with it colder temperatures and a lot more rainfall which resulted in some extra vigour to the canopies and the region looking a lot greener.

Crops in general across the region were small to average. The odd blocks where bud burst and fruit set were good are sitting above our target volumes, so some thinning was required.

By late January the season was 90 Growing Degree Days behind the average at this time of year. This pointed to a vintage being 10-14 days later than normal. However, with the smaller crops around the region there was potential for better ripening of fruit with good flavour intensity.

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As predicted, the 2010 vintage was late getting started and ended up being quite a drawn out affair. In some respects, the vintage never built much momentum, with a very clear definition between the harvest dates of white and red varieties.

Mother Nature was certainly on our side for the late summer – autumn weather which was a dream. An 'Indian Summer' meant very warm dry weather and great ripening conditions for all varieties.

Chardonnay as a variety in Hawkes Bay performed remarkably well. Flavours intensified slowly on the vines, and once the sugars and acids were in balance, fruit condition was fantastic. Viognier also looks very promising and those Pinot Gris vineyards which held fruit condition and were able to achieve optimum ripeness have delivered fruit of very high quality. Some blocks struggled to achieve this ripeness and fruit concentration was decreased.

Again with the reds, the opportunity existed to hold fruit on the vines until flavour and balance were achieved. The Gimblett Gravels provided some early harvest dates for Merlot. Flavour intensity was also very impressive and no sign of any disease. The later ripening Syrah performed wonderfully in the warm late summer conditions and with crop levels below average, looked exceptional at harvest time. Cabernet Sauvignon needed every minute of sunshine this season and those vineyards that are positioned to take advantage of this and had crop levels that were well regulated performed well.

Gisborne

The winter of 2009 was wetter than normal; after two consecutive dry winters where the soil moisture levels had been in deficit, we saw a return to normal levels. This year we have noticed a lot more vine vigour.

Bud burst was almost two weeks early following a very warm August but growth was slowed by a cool wet October which brought growth back to normal. Fortunately, no spring frosts were experienced. By early January there had been very little disease showing up in the vineyards despite high powdery mildew pressure.

Flowering in the early varieties was poor. Mendoza and clone 15 Chardonnay flowering in particular was affected by the cool wet weather resulting in a lot of "hen and chicken" berries, most other varieties also have lighter looser bunches going into veraison.

Generally the crop loads were lighter than normal. Growers did a lot of shoot thinning after budburst and, along with the poor flowering, we anticipated that the crops could be down by as much 20%. After quite a wet January we had one of the driest February/March ripening periods in a long time, leading to what many are saying was one of the best vintages since 1989. The January rain sparked quite an outbreak of Botrytis in the Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer and Pinot Gris. Growers reacted quickly and removed more leaves from the bunch zone and cut the worst of the rot out. The weather improved and dried out any remaining Botrytis. Although dry, the ripening period was not a warm one and this delayed harvest of the aromatics in particular by nearly a week. The Chardonnay however ripened a little earlier as most blocks were carrying a lighter crop than normal. Despite the late January rain the standout varieties this year were Chardonnay and Viognier with some very special parcels of fruit harvested. The first harvest day was the 2nd of March and the final day was the 19th of April with crop levels down 10% on our estimate.

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