

Wine industry expects a promising grape crop

The South African wine industry is excited about a particularly promising wine grape crop, both in terms of quality and volume. The harvest season was characterised by healthy, ideal growing conditions and a cool, though lengthened, harvesting period without rain or prolonged heat.

Inland wine growing areas recorded some of the best crops ever, while dwindling water supplies in the coastal region caused a systematic decrease in the anticipated crop over the season. The consequences of flood damage in the Orange River region in 2011 are still evident.

The total crop estimate exceeds that of 2011, and high quality wines are anticipated for the 2012 wine grape crop. The South African wine industry is able to buffer large fluctuations in overall crop size and quality, thanks to the diversity of the respective cultivation areas.

Crop size bigger than 2011

The 2012 wine grape harvest is expected to amount to 1 405 845 tons according to the latest estimate (30 April) of the SA Wine Industry Information and Systems (Sawis). This exceeds the 2011 crop by 8% and is only 10% smaller than the overall record crop of 2008. Paarl, Malmesbury, Stellenbosch and the Orange River will have smaller harvests, while the rest of the nine districts expect record harvests.

The 2012 wine harvest - including juice and concentrate for non-alcoholic purposes, wine for brandy and distilling wine - is expected to amount to 1 085 million litres, calculated at an average recovery of 772 litres per ton of grapes.

The 2011/2012 season kicked off with sufficient cold, but a drier winter than usual, especially in the coastal regions. Sufficient cold units had accumulated by the end of June, and with August being warmer, bud burst was a week early in some blocks. Vineyards showed good growth in the ideal weather conditions at the start of the new growing season.

Cold and rain caused uneven flowering

Abnormally cold and rainy conditions during the second part of flowering resulted in uneven flowering and berry set, with high disease pressure, which producers managed to control satisfactorily.

Weather conditions were back to normal in December, and less wind than usual resulted in less damage to grapevines than previous years. January was exceptionally hot, with heatwaves resulting in sunburn damage in some instances. This exacerbated pressure on dryland vineyards, which already had little soil water resources at that stage.

The ripening period in February and March was further characterised by ideal, cool weather conditions for slow ripening, resulting in good colour and flavour in red cultivars especially. Very dry weather also contributed to healthy grapes and the absence of diseases and rot. Cooler weather delayed the start of the harvest by about two weeks and the last grapes were crushed two to three weeks later than usual.

Excitement about wine potential

Producers, viticulturists and winemakers are excited about the quality of this year's crop, and some districts expect the best quality in years. The cool harvest period and slow ripening resulted in smaller berries with intense colour and exceptional flavours - in the red cultivars especially - as well as optimal ripeness levels at lower sugars, which led to lower alcohol levels. Throughout the industry winemakers anticipate excellent white wines with good fruit and structure.

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