

2024 harvest report – California, Oregon and Washington

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Despite challenges, it's a banner year for wine up and down the West Coast. Above, a harvest rainbow at WeatherEye Vineyard in Washington State.

According to the NOAA (the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#)), June–August 2024 was the hottest summer on record for the northern hemisphere. While the US West Coast has not been immune to the heat, it's been far less pronounced than in the north-east. And, for most areas on the West Coast, the average temperature for the last 9 months hasn't exceeded 1 °F more than normal.

1 January to 30 September 2024: mean temperature departures from 1991–2020 computed averages

Precipitation has, similarly, been fairly in line with historic averages.

1 January to 30 September 2024: precipitation percentages of 1991–2020 computed averages

Of course, there is the flaw of averages ...

With this season's temperature fluctuations top of mind, I called up winegrowers to find out how the season treated them.

Washington

'We went from wild to mild to wild to mild', said Ryan Johnson, vineyard manager and partner in [WeatherEye Vineyard](#) on Red Mountain, describing a cold snap, a perfect spring, a heatwave and a warmish fall.

While eyes were focused just across the Canadian border on British Columbia, where a [devastating January cold snap](#) took out 99% of the year's crop, Washington nursed less-grievous wounds from the same arctic airmass.

'On January 11 we had a high temp of 40 °F [4 °C]. A wind blew out of the north and the next morning we had a low temp of 2.6 °F [-16.3 °C] with a windchill of -37 °F and 30 mph sustained gusts. Normally elevation saves us [their vineyards are at 950–1,410 ft/290–430 m] but when an airmass blows in like that we feel the full brunt. We hit -2.8 °F [in the vineyards] on January 13.' Still, the worst effect was some bud damage, mostly in Syrah (which is particularly sensitive to dramatic temperature swings), which made its yields slightly lighter than average.

As the season rolled into April, temperatures were normal to slightly warm; budbreak in Johnson's high-elevation vineyards on Red Mountain began on 6 April, a few days ahead of usual. This was similarly true on the far west side of the Yakima Valley at Red Willow Vineyard, where budbreak occurred on 14 April – 6 days ahead of normal.

Budbreak at Red Willow

But, as you can see in the maps above, May was cold – causing growth to slow down significantly. 'By the time we got to bloom we were behind', said Jonathan Sauer, fourth-generation farmer of Red Willow Vineyard in Yakima Valley. 'We called general bloom June 8, which is a day later than our average going back to 2008.'

With the growing season in full swing, pressures changed with the weather. 'June was comfortable for us as humans, which means it was also comfortable for [powdery mildew](#), so early in the season it was about staying on top of that', said Johnson. 'That changed in July when we had 17 days at 100 °F [38 °C] or higher – then we had to focus on irrigation management and shaping canopies to give shade.'

After the first week of August, temperatures dropped, and the weather stayed beautifully warm, with bluebird skies. When I talked to Sauer on 15 October, he had his last pick of the season scheduled for the following day. 'Dad [Mike Sauer] always says that the magic of Washington is in September and October. This year was no exception. You have northerly latitude, so days get shorter but it's mild and warm and sugars are still building, and you can wait for the right moment to pick.'

Blue skies at Red Willow Vineyard

Given the long, warm fall, winemakers had the leeway to pick whenever they chose to, making a range of styles. Sauer and Johnson both tell me that the fruit was beautiful and, based on the flavour development and colour, they expect excellent wines this year.

Oregon

The arctic blast that hit BC and lowered yields in Washington barely reached across the border into Oregon's Columbia Gorge. 'We did have colder-than-normal temps for 10 days and we saw some bud damage in Godello and Albariño', Steven Thompson, owner and winemaker at Analemma, told me. 'Yields in those two varieties are down. But overall, we're not high or low.'

Budbreak was slightly later than recent years for Thompson, with the earliest of his 15 varieties starting in early May. A hundred miles south-west, in the Willamette Valley, a gentler start to the year led to average timing for budbreak – around the second week of April – said Drew Herman at Alexana Vineyard and Winery. Both Thompson and Herman

report that the cooler weather in May resulted in even shoot growth leading up to flowering. A little rain during bloom in the third week of June resulted in [shatter](#), which Herman said, ‘opened up a nice amount of space in clusters’.

As the season progressed, the largest pressure became powdery mildew. Herman said that this was the second year in a row that organic sites performed better than conventional. ‘I think it’s collaboration – we’re all talking to each other and less focused on sprays and more focused on the timing of canopy management.’

Although July was hot, with a few heat spikes, the season was mild overall, and soil moisture set up growers well. By veraison, Thompson was dropping fruit in order to ensure full ripeness by the end of the season.

Picking generally began the second week of September and extended well into October.

‘We had a long runway this year’, said Tyson Crowley, winemaker and owner of Crowley Wines in the Willamette Valley. ‘When you get these later seasons, you start to get great flavour development without the sugar pickup ... the problem is that it’s easy to get greedy and take more hang time. I took my Dundee stuff off early – it was warm enough that anything exposed to the west side might have seen dehydration and I didn’t want alcohols to go up.’ He tells me that his alcohols are moderate – ranging from high 12s to low 13s.

From left to right: Brett Lindstrom, Tyson Crowley and Evan Roberts at Crowley Wines

‘If I were making wishes, I wish we’d had a bit less heat at the end’, Herman told me. ‘Eola-Amity got that, but I wish I could have taken a bit more hang time here [in Dundee Hills]. I was done within 10 to 13 days. Still, it was a perfect vintage. Berries were small, I had more fruit than previous vintages, plenty of colour, lots of acid, enough tannin. It’s not as fruity as previous vintages and it’ll hold up really well in the cellar.’

‘I think the wines will be a bit more intense, darker, but give off the cool-climate vibe’, said Crowley.

California

Napa

‘I hope you’re talking to someone in the valley, too, because one of the vintage signatures is how different mountain and valley behaved’, Julia van der Vink warned me when I asked about harvest 2024. van der Vink is the former vineyard manager of Harlan Estate, now co-owner of the newly launched Aerika Estate on Mt Veeder.

Julia van der Vink and her 2024 harvest crew at Aerika

California, as you can see from the temperature comparison maps, had a relatively warm January, a mild spring, and above-average precipitation. van der Vink told me that their soil was fully saturated at the beginning of the season.

Budbreak was average – around mid April – as was flowering, which began around the end of May. But after a warm June, temperatures spiked in July.

‘The July heatwave was hardcore’, van der Vink recalled. ‘We had seven days in mid July over 95 °F [35 °C], two over 100 °F. We’re at 2,000 feet [610 m] elevation; we should be cooler than the valley – and that’s true ... the mountains didn’t get as hot during the days. But nighttime temps stayed between 75 and 83 °F [24–28 °C] during that whole period.’ The valley, on the other hand, had 13 days over 100 °F (with maxes up to 113 °F) and was consistently dropping back down to 50 °F (10 °C) at night. ‘We had completely different harvest trajectories from that point onward’, she said.

The hot nighttime temperatures accelerated ripening. ‘On August 5 we were at fifty per cent veraison. Then we had a second heatwave at the beginning of September, and we had to pick – we had fruit going from 22 to 24 °Brix in a day. We picked six Cabernet vineyards in two days. The valley was three weeks behind us.’

Harvest 2024 at Aerika

Despite the rapid sugar accumulation and need for speed in the mountains, van der Vink says they didn’t see any sunburn and canopies were green into October – something that wasn’t necessarily true in the valley, where sky-high temperatures meant a raised risk of vines closing their stomata and ceasing photosynthesis, ultimately extending the growing season.

Graeme MacDonald, who owns and farms a historic piece of the To Kalon vineyard in Oakville for his and his brother’s label, MacDonald Vineyards, spoke to me about the heat impact for their vineyard. ‘Because heat came early, pre-veraison, the impact on individual vineyards was exacerbated. We dry-farm and heat can shut down our plants – you could see that the sun was bleaching the chlorophyll this year. Our vines’ ability to ripen was in question. What we saw, oddly, was that sugar accumulation went way down. We ultimately picked around a degree Brix lower than usual with similar other chemistry. But some people had higher Brix; it really depends.’ One factor it depends on is irrigation, as watering will often keep vines photosynthesising longer (van der Vink also works with dry-farmed vineyards and, while she and MacDonald picked a month apart, they were both on the early side for their relative locations).

Both van der Vink and MacDonald told me that they are happy with their wines, though MacDonald's fruit was still macerating when we spoke. van der Vink was surprised with how similar the chemistries are to last year's. 'The wines will still feel a bit riper – 0.2% alcohol higher here and there – and they'll feel slightly richer, but our total acidities are in the low sixes, finished', she said.

Sonoma

Just over the Mayacamas Mountains, Sonoma experiences more coastal influence than Napa. Chris Pittenger, winemaker for Limerick Lane and owner-winemaker of Gros Ventre, tells me that their season was straightforward.

'We had above-average rainfall this winter and some late spring rains which led to ample canopies. Budbreak was early-ish – back to the new norm. Then we had fluctuating above-average warm periods and below average cool periods but nothing extreme. The hottest weather was around July 4 when we had a stretch of 100 °F-plus days.'

Pittenger began harvest with a bit of Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache Blanc for rosé on 22 August. The following week there was a bump in temperatures, 'It wasn't extreme, just a week of above-average temperatures that got things moving and the winery filled up really quick. We brought in our last fruit on September 26. The biggest pressure this year was that everything was tracking the same and I had more fruit at once than I would have preferred – I was running out of tanks.'

Lodi

Less than 70 miles (113 km) south-east of Napa and Sonoma, Lodi had an even hotter summer than Napa – which isn't unusual.

'It was a fairly uneventful season', say Stuart Spencer of the Lodi Winegrape Commission. 'Things came on quickly with heat and a lighter crop but we built into the heat so there wasn't damage [when temperatures rise gradually vines have time to acclimate]. There were lots of days over a hundred degrees in July and that resulted in smaller berries and lighter clusters. Then we had another heatwave in August that really accelerated things. Last year I picked my Barbera on October 7; this year it was the last week of August [see [last year's harvest report](#) on the extraordinarily cool, late 2023 season]. In essence it was warm, dry, early, light, very good quality – and a horrible grape market.'

Spencer ballpark that they're down 10–15% in terms of yields.

Paso Robles

In Paso Robles, 232 miles (373 km) south of Lodi, growers report an excellent vintage with variable yields depending on vineyard location. A frost during flowering in May affected growers on the east side of the AVA, which is lower in elevation and sees less maritime influence (see [this guide](#) to the region) – but largely spared those on the west side. Also notable was July, the hottest on record, which pushed ripeness along relatively quickly. It then cooled down in August, before building back up in September and October.

Harvest started slowly at the beginning of September but sped up in the midst of another heatwave at the beginning of October. ‘We were all in by October 15’, said Oliver Mikkelsen of the harvest at MAHA Estate & Villa Creek Cellars.

While sugar accumulation was normal, Mikkelsen says that hot nighttime temperatures in the higher-elevation vineyards on the west side caused vines to continue respirating, metabolising malic acid at a quicker clip, and lowering overall acidity. While this might sound concerning in many areas of the world, vineyards on the west side of Paso Robles are known for sky-high acidities due to the calcareous soils – which means that during most vintages growers are waiting for acids to drop rather than sugars to build. ‘Generalising, I was seeing about 1 to 1.5 g/l less of total acidity at the same potential alcohol’, Mikkelsen said.

Cris and Camille Cherry harvesting at MAHA

This allowed MAHA to pull fruit at slightly lower potential alcohols – 25 instead of 26 °Brix. ‘It’s exciting – with the heat we thought this year was going to be much more of a pain but we had great fruit integrity’, said Cris Cherry, owner of MAHA & Villa Creek.

Santa Barbara

A further 130 miles (209 km) south, Santa Barbara, a truly coastal climate, is a bit of an outlier for California’s 2024 season.

‘The phenomenon we see is that the more the climate changes, and the hotter it gets inland, the more it pulls coastal influence over the top of us and we end up with cool, mild weather’, Justin Willett of Tyler Winery explained to me.

Budbreak started in Santa Barbara the second week of March (about average). Berry count was down at flowering and clusters were very small, leading to yields 25–33% lower than normal.

‘The thing is, it’s always cold and windy during flowering here, and we always have a crop. Earlier-flowering varieties did a bit better than late-flowering varieties this year just because of the timing of the weather’, Willett said, adding that, ‘because it’s always humid there, there’s always powdery mildew pressure – but this year it was much lighter than last.’

Grapes began to ripen at the end of August, with harvest for Sauvignon Blanc starting on 23 August, followed by aromatic whites and sparkling and concluding with Pinot and Chardonnay. 'I suppose it's a weird vintage in the sense that I was trying to delay harvest to get the acidic profile out of the fruit. Sauvignon Blanc came in around the normal time; then it's usually the end of the first week of September for Pinot and Chardonnay, and that was mostly true, but I just picked in Chardonnay in the last week [interview 14 October] and most of the cellar is dry', Willett says, explaining that a few sites took longer to drop acidity than usual.

Willett tells me to expect pretty positively sharp wines on the white side – clean, clear and precise – and reds offering pure red fruit. 'I expect you'll see some people with higher alcohols this year because acids were so high that they were waiting. I let things hang an extra 0.3 degrees over where I'd usually harvest. The wines will still be red and mineral – a bit of reduction – but not a lot.'

Big picture

Reports from growers interviewed suggest an excellent vintage with below-average to average yields along the West Coast. Heat events led some to pick earlier in the season to retain acidity. Others took advantage of a long, warm fall to let the fruit hang. It's very likely that this vintage will see large ranges in alcohol between producers.

The biggest challenge in 2024 seems to be that the grape market is doing poorly and labour costs have increased. Stuart Spencer of Lodi shared, 'I talked to our secretary of agriculture. She said she doesn't ever remember it being this bad – even in the 1980s when we had high interest rates. It's not just us either: it's almonds, walnuts, dairy – everything is struggling.'

Drew Herman, who farms in both Oregon's Willamette Valley and in Napa, California, said, 'Labour has gone up in part because the fruit market is garbage. People are making less wine because they want less capital outlay. Then labour costs increase related to fruit sales because vineyard-management companies make sixty per cent of their money off picking – so when there's a ton of fruit not picked, then they have budget shortfall, and they have to increase labour rates. They figure companies will raise bottle prices ... but you can't raise prices when no one is buying.'

All photos graciously supplied by the wineries. All charts are from WestWide Drought Tracker (J T Abatzoglou, D J McEvoy, K T Redmond: The West Wide Drought Tracker: Drought monitoring at fine spatial scales. Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society).

The 2024 wines will not be out for some time, but in the meantime, check our tasting notes database for [hundreds of new releases](#) from these regions.