



Smoke and Mirrors

LOOKING BACK AT THE 2020 VINTAGE IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

FOR THOSE OF US who made wine in Northern California in 2020, the vintage will be forever remembered as one of extreme potential that ended in devastating losses and uncertainty due to the wildfires that raged throughout the ripening season. With many 2020 wines from the region now on the market, it is time for some thoughts on how to approach them, with the caveat that smoke taint in wine is an infinitely complex topic.

Smoke taint occurs when fruit, or must, is exposed to compounds in the air created by wildfires. These compounds can vary greatly in kind and quantity: Think smoke from burning oaks versus smoke from burning cars. A hint of the former in a wine can come across as similar to that from a toasted oak barrel. Indeed, many of the compounds are literally the same: Eugenol exhibits spice, furfural hints of vanilla and caramel. The smoky bacon notes found in Syrah come from the grape's naturally high levels of guaiacol, another compound found in smoke-tainted wines. Given that we all have varying sensitivities to these compounds, the answer to the question of whether or not a wine is suffering from smoke taint can be a matter of taste. At its worst, however,

smoke taint is unambiguously smoky, with a harsh, lingering metallic finish.

The 2020 Northern California harvest began in late July, prior to the LNU Lightning Complex fire that ignited on August 17. Fruit for sparkling wines, which came in first, was largely unaffected, and early-picked whites such as Sauvignon Blanc should also be safe: These grapes had minimal if any smoke contact and little sugar to bind to any smoke-taint phenols they did absorb. Chardonnay and rosé should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

As September arrived, the wildfires continued, laying thick layers of smoke down over ripening fruit. How were producers to determine if their crops were ruined? Proximity to the fires matters, of course, but if a vineyard even a quarter-mile away is not in the smoke's path, it can escape smoke taint. Exposure duration is another important factor to consider: The longer it is, the heavier the impact.

Researchers at the University of California, Davis, and others have identified many of the phenols we should be testing for. However, these compounds can be present in both "free" forms, which one can smell and taste, and "bound" forms,

which one cannot. The kicker is that as wine ages, molecules break apart: Bound phenols can become free over time, and suddenly a wine that tasted fine has undeniable smoke taint.

Crops that were obviously damaged were mostly forfeited. Sonoma County alone estimated the loss of grapes at \$600 million, a testament to the integrity of the winemaker and this business: Nobody wants to sell faulty wine. However, it is possible that some wines have slipped through the cracks. Perhaps they were not tested properly, and though they tasted fine a year ago the smoke is now beginning to show.

When it comes to 2020 reds, my recommendation is this: Instead of writing off the entire vintage, do your homework. Listen to the vintners and let them tell their stories; pick date and location are key. Taste wines blind, preferably in a group to help calibrate your taste buds to smoke taint. Smoke taint can linger in your mouth for two or more minutes, so leave plenty of time between wines. The more you taste, the more you will know! STJ