

# Giving Pyrazines the

# Green Light

IT'S TIME TO RETHINK  
RIPENESS IN  
CALIFORNIA REDS

by Kate Nowell-Smith

**BY ALL ACCOUNTS**, the 2020 harvest in Napa, Sonoma, and surrounding counties was among the most devastating on record. The impact of the wildfires in terms of fruit lost to smoke taint is something growers and vintners will be sorting out for months, if not years, to come.

But while fires get all of the attention, there is another byproduct of global warming that I see as a far bigger long-term threat to the quality of wines produced in California, and that is the ever-increasing phenomenon of grapes reaching excessively high sugar levels before they are considered phenologically ripe. Fruit that achieves "optimal ripeness" often yields wines that must be heavily manipulated, are high in alcohol, or both. Say your fruit comes in at 28 degrees Brix. That means that there are 280 grams per liter of sugar in your must, so the resulting wine will have a potential alcohol level in the neighborhood of 16.5%. It's well on its way to being a Port!



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Mindful of this trend, winemakers and viticulturists are working hard in many different ways to reverse it. Much is being done that keeps us hopeful, including canopy management and irrigation programs designed to help grapes stay cool during what we now euphemistically refer to as “heat events” (those 100-plus-degree days); experimentation with yeasts that naturally convert less sugar into alcohol; and trials with rootstocks and varieties that ripen sooner while retaining more acid.

Meanwhile, I do see one silver lining to the threat of both rising temperatures and more frequent wildfires (beyond an increasing awareness among winemakers of their carbon footprint, which is of course a necessity): It may finally encourage more producers and consumers alike to reconsider their definition of ripe fruit—especially when it comes to Cabernet Sauvignon, arguably the variety most heavily impacted by climate change in California.

When I’m walking the rows near harvesttime, I’m using all my senses to

evaluate ripeness. With respect to Bordeaux varieties in general and Cabernet Sauvignon in particular, before I have even tasted the fruit, I want to see the stems beginning to lignify and turn brown, and I want to see a fairly uniform, deep color in the cluster. Putting a berry in my mouth, I want the skins to give a little; next I’ll chew the seeds, which should be separated out from the pulp and turning brown, to check for tannin maturity. If they’re underripe, there will be a sharp hit of bitterness; when ripe, they will give a nice crunch and taste pleasantly nutty.

I’d guess that most California winemakers would be with me so far. Our opinions as to what the fruit should actually taste like, however, diverge—and that makes all the difference in the world for the final product.

Ripeness, in general, brings fruit flavors forward. So a ripe Cabernet Sauvignon grape, properly farmed in favorable conditions, should give you a nice burst of delicious flavors—blackberry, black currant, raspberry, and so on. But what about the naturally occurring methoxypyrazines (MPs) found, to a greater or lesser extent, in all Bordeaux varieties? These compounds are responsible for a wide variety of “green” flavors, from green bell pepper to green beans to hints of thyme and sage. For a good decade or more now, many winemakers have dreaded MPs as the enemy; they leave their fruit on the vine long after all other ripeness parameters have been met in an effort to ensure that not a single hint of greenness remains.

It is this intolerance for MPs that needs to be reexamined for the good of the wine, the consumer, and the industry at large. I get it—once picked, MP levels stay relatively unchanged, and their flavors can become more prominent over time if we aren’t careful; I’m not suggesting that notes of canned asparagus or jalapeño should dominate our Cabernets. But I do want us to reembrace the delicious herbaceous notes that occur naturally in many varieties thanks to MPs. All too often, waiting to harvest until every last vestige of greenness is gone means that the fruit will have

lost complexity, varietal typicity, and clarity of flavor. All roads lead to raisination: An overripe must becomes a sort of raisin-prune stew. It will also be excessively high in potential alcohol, will probably have suffered damage from birds and other critters (due to those tasty sugars), and may have trouble fermenting to dryness without serious intervention on the part of the winemaker. Furthermore, the longer fruit is left on the vine, the greater the chance that a fire will strike, causing smoke taint that renders the entire harvest unusable.

The question I ask is: Why are we giving up so much in order to avoid one naturally occurring, potentially delicious flavor component? As a winemaker and consumer, I embrace wines that are naturally lower in alcohol, higher in acidity, complex, fresh, and ageworthy. Many great wines are made this way. I would like to see California Bordeaux varieties reenter this fold. S



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