SOUTH AFRICAN WINE HARVEST REPORT 2020

GREAT SEASON, REMARKABLE WINES

PHOTO: Marais Family Wines, Breedekloof

South Africa's 2020 wine grape crop will bring exceptional wines to consumers, following favourable conditions throughout the season.

"Although it's always important to take our diversity over ten wine grape growing regions into account, the industry had a great season overall, which we believe will produce high quality wines," says Conrad Schutte, consultation service manager of Vinpro, the wine industry's representative body.

The 2020 wine grape crop is estimated at 1 349 883 tonnes – representing a 8.2% increase year on year – according to the latest estimate of industry body SAWIS (South African Wine Industry Information and Systems) on 24 April 2020.

Throughout the 2020 season, weather conditions were favourable in general and the bunch numbers already showed promise early in the season, but windy conditions during the set and sensitive berry growth stages resulted in smaller berries and a consequently lighter crop. The season was also characterised by great variation between and even within the same vineyard blocks in areas that experienced dry conditions.

The Stellenbosch, Swartland, Cape South Coast, Paarl and Breedekloof regions all harvested a larger crop than in 2019, with the Olifants River region almost returning to its normal production levels after being one of the regions hardest hit by the recent drought. The Klein Karoo region still struggles with the ongoing drought, which was also experienced in certain parts of the Robertson region, while frost damage resulted in great crop losses in the Northern Cape.

THE COVID-19 SCURRY

Although the harvesting season commenced approximately two weeks earlier than usual, the unexpected announcement of the COVID-19 lockdown, which was implemented in South Africa from 26 March 2020, created a scurry among many producers to harvest the last grapes of the season and complete winemaking processes in cellars. Wine-related activities were initially prohibited, but Government made a last-minute concession that allowed for harvesting and storage activities, which were essential to prevent wastage of primary agricultural goods during lockdown. At the time, around 40 000 tonnes of wine grapes still had to be harvested.

“With uncertainties during the announcement of the lockdown, some producers decided to harvest the grapes without prejudice just to get it to the cellar, while others waited for optimal ripeness to ensure exceptional quality,” Conrad says.

2019/20 GROWING SEASON

Most regions experienced an improved post-harvest period compared to the previous year. The leaves fell around the same time or later than usual, vines were healthier and producers had access to post-harvest irrigation water.

Sufficient cold units were accumulated during the winter to break dormancy, while rainfall varied across regions but was mostly below average.

With spring came mostly favourable conditions, which contributed to a somewhat earlier but even bud-break. The early growing season will especially be remembered for good, homogenous shoot growth.

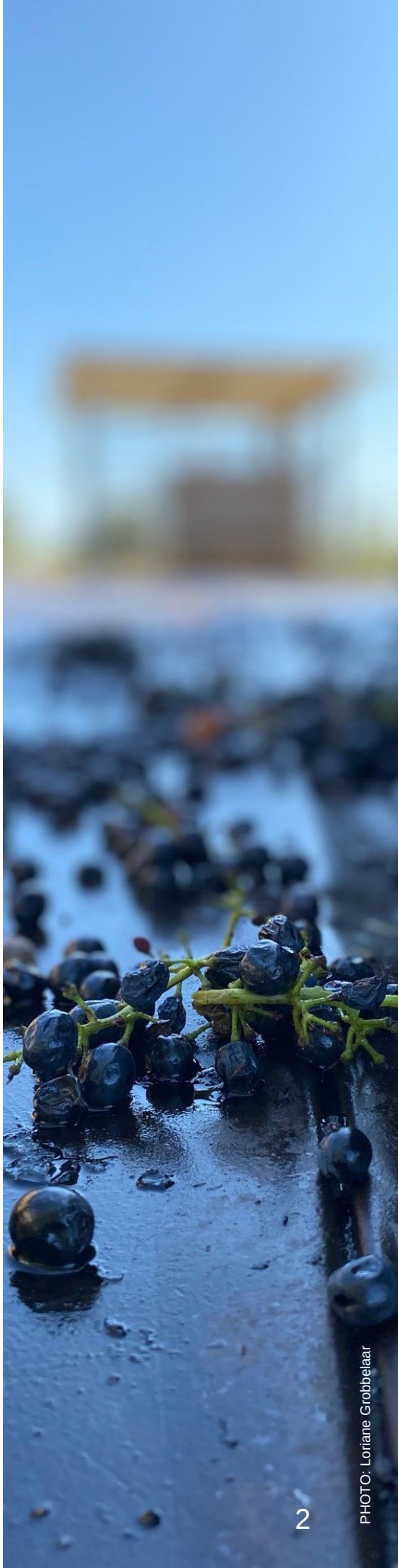

PHOTO: Loriane Grobbelaar

Summer temperatures were moderate during the ripening period, with the absence of characteristic heat peaks. These conditions bode particularly well for flavour retention in grapes. Although rainfall during the ripening period relieved pressure on water resources in some regions, it resulted in a surge in diseases (downy mildew, sour rot and botrytis) and necessitated increased weed control in other areas.

WINE QUALITY EXCEPTIONAL

“We are excited about the exceptional wines that will flow from the 2020 wine grape crop, with Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay leading the pack,” Conrad says. “The early cultivars showed exceptional acidity, and the colour and tannin analyses in the red wines promise full wines with concentrated flavour profiles.”

The 2020 wine harvest – including juice and concentrate for non-alcoholic purposes, wine for brandy and distilling wine – is expected to amount to 1 046.2 million litres at an average recovery of 775 litres per ton of grapes.

READY FOR THE MARKET

Following restrictions on both local sales and wine exports during South Africa’s COVID-19 lockdown, the industry was relieved that Government allowed for the export of alcoholic products from 1 May 2020. This included transport to ports and airports, as well as related activities to prepare wine for exports such as bottling and labelling.

“As an industry we are grateful and relieved to be able to resume exports. This finally enables us to showcase our exceptional 2020 vintage wines to the trade, media and consumers around the world,” comments Siobhan Thompson, CEO of Wines of South Africa.

She continues, “We would like to thank all of our international networks of agents, importers and friends who have never wavered in their support of our wine and our people, despite the challenges we’ve faced as an industry.”

South Africa is the ninth biggest wine producer world-wide and produces about 3.3% of the world’s wine. The wine industry contributes more than R36 billion to the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and employs nearly 300 000 people.

PHOTO: Hermes Rivera, Unsplash

OVERVIEW OF REGIONS:

BREEDEKLOOF
A slightly larger crop than in 2019, although the occurrence of wind during berry growth had a negative effect on flowering and set in some areas.

CAPE SOUTH COAST
Better yields than the previous season, thanks to favourable climatic conditions, the implementation of Guyot pruning systems, utilisation of rest breaking agents and amendments to fertilisation programmes.

KLEIN KAROO
Yet another small crop due to the ongoing drought and shrinking area planted under vines.

NORTHERN CAPE
Lower than expected production due to severe frost experienced at the end of October in the lower lying areas east of Upington.

OLIFANTS RIVER
A great year as vines are recovering well following the drought. The region also had better water supplies than during the previous season.

PAARL
A better crop compared to 2019, owing to favourable post-harvest conditions, sufficient water for irrigation and moderate temperatures during ripening.

ROBERTSON
Smaller yields due to water shortages in certain parts of the region, as well as smaller berries caused by wind during set, a decline in new plantings and the occurrence of botrytis and sour rot following rain in January.

STELLENBOSCH
A bigger wine grape crop than in 2019, thanks to good reserves accumulated in the post-harvest period, rain during critical berry growth stages and a moderate climate throughout the growing season.

SWARTLAND
Larger yields than in 2019, characterised by decent bunch numbers thanks to good post-harvest and winter conditions. Soil profiles were also supplemented well due to late winter rainfall.

WORCESTER
Varying yields throughout the region, with producers recording a somewhat larger crop than in 2019.

ISSUED: 5 May2020 by
Vinpro
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Wines of South Africa welcome to our world of discovery

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Herewith an overview of the season and wine grape crop size and quality in ten South African wine grape regions, compiled by Vinpro's viticulture consultants.

BREEDEKLOOF

OVERVIEW

"The Breedekloof region's 2020 growth season was characterised by good winter rains, strong winds and moderate temperatures, which resulted in a smaller berry size," says Pierre Snyman, Vinpro's viticulturist for the Worcester and Breedekloof regions.

The greatest part of the harvest season progressed at a swift pace and cellars were under pressure to take in grapes. The 2020 wine grape harvest appears to be somewhat larger than that of 2019 and good quality wines are to be expected.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The region realised a slightly larger crop overall, in comparison with excellent yields in 2019.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

The post-harvest period was long and favourable, with leaf fall occurring relatively late. Vineyards in the Breedekloof region were disease-free, which contributed to the accumulation of sufficient reserve levels.

Although the winter rainfall appeared to improve on the previous season, it amounted to only 60% to 70% of the long-term average rainfall. The Brandvlei dam was 54% full by mid-March, compared to the Stettynskloof dam that overflowed during this time. The number of cold units was lower than the previous year, but was still sufficient for the breaking of dormancy in the vineyards. Producers limited the use of rest breaking agents to vineyards that were established the year before, and to cases where the development of the vine structure with bearers was problematic.

Most of the vineyards and cultivars experienced bud burst a week earlier compared to the previous season. Although budding was consistently even, some late cultivars such as Cabernet Sauvignon had highly uneven bud burst. Initial shoot growth was fast and strong, which therefore placed pressure on canopy management techniques such as suckering.

The region had already experienced the effect of strong winds from October, which had a negative impact on the flowering and berry set periods and many shoots physically blew off during this time. It was a great challenge for producers to apply chemical control for prevention of fungal diseases, pests and weeds. Temperatures during October and November were cool and moderate and these weather conditions continued until the start of the harvest season.

PHOTO: Marais Family Wines, Breedekloof

Véraison occurred earlier than in the previous year. It occurred relatively fast and uniform and most of the red cultivars showed promising colour development. However, problems regarding colour and ripening did occur in the vineyards that had suffered from leaf roll virus.

Strong winds during November and December led to inadequate berry enlargement . Prior to the harvest season, it was evident that the berries would be consistently smaller and bunches would be looser than usual. Approximately 10 to 20 mm of rain was recorded during December, which increased the pressure of diseases during this time.

The harvest season commenced about seven to ten days earlier, therefore complicating accurate sampling as a result of uneven ripening patterns in most of the vineyards. Further, the harvest season was characterised by fast and simultaneous maturation, which placed immense pressure on intakes at the cellars. This trend flattened towards the end of the harvest season and the last red grape cultivars were harvested during the COVID-19 lockdown until 12 April 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown, which was implemented in South Africa from 26 March 2020, cellar space was another major problem.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The 2020 season was characterised by initial low disease pressure with very few pests . However, the situation changed after the increased rainfall during December and early February. Weed control was also problematic throughout the season. The usual heat waves during February didn't have a noteworthy impact on the vineyards and grape quality. However, slight sunburn damage was found on some of the grapes. .

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Grape analyses were consistently promising with high acidity quality and good sugar levels. Good quality Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc wines from the Breedekloof are to be expected in particular.

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PHOTO: Nicolaas van Rensburg, Botha Cellar, Breedekloof

CAPE SOUTH COAST

OVERVIEW

The Cape South Coast region's 2020 growth season delivered excellent vigour, higher yields and slow and even ripening.

The producers performed very well to harness the positive aspects of the season by utilising innovative and alternative management techniques, according to Etienne Terblanche, Vinpro's viticulturist for the Cape South Coast and Stellenbosch regions.

The welcome rains during January brought relief to drought-stricken areas and contributed towards high quality wines. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, producers can brave the winter months with significantly more litres in the cellars at the desired quality versus the same time last year.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The Cape South Coast region encountered significantly higher productions than in the 2019 season, while the yields per block were comparable with long-term averages. Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinotage and Shiraz, which suffered most due to dormancy problems during the previous season, improved drastically and in some cases even doubled their productions.

A combination of favourable weather conditions during the flowering and berry set periods, as well as good rainfall shortly before Véraison, contributed to substantial yields for middle to late maturing cultivars. Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc in particular delivered outstanding yields.

The improved yields were not only a consequence of climatic conditions, but also a result of modified management practices preceding the 2020 harvest. Producers employed alternative/adaptive pruning methods, increased the use of rest breaking agents and adopted customised fertilisation programmes, which all contributed favourably.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

The 2019 post-harvest period was cool, which contributed towards leaf fall occurring later and allowed sufficient accumulation of reserves. However, in some cases high downy mildew pressure caused the premature leaf drop of younger leaves, which in turn may have prevented optimal accumulation of reserves. Sufficient water reserves were available for essential post-harvest irrigation in the Elgin and Hemel-en-Aarde areas, whereas Botrivier, Napier and Malgas had limited water reserves, in which case the producers were not able to irrigate optimally.

Significantly more cold units were accumulated during early winter compared to the previous season, which is imperative for the breaking of dormancy. Lower winter rainfall occurred than in the previous season, but was still sufficient to replenish soil profiles. In certain regions of the Overberg and further north – not strictly regarded as winter rainfall areas – built up salts could not be leached effectively due to insufficient quality and amount of irrigation water. Sufficient cold units were accumulated up until the end of July, followed by decreased accumulation during August. Nonetheless, the vineyards' needs were met despite a relatively short winter followed by early spring in August.

PHOTO: Francois Viljoen, Vinpro

Bud burst and initial shoot growth occurred significantly earlier than usual, with some blocks experiencing bud burst as much as 14 days earlier than usual. The vineyards displayed even bud burst and uniform initial growth, mainly due to higher than normal maximum and minimum temperatures during September. The warmer, drier weather conditions increased soil temperatures as well as significantly increasing root activity, which in turn stimulated increased vigour and resulted in efficient canopies that would later contribute towards future reserve accumulation.

The overall conditions during flowering and berry set were significantly improved compared to the previous season's extreme temperature fluctuations. Temperatures were moderate, but not excessively cool, which promoted the fertilisation process. However, the region experienced significant wind velocities from the end of October to the beginning of November, which is the flowering period for early cultivars such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Flowering and berry set were therefore affected negatively. Fortunately, the later cultivars escaped these conditions.

The growth season was thus characterised by good, even vegetative growth, mainly due to a warmer spring, even bud burst and the availability of mobilised plant reserves as a result of good root activity.

Constant windy conditions prevailed at the coast during the latter stages of the season, with regular light showers and cool weather conditions. These conditions controlled the vigour and had a positive effect on the restriction of vegetative growth and berry size. However, these cool, wet conditions resulted in substantial downy mildew pressure – in particular attacking bunches and young leaves. Windy conditions and vigorous canopies necessitated additional canopy actions in order to manage secondary growth in the bunch zones and the occurrence of grapes borne on lateral shoots.

Bunch variation was considerably less during the ripening period than in the previous year. Certain areas in the Cape South Coast region received more than 140 mm of rain over two days during January. The soil profiles were replenished and run-off water contributed towards water reserves for irrigation purposes. The early ripening cultivars, which already started to accumulate sugar during this time, had to undergo Botrytis management. The later cultivars were safe and no action was needed. High soil water and regular light rain showers, coupled with relatively cool day and night temperatures, delayed the ripening process significantly despite the initial earlier expected harvest dates. Various producers were still busy harvesting when the nation-wide lockdown was announced on 26 March 2020, but fortunately they were able to end off the harvest season successfully.

PHOTO: Beaumont Family Wines, Cape South Coast

GENERAL COMMENTS

Producers modified their pruning systems by leaving more buds per vine and treating larger areas with rest breaking agents. Uncharacteristic increased vigour placed pressure on the labour force during early summer months, but resulted in excellent canopies.

Overall disease pressure was high due to the regular cool, wet conditions, with fungal diseases being a challenge in particular. High relative humidity led to the occurrence of successive downy mildew generations. In cases where producers didn't modify their spray programmes and frequency thereof, it led to crop losses with regards to wilted inflorescence as well as effective canopy loss. Botrytis especially occurred in the earlier cultivars, which were affected by the high rainfall during January.

Hail damage in areas such as Elgin and Grabouw fortunately occurred early enough (prior to véraison) and therefore didn't have a negative impact on the wine grape quality. .

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

The initial grape analyses show promise of good quality wines. Grapes that were harvested during the period shortly after the major rainfall in January, displayed low sugar and acidity levels better suited to lighter wine styles.

High quality grapes were received from later harvest dates, as we have grown accustomed to in the Cape South Coast's characteristic cool ripening climate. Grapes are marked by good sugar and acidity levels and intense flavour profiles, typical of the region. The yeast assimilable nitrogen (YAN) values were sufficient and the fermentations were completed without any issues, despite higher yields. The red wines are showing increased colour and tannin values compared to 2019, with complex flavour spectrums and adequate extraction levels.

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PHOTO: David Smit, Walker Bay Vineyards, Cape South Coast

KLEIN KAROO

OVERVIEW

“2020 was a challenging year for the Klein Karoo region, with low productions due to the ongoing drought in this region,” says Hennie Visser, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Klein Karoo and Robertson regions.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

In 2020, the Klein Karoo region produced a significantly smaller yield for the fourth consecutive year, due to the ongoing drought as well as the fact that more vineyards were uprooted than established in the past few years.

The ongoing drought had a lasting impact on production levels, although producers who received water from the water schemes in the area had more water available for irrigation.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

Vineyards experienced earlier than usual leaf fall during the post-harvest period due to the drought in the Klein Karoo and concomitant salinity problems. A mere 25% of the long-term average rainfall was measured during post-harvest at the Derdeheuwel weather station. The quality of the water available for irrigation was often unsuitable and a poor accumulation of reserves are to be expected.

The winter rainfall was once again below-average – about a third of the long-term average was measured at the Derdeheuwel weather station – and the dam levels were utterly low. Although the winter temperatures were consistently higher than usual, significantly less cold units were still sufficient for the breaking of dormancy in vineyards.

The dry weather conditions continued throughout spring. Due to a warmer August and September, bud burst occurred about 10 days earlier than usual in the Montagu region. The vineyards generally displayed good bud burst, with the exception of Colombar which had sporadic, uneven bud burst. Further, some vineyards showed uneven bud burst in cases where early leaf fall occurred, due to poor quality, saline and/or insufficient irrigation water. The subsoil was still very dry and erratic bud burst occurred in other parts of the Klein Karoo (Ladismith, Barrydale and Calitzdorp) as a result of the ongoing drought, which resulted in low reserve accumulation over the past few years.

In many cases there were insufficient water reserves to apply post-harvest fertilisation or sufficient fertilisation during the growth season. Growth was therefore also weaker in these areas, despite pruning modification to one-bud bearers.

Montagu received good rainfall during January, and the Barrydale and Ladismith regions also had good rainfall during January and February, which was the salvation for the harvest and also helped to ripen the grapes. The first grapes matured earlier, but the accumulation of sugar slowed down as the season continued and the berries were consistently smaller than usual.

PHOTO: Loriane Grobbelaar

GENERAL COMMENTS

Disease pressure was low due to low rainfall throughout the season. Minimal powdery mildew outbreaks initially occurred, but were observed as the season progressed.

The rain that occurred during January resulted in Botrytis rot and sour rot in certain parts of the Klein Karoo, especially on Chenin Blanc vineyards. However, the dry weather conditions rapidly dried up the rot.

Due to the low rainfall, significantly more salinity and nutritional element symptoms were observed, as well as increased use of poor-quality irrigation water and consequential accumulation of salinity in the soil. Many vineyards in the Ladismith and Barrydale regions had poor growth due to little and poor-quality water. Blocks with leaf roll virus displayed more prominent symptoms over the past three years, which has had an impact on berry colour and sugar accumulation.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

White wines from the Klein Karoo region have beautiful, fresh flavours and the wine quality seems promising at this stage. Good acidity and pH levels were reported in Montagu, whilst these levels were higher in the Klein Karoo due to drought stress. There was less pressure on cellar space this year due to the smaller yield and the harvest season continued smoothly.

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PHOTO: iStockphoto

NORTHERN CAPE

OVERVIEW

"The Northern Cape region experienced an average 2020 season in terms of yields per hectare and was characterised by good quality wines produced at acceptable volumes in the cellar," says Henning Burger, viticulturist at Orange River Cellars.

The harvest season commenced at least seven days earlier and continued smoothly, without an exceptional peak. The region was grateful for a prosperous and blessed year, despite problems with ESCOM's electricity supply during the mid-peak period.

Although most of the 2020 harvest was taken in before the COVID-19 lockdown, which came into effect on 26 March 2020, the lockdown did have an impact on further processes in the cellar. However, these challenges were overcome by effective management and hardworking winemakers, who attended to the wines with minimal help.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

Orange River Cellars, which harvests the majority of the region's grapes, produced a somewhat smaller crop when compared to the 2019 harvest. This was partly due to frost damage, which occurred towards the end of October 2019. The 2019 harvest was also exceptionally good compared to the long term average. All wine grape cultivars produced lower yields per hectare than in 2019.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

During the post-harvest period, the vineyards in the Northern Cape region were healthy with no occurrence of diseases. Warm temperatures continued until late May, which resulted in limited regrowth, particularly of vigorous blocks. The first actual frost only occurred by late May in 2019. Vineyards were also pruned at least two weeks later than usual.

The number of cold units that accumulated by June 2019, were significantly lower than the corresponding time in 2018, and the total number for the entire winter period until the end of August was also lower than in the previous year. It was evident after leaf fall and during the pruning stage that grape bearing shoots ripened optimally and were available in sufficient amounts for the use in cultivars pruned with long-bearers. It was cold until the end of August with day and night temperatures that started to increase gradually from the beginning of September.

The vineyards started budding from 7 September – around five to seven days earlier than the previous season, which can be partly attributed to warm day and night temperatures during the first half of September. At times the temperatures dropped rapidly and increased again gradually, as influenced by many cold fronts that occurred throughout the Western Cape during September.

The vineyards had even bud burst and nearly all cultivars displayed a good budding percentage. Bunches were abundant, boding positively for a good 2020 yield. However, wide-spread frost damage occurred towards the end of October – particularly in low-situated vineyards, east of Upington.

PHOTO: Orange River Cellars

GENERAL COMMENTS

The vineyards were healthy and vigorous until the end of January, despite more than 75 mm of rain that occurred in the Upington area during mid-December. However, regular wide-spread rains during February resulted in rot, which led to limited crop losses.

Fortunately the region didn't have any water shortages during the 2020 season, since the Orange-Vaal System's dams were more than 70% full.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

The quality of the grapes was excellent, with good acidity and pH levels up until the end of February. Unfortunately, regular rainfall during this month resulted in uneven quality due to rot.

Healthy grapes, produced under good, more moderate climactic conditions, coupled with lower yields than in the 2019 season, resulted in beautifully balanced wines. Colour development in the red cultivars was consistently good as a result of the lower than normal temperatures that occurred during phase 2 of the berry development cycle.

Alcohol levels were higher than in the 2019 season – partly ascribed to the increase in sugar grading for white wine grapes, as well as the fact that the 2020 yield was smaller than in 2019. Juice recoveries were consistently satisfactory at all the cellars, with an average recovery of 785 litres per ton. Early Chenin Blanc and Colombar grapes that were both received and processed in 2020 show promise of excellent quality.

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PHOTO: Christoph Schütz, Pixabay

OLIFANTS RIVER

OVERVIEW

“The Olifants River region had an excellent season in terms of production and quality, whilst the harvest season and winemaking process progressed smoothly,” says Gert Engelbrecht, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Olifants River region.

After three challenging, drought-stricken years, the region bounced back for the first time. Consumers can expect good wines from this region, with exceptional cultivar character and fuller-bodied wines in all varieties.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

Most of the vineyards in the Olifants River region had almost completely recovered after the drought and consequential small harvests in 2017 and 2018, as well as a subsequent small harvest in 2019. The total 2020 yield increased significantly from a very low basis. The harvest was consistently earlier than usual and the increase in productions was observed for both white and red wine grape cultivars. Yields for Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinotage and Shiraz made big progress in particular, returning to this region’s normal production levels.

The region was blessed with good productions and quality, and will therefore be remembered as the first ‘back-to-normal season’ after the drought

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

After a poor 2019 harvest, a successful post-harvest period was critical for the recovery of vineyards for the 2020 growth season. Water supply from the canal continued until the beginning of April. The amount of available water for post-harvest irrigation was therefore significantly more this season than the previous season. This resulted in leaf fall occurring late and producers had a longer window period for post-harvest fertilisation. March and April were both cooler than usual, ensuring a moderate autumn season.

Winter arrived late, since May and June were warmer than usual, but temperatures started to fall at the start of July. Cold units accumulated to above-average levels. The winter rainfall was lower than the long-term average, but the Clanwilliam dam still filled up. Producers used more rest breaking agents in order to ensure good bud burst after the previous challenging season. A warm spring as well as sufficient cold winter temperatures ensured fast and even bud burst – even in Chardonnay and Shiraz cultivars. Rest breaking agents also contributed towards this.

The ongoing good weather conditions during spring resulted in good, active shoot growth. The flowering period also occurred earlier and appeared very even. The Hanepoot vineyards – for which bud burst occurs last – were however impacted by strong winds during flowering in late October and November. Véraison also occurred earlier- and more even than usual.

PHOTO: Andries Rossouw, Klawer Wine Cellar, Olifants River

The water canal ruptured during the first week of January, which delayed the water supply to the entire region with more than a week. Fortunately moderate weather conditions occurred during this time, limiting crop losses to a minimum. Shoot growth and leaf sizes appeared to improve on those of the 2019 season, but were not excessively vigorous.

A period of sustained above-average day and night temperatures prevailed from mid-February to the beginning of March. This accelerated the ripening of later cultivars and resulted in bottleneck situations at the cellars, particularly with regards to the intake of the red grapes.

As expected, the harvest season started earlier than usual – for both early and late cultivars. Cabernet Sauvignon especially stood out in terms of ripening and even reached maturation before Shiraz. However, the biggest contrast during the ripening period was observed in the same cultivars between virus-infected and virus-free blocks. Virus-free blocks were in many cases harvested a month earlier than the infected blocks from the same area and variety.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Diseases and pests occurred sporadically. Rain showers towards the end of October resulted in downy mildew outbreaks at certain farms in the Lutzville area. Powdery mildew outbreaks were also observed in certain parts, as well as a degree of rot in Pinot Noir, Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc blocks. Fortunately the vineyards were exceptionally healthy overall.

Sunburn damage in early cultivars was caused by an intense heat wave on the 5th of December and likely had an impact on the crop size – especially in blocks with a north-south row direction.

Water supply was sufficient and the canal continued flowing until mid-April. This will hopefully contribute towards good reserve accumulation for the 2021 season.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Grape analyses were outstanding for all cultivars, thanks to the moderate ripening conditions. The grapes also showed promising colour and flavour concentrations. Sufficient yeast assimilable nitrogen (YAN) levels in the grape resulted in good fermentation, with minimal sluggish fermentation problems.

One predominant aspect was the high transformation of sugar to alcohol which resulted in full-bodied wines with high alcohol levels. Major differences between virus-free and virus-infected blocks continued throughout the winemaking process and is evident particularly in the colour and full-bodied character of the red wines.

Warmer temperatures during February contributed towards a more tropical style Sauvignon Blanc. Juice recoveries were normal with minimal exceptions.

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PHOTO: Shutterstock

PAARL

OVERVIEW

"After two seasons of serious drought in the Paarl region, improved yields were achieved in the 2020 harvest and wines of superior quality are expected," says Hanno van Schalkwyk, Vinpro's viticulturist for the Paarl and Swartland regions.

The vineyards' fertility was promoted by favourable post-harvest conditions, which resulted in the sufficient accumulation of reserves. Irrigation water was also more readily available and contributed towards further recovery of crops.

A warm spring contributed to rapid vineyard development and a warm harvest season led to an early, compact harvest, which placed immense pressure on the cellars.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The vineyards' fertility and bunch counts, as well as improved reserve levels, in the Paarl region showed promise due to the increased availability of irrigation water.

Overall, crop sized improved greatly in the 2020 season, among which especially red cultivars (Merlot, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon) showed good increases in productions.

Although the availability of picking teams was sufficient, the cellars were under pressure to process the grapes on time due to the compact nature of the harvest season.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

The post-harvest period was relatively cool and sufficient water was available for irrigation purposes. The leaves were retained on the vines for longer and the overall conditions were more favourable for the accumulation of necessary reserves. Canopies of dry-land vineyards also appeared better when compared the previous year. Rain showers during April further contributed to the recovery of the reserve levels within the vines.

Winter arrived late and the first winter rainfall only occurred towards the end of May. The rainfall was low until July, after which above-average rainfall was measured. It's assumed that the accompanying cold temperatures (lower than the long-term average) were sufficient to provide in the vineyards' needs. Good rainfall over the big storage dams' catchment areas resulted in dams reaching their highest levels in years. Although the total winter rainfall was lower than the long-term average, the soil water content was replenished to water-holding capacity.

Utterly warm weather conditions during the second half of August resulted in early bud burst in many vineyards. The following period was cool, which temporarily delayed the initial fast development, although rising temperatures at the beginning of September accelerated bud burst and shoot growth once more.

PHOTO: Welgegund Wines, Wellington

Vineyards generally displayed good, even and timely bud burst. Shiraz, Chardonnay and Colombar vineyards had sporadic, uneven bud burst, although the occurrence thereof was significantly less than in the previous season. Flower bunch numbers were substantially better than the previous year, due to the increased reserve levels that improved fertility.

Weather conditions during the flowering period was favourable for good berry set. One cold period at the beginning of November, coupled with the millerandage phenomenon, resulted in poor berry set in some of the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards already in full bloom. Some of the berries' ovaries were rejected in such cases and the berries remained small and green.

Temperatures during the growth season were relatively moderate and the vigour was quite strong. Producers had to plan ahead carefully to keep up with suckering, leaf removal and tipping and topping actions. Constant winds during December hindered active shoot growth and the soil was also dried out considerably. Dry-land vineyards planted on soils with a lower water-holding capacity had already started showing symptoms of water stress during January.

The availability of irrigation water from the Berg River Irrigation Scheme was abundant and scheduling could proceed without any limitations. Véraison occurred fast and relatively even. Green bunch removal was applied on premium blocks – especially in blocks where the vineyards had poor berry set.

Temperatures suddenly spiked during mid-January, after which it dropped rapidly due to a cold front, which also brought along wide-spread rains.

The harvest season commenced relatively early, with some blocks harvested seven days earlier for sparkling wine. Extremely warm temperatures were recorded in February, which placed immense pressure on the cellars' processing capacity as grapes had to be harvested simultaneously.

Sampling was challenging due to a variation between bunches – a trend that was particularly observed in Chenin Blanc. March was cooler with a few rain showers, which delayed the ripening process of the last few blocks. Leaf roll virus infection also contributed towards this delay.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Diseases and pests were generally managed very well. Mealy bug and powdery mildew outbreaks occurred sporadically and there was minor downy mildew damage following the November rainfall.

PHOTO: Zach Moolman, Moreson Wine Farm, Franschhoek

The rainfall also resulted in an increase in weeds, such as Erigeron Floribundus (“Vaalskraalhans”) and summer grasses, which was a major problem for producers. Sunburn damage was observed sporadically due to the extreme warm weather conditions during the harvest season. However, the grapes were very healthy in general.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Grape analyses seemed promising at the beginning of the harvest season, but the warm conditions during the second half of the harvest season negatively impacted acidity levels.

Colour development was very good and tannins already tasted softer at lower sugar qualities. With regards to the white wines, Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay show excellent cultivar character and quality. The red wines are already showing good promise and full-bodied wines with excellent colour and aroma are to be expected.

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PHOTO: Peartree Photography, Bosman Family Vineyards, Wellington

ROBERTSON

OVERVIEW

The Robertson region produced a small harvest for the second consecutive year due to water shortages in certain parts of the region. “Although there was no frost damage in the region, farmers who utilise run-off water from the mountains had very little water available due to the ongoing drought,” says Hennie Visser, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Robertson and Klein Karoo regions.

Despite all the challenges – including water shortages, load shedding and the COVID-19 pandemic – the grapes matured early, the grape analyses were sufficient, and the wine quality looks promising.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The Robertson region's 2020 crop continued to shrink on the back of a small 2019 crop, and can be attributed to smaller berries due to extreme windy conditions after berry set. As certain vineyards suffered and were not able to receive sufficient irrigation and/or fertilisation, this further contributed towards smaller berries. The occurrence of salinity as a result of the previous year’s drought, is an ongoing problem.

Significantly more vineyards were uprooted than established over the past few years, which contributed to a decrease in the total production.

Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay, Colombar and Pinotage delivered very low yields. On the contrary, yields for Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Ruby cabernet improved from 2019. The 2020 harvest will be remembered as an early year with good analyses and swift sugar accumulation.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

Early leaf fall occurred during the post-harvest period due to powdery mildew and downy mildew disease pressure, and weed growth was a major problem later in the season due to high rainfall during March. These circumstances subsequently led to poor reserve accumulation.

The Robertson region received very little rain during the winter –about 44% of the normal rainfall – with only 1.4 mm of rain during August. Permanent and sowed cover crops performed poorly due to a shortage of winter rains. Average minimum and maximum temperatures were consistently warmer than the long-term average and the cold units were also less. The cold winter temperatures were still sufficient for the breaking of dormancy, despite die warmer weather.

The region experienced a warm, early spring during which the maximum and minimum temperatures were consistently higher than the long-term average. The rainfall during spring was true to the norm. The first vineyards had early bud burst – in some cases even two weeks earlier than usual – and therefore the soil temperature was still low and the leaves appeared yellow. The vineyards had good bud burst overall, apart from Colombar and a few other cultivars which had sporadic, uneven bud burst. The initial shoot growth was sufficient and the vineyards had vigorous growth due to the high temperatures that followed in September and October. No frost occurred during this time, as it has been the case for the past two years.

PHOTO: Shutterstock

The vineyards initially had vigorous growth, thanks to a warm September and October. Although the early part of the growth season was warm, the rest of the season was cooler with an unusually cooler November, December and January. As the season progressed, the vineyards' growth declined and stagnated early as a result of the unusual windy conditions during November and December.

The temperatures during February and March were true to the long-term average, and the summer rainfall was about 40% more than the long-term average. About 47 mm of rain fell during January – four times more than the long-term average – as opposed to the very low rainfall during December, February and March. The highest rainfall during March measured 6 mm.

The grapes ripened early, in some cases up to two weeks earlier. Rain during January resulted in berries bursting in some cultivars, especially Sauvignon Blanc. Wide-spread Botrytis rot and sour rot occurred, but fortunately dried up rapidly because of a dry February and March. However, the rot resulted in crop losses, particularly for Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc cultivars. The harvest season progressed smoothly as a result of minimal rainy days.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Disease pressure was minimal at the beginning of the growth season. Minor downy mildew outbreaks occurred during the growth season and only a few cases of powdery mildew outbreaks were recorded. However, the disease pressure increased after the high rainfall during January, which led to downy mildew infections, as well as wide-spread Botrytis rot and sour rot. Berry cracking occurred in some of the cultivars, particularly Sauvignon Blanc. There were also sporadic mealy bug outbreaks during this time.

A few heat waves occurred during the ripening period, but overall temperatures measured below the mean. Most of the producers had sufficient irrigation water, although the farmers who were relying on mountain water for irrigation, were under immense pressure with little irrigation water due to the ongoing low rain fall.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Grape analyses showed good promise with unusually high acidity and low pH levels. However, recoveries were below norm due to the small berry sizes.

Sauvignon Blanc's quality shows particular promise, as a result of a cooler, early summer. As usual, the Chardonnay's quality didn't disappoint. Red cultivars have excellent colour, which could be ascribed to the low pH levels and small berries.

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PHOTO: Van Loveren Family Wines, Robertson

STELLENBOSCH

OVERVIEW

“The Stellenbosch region is expecting excellent wines from a bigger wine grape harvest,” says Etienne Terblanche, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Stellenbosch and Cape South Coast regions.

The moderate growth season as well as the timely in-season rainfall, laid the foundation for a good season. The early cultivars are showing favourable acidity and sugar levels, whereas the later cultivars delivered wines with good concentration, structure and desired alcohol levels.

“Stellenbosch producers can celebrate and be proud of the 2020 harvest with regards to both the crop size and quality in the cellar, despite obvious challenges and pressures because of the COVID-19 pandemic,” says Etienne.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

Producers in the Stellenbosch region saw a significant improvement in yields, as opposed to the relatively small harvest in 2019. The increased yields are mainly ascribed to a favourable, wet post-harvest period, sufficient winter cold and a moderate growing season.

The valuable winter cold was particularly favourable for sensitive cultivars such as Chardonnay and Shiraz, positively impacting bud break percentages, which eventually led to a larger crop. Cultivars which would normally be harvested in die middle of the season, experienced advantageous flowering and berry set conditions in particular. Merlot especially produced high yields, whereas Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc delivered average yields. Late cultivars such as Cabernet Sauvignon showed a modest improvement with regards to yields, although berry dehydration occurred specifically in this cultivar, which might have had a negative impact on yields.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

Good rainfall during the harvest and post-harvest seasons, replenished soil profiles during this crucial time of reserve accumulation. In some cases post-harvest irrigation was not necessary, due to sufficient soil water. The overall leaf fall was significantly later than in the preceding dry year. However, certain vineyards were not able to effectively accumulate reserves due to fungal diseases as a result of the moist weather conditions, which resulted in premature leaf fall. Environmental conditions and cooler autumn temperatures were of such a nature that no significant regrowth took place that could subsequently deplete reserve build-up. Early dormancy temperatures were significantly lower than in the previous season.

The winter rainfall was lower compared to the 2019 season, but still higher than during the drought period of 2016 to 2018. Winter rainfall was on par with means during most of the winter months, apart from extremely low rainfall during August. Cold units started accumulating about six weeks earlier than in the previous year. This year, the way in which the cold units accumulated virtually uninterrupted until early in August was particularly distinctive, as opposed to the typical warm periods that were recorded during the winter season over the past few years and resulted in various challenges.

PHOTO: Loriane Grobbelaar, Kings Kloof Vineyards, Stellenbosch

Nevertheless, temperatures gradually increased throughout August and some of the early cultivars achieved bud burst up to two weeks prior to the average budding dates.

An exceptionally warm and dry spring resulted in good, even bud burst of early and mid-seasonal cultivars, after sufficient winter cold. Soil temperatures are usually low in cooler and wet spring conditions, which could result in delayed and uneven growth. However, this wasn't the case this year. Cultivars such as Chardonnay and Shiraz initially showed excellent and uniform growth, mainly due to moderate spring temperatures and improved root activity.

The temperatures during the flowering and berry set periods were average, with significantly less fluctuations than in the previous season. Good rainfall, measured at around 100 mm and even more towards the end of October, was crucial to replenish the dry soil profiles and to lay the foundation for stress-free flowering and berry set conditions. As a result of these conditions, early and mid-cultivars exceeded expectations with regards to berry set, whereas late cultivars such as Cabernet Sauvignon had to develop berry set in cooler conditions, which in turn resulted in normal berry set.

The growth season was characterised by sustained, moderate to cool day temperatures, combined with significant wind. Cool, windy conditions prevailed from November to December, with the exception of a short, warm period early in December, which led to sunburn damage on susceptible cultivars. These cool conditions during the cell enlargement and division phases of the berries possibly led to smaller berry sizes, despite relatively low water stress. The region experienced gale-force winds above 90 km/h which caused damage particularly to thin canopies and some bunches. Vineyards in the mountainous areas were most severely affected.

The 2020 ripening period was characterised by typical dry conditions and moderate temperatures. Carry-over effects from the heat during spring and effective canopies promoted ripening in early cultivars and were therefore harvested much earlier. Sustained, moderate temperatures occurred until the end of March and resulted in effective plant functioning and full maturity in late cultivars. .

GENERAL COMMENTS

Cover crops were well established and accumulated good biomass, especially throughout August, during which the region experienced higher temperatures. This ensured effective weed suppression.

Regarding pests, historic problem areas maintained high snail populations, although they were less of a problem due to a drier spring.

Fungal disease pressure was relatively high after good rainfall during October and various generations of downy mildew were present from the flowering and berry set stages to late summer.

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PHOTO: Spier Wine Estate, Stellenbosch

Producers who didn't modify their spraying programmes and frequency thereof experienced both crop losses (wilting of inflorescence) as well as effective canopy loss. Pinotage and Merlot were particularly affected by this.

Mealy bug, weevil and katydid outbreaks were somewhat higher than in the previous season, but still under control. The growth season was characterised by good, even shoot growth, resulting in excellent canopies with sufficient capacity to ripen their crops.

Timely in-season rainfall and moderate temperatures resulted in good vigour, whilst high wind speeds towards the end of the summer kept the vigour and berry sizes under control.

Early cultivars were harvested up to two weeks earlier than usual. Contrariwise, the pace of ripening slowed down towards the end of the harvest season and late cultivars were harvested in the normal picking windows, due to the cooler temperatures and significant crop loads. The larger crop and accelerated maturation placed some pressure on cellar space halfway into the harvest period.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Early indications of wine quality seem promising. Grape analyses within early cultivars generally showed higher acidity levels, in many cases not necessitating acid additions in the cellar. In this regard, Chenin Blanc particularly stood out.

Wine laboratories confirmed normal yeast assimilable nitrogen (YAN) values, which could be ascribed to good, healthy canopies as well as effective irrigation scheduling and fertilisation programmes. Colour and tannin analyses of the red wines seem higher than in 2019 and producers are expecting full-bodied wines with intense and complex flavour profiles.

Average to below-average juice recoveries were reached due to relatively small berry sizes.

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PHOTO: Vinpro Consultation Service, Simongsig, Stellenbosch

SWARTLAND

OVERVIEW

“The Swartland region’s 2020 harvest season will be remembered as the first good harvest after the drought that led to tumbling productions figures,” says Hanno van Schalkwyk, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Swartland and Paarl regions.

Firstly, the vineyards had a good post-harvest period wherein they were able to accumulate reserves that impacted fertility and shoot growth positively. Furthermore, it was a warm season, resulting in fast-developing vineyards with bud burst and berry set that showed uniform and satisfactory progress.

Particularly warm weather conditions from mid-January placed cellars under great pressure to process the harvest in time. Fortunately the grapes were of high quality and the wines show promise – especially the red cultivars.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The total yield for the Swartland region was larger than in 2019, with red cultivars generally showing greater production increases than the white cultivars. Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc delivered good yields in particular.

The berries were relatively small due to the dry conditions, although bunch counts were higher as a result of improved conditions during the post-harvest period as well as the winter season. Although there were sufficient picking teams to collect the harvest, the cellar capacity was under immense pressure.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

The post-harvest period in the Swartland region was relatively dry, although the canopies generally outperformed previous years due to relatively cooler conditions. The conditions for root growth and reserve accumulation were therefore optimal, which had a positive impact on fertility and shoot growth.

Winter arrived late and good rainfall accompanied by cold conditions only arrived in July. The average winter temperatures were sufficient to provide in the vineyards’ cold unit needs. Although the winter rainfall remained below the long-term average, the big storage dams’ levels rose considerably and the soil water levels were replenished to water-holding capacity.

Temperatures spiked towards the end of August and vineyards started budding about seven to ten days earlier than usual. The ongoing heat led to even bud burst and shoots developed rapidly. The vineyards had early flowering and berry set was good overall. As a result of the strong active shoot growth, producers were under pressure to apply canopy management actions on time. Suckering and leaf removal actions were more intensive in order to improve light penetration in the canopies. Regular tipping and topping actions were applied. Véraison occurred early and relatively uniform.

PHOTO: Darling Cellar, Swartland

Temperatures were moderate prior to the harvest season, but spiked during mid-January reaching temperatures above 40°C, which hastened the commencement of the harvest. Many vineyards were harvested seven and even up to 14 days earlier than normal. The cultivars were also harvested simultaneously, which led to immense pressure with regards to cellar space. The harvest season was generally warm and dry, which resulted in an extremely short and compact picking window.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Downy mildew disease pressure was relatively high during November and minor sporadic damage was observed on the leaves and bunches. Minor sunburn damage was also observed on exposed bunches due to the warm conditions during the harvest season.

Weed growth was a greater problem than usual due to rain showers during November and January. The vineyards started showing symptoms of water stress after the heat conditions during mid-January, although the grapes could still be harvested at full maturity. The vineyards were generally very healthy.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Grape analyses initially showed promise with high acidity and low pH levels as well as good colour development – particularly in red cultivars.

The acidity levels dropped significantly during the second half of the harvest season. Early indications show that it will be an excellent year with regards to wine quality. Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay and cool-area Sauvignon Blanc are displaying exceptional cultivar characteristics. The red wines have excellent quality with good fruit concentration, full-bodied character and colour.

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PHOTO: Vinpro

WORCESTER

OVERVIEW

“Inconsistent yields were recorded throughout the Worcester region, although the wines from the 2020 harvest show promise,” says Pierre Snyman, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Worcester and Breedekloof regions.

It was a windy, cool season with late rainfall towards the end of January and at the beginning of February. The harvest season commenced early and the cellars were under pressure due to simultaneous grape intakes.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

Production trends in the 2020 season were extremely inconsistent in the Worcester region; some producers recorded higher yields, whilst others recorded productions that were somewhat lower than the previous season.

Chenin Blanc and Colombar delivered lighter yields in particular, whereas Pinotage produced more than the previous season in many cases. The carry-over effect from the ongoing drought from the previous few years continued to impact the vineyards’ overall condition and vigour. Fortunately, the vineyards that suffered frost damage in the previous season recovered and offered good yields this year.

CLIMATE AND VITICULTURAL TRENDS

Leaf fall occurred relatively late in the post-harvest period, which constituted good reserve accumulation in the vines. This could be ascribed to the good rainfall that was recorded during the 2019 harvest season. However, saline areas prevail in the region and even escalated throughout the season. Producers were able to apply their post-harvest fertilisation normally since there was sufficient water for this purpose.

The cold units were consistently less than in the previous season, causing some concern for the fruit producers. Fortunately the cold units accumulated rapidly during July and August. The regions experienced no to little snow fall in the mountains, which seriously affected the soil water and farm dam levels.

The rainfall remained low during April and July, although it did show improvement in comparison with the previous drier years. The Nuy Valley experienced dry conditions throughout the season, since the Keerom dam was only 14% full. The Kwaggaskloof dam was 53% full, from which irrigation was applied.

Initial bud burst occurred seven to 14 days earlier than in the previous season. Bud burst generally occurred evenly and shoot growth was strong and fast. Producers had to act swiftly to sucker premium blocks. Bud burst for late cultivars such as Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon occurred less even.

PHOTO: Unknown

The region experienced strong winds at the start of the flowering period, which had a negative impact on berry set. The wind furthermore interfered with spraying for the prevention of fungal diseases.

The vineyards showed strong shoot growth despite the winds. Lateral shoot formation was observed, which resulted in dense canopies. In cases where canopy management wasn't applied correctly or timeously, yellow leaves were visible within the canopy early in the season. Temperatures were moderate throughout the season until the start of harvest, and the infamous Worcester heat waves only occurred in February. The prevalence of saline areas also increased as the season progressed. This could be ascribed to the carry-over effect of the drought from the previous years.

This season, the early cultivars ripened even earlier and faster than usual due to good and healthy functioning canopies, smaller berries and moderate climate conditions. Most producers and winemakers were caught off-guard by the harvest, which in some cases started as much as 14 days earlier.

It was challenging to take accurate grape samples because of the uneven ripening patterns within the vineyards and even on the vines itself. The initial harvest stagnated due to late rainfall at the end of January, but accelerated thereafter. The daily intake of grapes at the cellars was under more pressure than ever before.

GENERAL COMMENTS

It was a healthy year, although the rainfall at the end of January and beginning of February posed a substantial challenge to manage, since many vineyards were already being harvested or close to being harvested. The berries swelled and were consequently separated from the brush and Botrytis rot was suddenly a major problem. The producers sensibly sprayed registered contact chemicals and opened up the canopies using leaf removal actions.

The harvest season went by quickly and pressed on, although the ripening of late cultivars stayed true to their normal pace – partly because of the cooler nights, as well as the occurrence of leaf roll virus, which seems to become an increasing problem.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

The early cultivars were harvested with particularly good analyses. The acidity levels were particularly high, as is favourable for wines in creation. Sauvignon Blanc particularly benefitted from the cool ripening period.

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PHOTO: Shutterstock