

This year, I visited nearly 50 wineries across Sonoma County to taste finished wines from the 2022 vintage, plus early samples from the promising 2023 vintage. These two vintages couldn't be more different. For many growers, 2022 was one of the earliest harvests on record, marked by drought and a severe, prolonged heat wave. After the blistering heat and a furiously fast-paced harvest, 2023 began with record amounts of rain. Over the winter, reservoirs were replenished, and three years of drought came to a close. As the season progressed, the plentiful sunshine and hot temperatures Californians have come to expect in an era of climate change simply never materialized. Harvest was one of the latest on record, and 2023 turned out to be one of the coolest seasons California has experienced over the last two decades.

The 2022 Growing Season

The 2022 growing season was variable and marked by continued drought. Although moderate rainfall from October of 2021 to January of 2022 offered some relief, the growing season remained very dry. "The sites that seemed to suffer the most were the sites that have the best soils," Littorai's Ted Lemon explained. "It can seem contradictory, but I think those places aren't used to lacking water, so the drought really affected them." Warmth early in the year, combined with the dry soils, led to an early budbreak in March. But the heat didn't last, and there were several unusual frost events in March, April and May. At Dumol, eight to 10 nights of frost protection were required in early May; Dumol winegrower and partner Andy Smith said it was the worst frost season since 2008.

Cooler temperatures and scattered storms during bloom and flowering led to shatter and lowered yields. "It was a start-stop, gas-on, gas-off phenomenon," Williams Selyem winemaker Jeff Mangahas noted. The summer was moderate and easygoing, but the early start to the growing season precipitated a very early harvest beginning in mid-August, up to a month earlier than average in some areas. It was the earliest harvest on record at Dumol, where the first grapes were picked on August 12 and the last grapes picked on September 15. Smith said dry soils, low crop levels and healthy vines contributed to the very early harvest.

In early September, the Labor Day heat wave arrived. The heat lasted much longer than anticipated—a week or more in some areas—and temperatures reached 118 degrees Fahrenheit. "It was a very challenging vintage, a triage year," noted Lasseter winemaker Danielle Langlois. "We were in an oven for two weeks." Vines shut down and brix jumped dramatically. Even growers on the coast suffered as diurnal shifts tapered. "It was 75 degrees at 3:00 a.m. out on the coast in September," Courtney Robinett Wagoner, winemaker at Martinelli, remembered. "We didn't have that fog and cool breeze like we usually do." At Arnot-Roberts, Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts noted that even vines near the coast showed sunburn.

While the unusually early harvest in 2022 meant some growers had already picked large portions of their grapes, particularly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, others faced crops that weren't quite ripe. Mark Williams, winemaker at Gallo's Mount Peak Winery, said, "It was another early year, so leading up to September things were ahead of schedule. You had a lot of vineyards and varieties that were right on the cusp. They needed a couple weeks to get fully ripe. Then came seven to 10 days of 100+ degrees. It didn't cool off at night, brix skyrocketed, there was dehydration and desiccation. We were picking everything as fast as we could." The compressed harvest also resulted in logistical problems in the winery. "We were fermenting like gangbusters," Wagoner said. "We were running six presses every day just to move it all out. It was a crazy, intense harvest."

The 2022 Vintage: Style, Quality & Consistency

Quality in 2022 will depend on specific location, grape variety, picking decisions and mitigation techniques in the winery. "Response was critical, and you had to be on your toes," Raen winemaker Melanie McIntyre emphasized. Like the erratic growing season itself, quality and consistency vary widely in 2022. "There's a lot of unevenness from a quality perspective on the whole," Mangahas said. "It purely depends on your commitment to quality. The key to success was making the hard decisions. That's what's in the glass, and folks who made the tough decisions made the best wines." For grapes harvested after the heat wave, quality will depend on how much compromised fruit wineries were willing to discard—a painful economic decision when yields were already lower than usual.

While many growers compared 2022 to 2017—another year with record-breaking heat—Lemon explained that the heat in 2022 was less detrimental, due to a number of factors. "In 2017, the heat hit us when things were still going through veraison," he began. "Whereas in 2022, we were basically ready to pick. And in 2022, the canopies were just healthier and stood up better. I kept expecting the canopies to dry out, and it just didn't happen." Lower crop levels, he said, kept the vines from experiencing too much stress. "It was one of those harvests that for me was a real miracle," he recalled. "Load after load of really happy, healthy fruit came in the door."

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the charm, openness and generosity of the 2022s. Fruit-forward and approachable, the best wines have managed to capture a sense of California warmth and sunshine in a positive way, although they won't offer the extended aging potential of the outstanding 2021s. Technically speaking, acidities were higher in 2021, but the 2022s still feel juicy and fresh. "Acids are lower but you wouldn't guess it," Bedrock's Morgan Twain-Peterson MW noted. "The 2022s are naturally bright. There's no overripe fruit character." Despite the challenges of the growing season, 2022 offers plenty of high-quality wines capable of moderate cellaring. These are the wines to drink while waiting for the 2021s—and potentially the 2023s—to mature.

Looking Ahead: The 2023 Vintage

The 2023 growing season began with multiple "atmospheric rivers" in early January and late March that brought record amounts of rain to California and caused flooding in some areas. Luckily, most growers in Sonoma County reported moderate, sustained rainstorms with enough time between them for the ground to dry out, allowing the soil to soak in substantial amounts of moisture, keeping disease pressure at bay.

Wagoner explained that drought causes a buildup of nutrients in the soil, and rain is needed to flush the nutrients past the surface roots. “We got 80-100 inches at the coast,” she recalled. “We needed that penetration from three years of drought. It takes a long time to get those nutrients down, but the way the rain came, it really soaked up like a sponge and got the vines really happy again.”

The colder, wetter weather through March resulted in a later budbreak and extended bloom period, although fruit set was surprisingly successful. Veraison occurred in late July and early August. The summer remained cool and mild, delaying harvest even further. “There was no heat until October,” Twain-Peterson recalled. “Everything was delayed,” Ridge winemaker Shauana Rosenblum said. “Physiological ripening was outrunning brix. For 10-14 days, everything stalled out at 19 brix. We started calling my office the ‘situation room.’” And according to Danielle Langlois, “2023 was the opposite of 2022—hang it until the leaves fall off or the rain comes.”

The cool weather and generous winter rains resulted in a bumper crop, and yields were higher than anticipated. “We thought we were going to get an average crop in 2023,” Paul Hobbs said. But by August, “We saw up to a 30% increase in cluster weight, and we dropped on average around one-third of the fruit.” Controlling yields will have been critical for quality this year. Rosenblum noted that by late September and early October, “you get concerns about other problems like rain and mold.” Cabernet Sauvignon and other later-ripening varieties were most at risk. Some areas endured significant rain during the harvest window. In October in Napa, where I live, I watched rows of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes hang through days of pouring rain. Growers who hung too much crop in anticipation of another hot summer will have suffered from unripe grapes, and the result may be thin, dilute or underripe wines.



Old vines in Sonoma County

Despite the season’s challenges, most growers in Sonoma County are excited for the rare opportunity to craft truly cool-climate wines in 2023. “The opportunity to hang fruit without the excessive buildup of brix” is rare in California, Langlois said. Burgundian Stéphane Vivier, who has made wine in California for the last 25 years, said he can’t remember another vintage like 2023. “Even the old guard in the Russian River

Valley, they've never seen this before," he emphasized. "I harvested Pinot Noir in Occidental on November 5." While the 2021 vintage has been highly lauded, Lemon said, "It's entirely possible that 2023 could be the best." Rosenblum agreed. 2023 produced "wines of incredible concentration, bright acidity and low to moderate alcohol. It will be a banner year for collectible wines."



2021 Migration Pinot Noir Dutton Ranch

Rating	Release Price	Drink Date
92	\$74	2025 - 2035
Reviewed by	Issue Date	Source
Erin Brooks	May 25, 2023	

Matured for 10 months in 40% new french oak, the 2021 Pinot Noir Dutton Ranch is bursting with aromas of pomegranate, blueberry, tangerine peel and floral tones. The medium-bodied palate is concentrated with expressive, perfumed red fruit. It's structured by chalky tannins and fresh acidity and has a long, perfumed finish.

Producer: Migration

From: USA, California, North Coast, Sonoma County, Russian River Valley

Color: Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Pinot Noir



2021 Migration Chardonnay Peake Ranch Vineyard

Rating	Release Price	Drink Date
91	\$58	2025 - 2032
Reviewed by	Issue Date	Source
Erin Brooks	May 25, 2023	

The 2021 Chardonnay Peake Ranch Vineyard was matured for 10 months in 34% new French oak. It has alluring aromas of stone fruit, hazelnuts, beeswax, meringue, allspice and flint. The light-bodied palate features concentrated, dynamic flavors, bright, refreshing acidity and a long, creamy finish.

Producer: Migration

From: USA, California, Central Coast, Santa Barbara County, Sta. Rita Hills

Color: White

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Chardonnay



2021 Migration Chardonnay Keefer Ranch

Rating	Release Price	Drink Date
90	\$58	2024 - 2029
Reviewed by	Issue Date	Source
Erin Brooks	May 25, 2023	

Matured for 10 months in 35% new French oak, the 2021 Chardonnay Keefer Ranch has open-knit aromas of peach, allspice, jasmine and crème brûlée. The light-bodied palate is gently creamy with pure, concentrated flavors, energetic acidity and a long, spicy finish.

Producer: Migration

From: USA, California, North Coast, Sonoma County, Sonoma Coast

Color: White

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Chardonnay



2021 Migration Pinot Noir Running Creek Vineyard

Rating	Release Price	Drink Date
90	\$74	2024 - 2029
Reviewed by	Issue Date	Source
Erin Brooks	May 25, 2023	

Matured for 10 months in 38% new French oak, the 2021 Pinot Noir Running Creek Vineyard has layered aromas of blackberry, raspberry, Earl Grey tea leaves, tobacco and earth. The light-bodied palate is silky and refreshing with crunchy fruit and a perfumed finish.

Producer: Migration

From: USA, California, North Coast, Sonoma County, Russian River Valley

Color: Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Pinot Noir