

Vintage in a heartbeat...

A fast and furious start to McLaren Vale's vintage as **james hook** is finding out...

It's a drought vintage but it started with a rainstorm. Three days of rain from January 19th saw the McLaren Vale area receive 55mm of rain. This was the most rain in a week since winter; the most rain since before last winter.

The rain and humidity of that week caused some berry splitting - locally called laughing berries because they look like they are smiling - in reality no joke to the concerned farmers.

Fortunately hot dry weather followed and most fruit healed up, improving the potential of the season. Split sugary fruit is a major disease risk and can cause wineries to pick their grapes early to avoid any problems with their wine.

Harvest for sparkling wine began after the grape vineyards had dried. The first pinot noir and chardonnay base wine was picked during the last few nights of January. wines, verdelho, sauvignon blanc and chardonnay were again into the winery earlier than normal.



winefightclub

john minchella head of one of the large grape growing families harvested his chardonnay one week earlier than any vintage before. *“Sometimes we pick in March. The earliest we had picked was the 14th February. This season we beat that by 7 clear days.”* Demand for John’s grapes was high. *“This season we received calls from wineries looking for our fruit. In the last few years we have been chasing a sale.”*

This is proving true for many of the districts white wine growers. High demand but less product to sell. The early harvest this year is due to much lower crop levels than a normal season. The drought and the effects of splitting reduced crops by up to 50%.

The legion of seasonal grape pickers are already finding the pickings thin. Wineries looking to fill export quota’s are searching hard to source extra fruit that is clean and in good shape.

The reds, McLaren Vale has built its reputation on reds. Crops for shiraz and cabernet sauvignon are estimated to be significantly down on last season. Wineries are expecting to see more of a scramble for fruit. The quality is expected to be high, but with such strange weather compared to what is the normal, different vineyards sites will produce different wine quality.

The early assessments are for excellent quality from Blewitt Springs which is higher and naturally a bit cooler than the rest of the region. These vineyards have handled the drought very well. The lack of winter rainfall has helped keep berries small, perfect for red wine making.

dudley brown- wine producer from California Rd, on the opposite side of town is hanging out for picking. *“I have officially hit the nutty farmer stage. It has been a constant challenge to identify the right level of moisture to support the ripening of crop.”* Dudley says. He expects his shiraz will be picked with in two weeks. Again this will be a week earlier than his earliest pick.

With the rapid ripening that is happening each vineyard and each wine made will be different and it will require a good palate to fully appreciate the effects of the drought on the districts quality.

The only thing that is certain is the harvest is going to be a whirlwind. It’s going to last weeks, not months. The regions growers and winemakers are hoping for a cool and dry March to make this as ideal as possible.



LAUGHING BERRIES = WORRY

Grape berries are quite soft in the few weeks before picking. Any heavy rain causes them to suck up water, swell and if enough rain falls they split.

