

These elite Napa estates are releasing wines from a fire-ravaged year. Do they taste smoky?

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Winemaker Helene Mingot holds a bottle of 2020 Eisele Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon.

Two years after the hazy, chaotic days of the 2020 wine harvest, a season bookended by sprawling wildfires, some Napa Valley winemakers are coming out with a surprising announcement: They made wine in 2020. And they're proud of it.

Not just any winemakers. Some of the wineries that plan to release 2020 red wines in the coming months include some of Napa's — even the world's — most elite, including Harlan Estate, Spottswoode Winery, Dominus Estate, Corison Winery and Eisele Vineyard.

The existence of these high-end [Napa wines](#) plainly contradicts the [narrative](#) that began to circulate during the fall of 2020, when many wineries declared that they would [not be making any wine](#) that year. The reason: They feared their wines had been marred by [smoke taint](#), a phenomenon in which ambient wildfire smoke can nestle inside grapes hanging on the vine, imparting unpleasantly smoky flavors that are difficult to remove from the resulting wine. At its worst, smoke taint can make a Cabernet taste like an ashtray.

With two major fires in Napa that year — the [LNU Lightning Complex](#) fire in August, followed by the [Glass Fire](#) in September — the entire valley was in a monthslong state of panic. Had the pervasive smoke, which sat thick in the air above many vineyards, irrevocably damaged their grapes? No one knew for sure, and with thousands of wineries all asking the same question, the laboratories that can test for smoke compounds were [backed up](#) for months.

“We did not turn on the crusher in 2020,” said Elias Fernandez, winemaker at [Shafer Vineyards](#) in Napa, referring to the piece of equipment that crushes grapes after they’re picked. “Looking back, it was the best thing we ever did to protect our integrity and our brand.”

Fernandez’s approach seemed, for a time, to be the prevailing wisdom among [high-end Napa Valley](#) estates — the sorts of places that sell bottles for \$200 or more and cannot afford to release a product that’s anything less than spectacular. While it’s hard to pinpoint exactly how many of Napa Valley’s wineries won’t be selling 2020 wines, multiple industry insiders estimate it to be more than half.



Firefighters at the Glass Fire in Calistoga on Sept. 29, 2020.

Yet it's now clear that 2020 was not, in fact, a lost vintage. I tasted dozens of soon-to-be-sold 2020 Napa reds while reporting this story. Virtually all, to my palate, are free of smoke taint.

If these wines are inspiring regret in some winemakers who wrote off an entire year's worth of revenue, they should also instill hope. Even in a season ravaged by wildfires — and 2020 surely won't be the last one — it may still be possible to make good wine in California.

“If we weren't contaminated,” said Tod Mostero, the winemaker at Dominus Estate, “then there were plenty of others that weren't contaminated.”

Smoke taint is a frustratingly opaque topic, still poorly understood by scientists. Basically, when smoke is in the air, certain compounds can make their way into grape skins. But what's hard to grasp “is that it's not a linear relationship,” said Anita Oberholster, a UC Davis scientist. “Just because somebody has smoke at their vineyard doesn't mean they will have smoke

taint.” Various factors like the land’s topography, the wind direction and the freshness of the smoke can determine the ultimate effect.

Confusingly, “proximity to fire is actually not a good indicator,” said Oberholster.

No wonder, then, that few winemakers knew what to do in 2020. The harvest season got off to an ominous start that year on Aug. 17, when a dry lightning siege ignited fires throughout California. A lightning strike in eastern Napa County gave way to the [LNU Lightning Complex Fire](#), which would ultimately destroy nearly 1,500 structures.

On the morning of Aug. 17, Helene Mingot was out in the rows of the Eisele Vineyard in Calistoga, where she’s been the winemaker for the last decade. It was her crew’s first day of harvest, and they were picking Sauvignon Blanc grapes. By 7 a.m., Mingot could smell the smoke, which was rising south and east of her, just beyond the Vaca Mountains.



Winemaker Helene Mingot inside the caves at Eisele Vineyard. Mingot made red wines in 2020. Her bottles sell for as much as \$450.

The LNU Lightning Complex would continue to burn for weeks, though the wind was moving eastward, toward Vacaville, away from Napa Valley. During that time, Mingot, like all the winemakers around her, was on high alert. She did what all her peers did: She sent samples of her grapes to laboratories — in her case, in France, because she couldn't get real-time information from any U.S. lab — to test for the presence of smoke compounds. And Mingot performed “microferments” at the winery, creating small batches of wine to see whether any smokiness could be tasted. (Some smoke compounds do not become perceptible until after fermentation.)

As she waited impatiently for the results, Mingot proceeded with the harvest as she normally would. “The important thing, I felt, was not to panic, but just to remain logical and methodical,” she said.

Eventually, her evaluations of the microferments and the lab results from France convinced Mingot that the smoke from the LNU Lightning Complex had not contaminated her wines, including the flagship Eisele Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, which sells for \$450.

All around her, other winemakers were making the same calculations. Mostero, at Dominus, was similarly concerned, “but we never considered not harvesting,” he said. But as more and more winemakers came out and announced they were choosing not to make wine, Mostero believes, “the terror spread.”

Could that infectious panic have led some wineries to abandon grapes on the vine that might have stood a chance? “The takeaway we're all learning,” said Sam Kaplan, who made 2020 wines for Arkenstone and Memento Mori



Hazy skies over a vineyard on Napa Valley's Howell Mountain on Oct. 1, 2020.

wineries, “is that there were some other factors affecting people’s decisions, like market perception.”

The calculus shifted yet again on Sept. 27, with the outbreak of the Glass Fire, which would prove even more destructive within Napa Valley, ultimately damaging more than 30 wineries. Anyone who had evaded smoke taint from the LNU Lightning Complex now had to consider a completely new, and possibly more devastating, factor.

Most of the wineries that are now releasing 2020 wines had, by pure chance, harvested their final grapes before the Glass Fire began. Winemaker Cory Empting had picked all the grapes for Harlan, Promontory and Bond estates by the end of August. Mingot finished at Eisele on Sept. 24; Mostero at Dominus on the 27th. Kaplan had made a point of picking the final grapes at Arkenstone on Sept. 26, because he didn’t want to work on his birthday the following day. That choice proved prescient for the wines, although Arkenstone’s property ended up engulfed in flames; Kaplan spent his birthday helping firefighters combat the blaze.

Winemaker Peter Heitz had harvested about 70% of his fruit for Turnbull Wine Cellars, in Oakville, by the time of the Glass Fire. Despite his fears that the fruit had been ruined by the LNU Lightning Complex — he had plans to sell it off in bulk — he found it tasted great. But anything that remained on the vine during the Glass Fire, he said, was noticeably smoky. That final 30%, Heitz said, “I sold to a company for \$1 a gallon that wanted to use it for barbecue sauce.”



Winemaker Aron Weinkauf tastes fermenting Cabernet Sauvignon wines at Spottswode Winery in St. Helena.

There are few known remedies for smoke-tainted grapes, though some processes like reverse osmosis and charcoal filtration have shown promise. One winemaker, Jason Moulton at St. Helena’s Whitehall Lane Winery, came up with his own solution: soaking his grapes in water that had been treated with ozone, a powerful sanitizer. (Ozone can be used to deodorize smoke compounds in a car or a house.) He found this to be successful, transforming grapes that had been covered in ash into wine that tasted, to him, smoke-free.

These wineries were the lucky ones. It's undeniable that some vineyards were affected by smoke taint in 2020, even those that were harvested before the Glass Fire. Many properties near the outbreak of the LNU Lightning Complex, in the valley's eastern hillsides, could not escape the worst-case scenario. Fernandez, of Shafer Vineyards, in the Stags Leap District, is among those winemakers who has no lingering doubts about the viability of a 2020 vintage. If he had to make the decision again, Fernandez said, "I'd make it faster."

For others, money made the decision. Wineries that buy grapes from farmers, rather than use vineyards they own themselves, as well as winemakers who pay to use shared winemaking facilities, may not have wanted to front all that money to make wine of questionable quality. Many farmers had insurance policies that would pay out only if winemakers rejected the fruit, so in some cases a winemaker was doing a farmer a favor by letting the grapes hang.

Still, some Napa winemakers now harbor regret.

"In retrospect, could I have fermented some stuff?" said Jean Hoeflinger, a consultant winemaker who works for dozens of brands including AxR and Pope Valley Winery. "Probably. In hindsight, I would probably have tried to negotiate differently with some growers." There was one particular vineyard in Oakville, Hoeflinger now believes, that "could have worked."

The problem, he continued, is that there's little room for error when you're making wine at the high price point that many Napa wineries do, like the ones he works for. A little smoke taint in a \$15 bottle might not be as offensive as in a \$250 one.

Most of the winemakers I interviewed who made 2020 wines chalked their success up to luck, especially those that finished before the Glass Fire. But Oberholster's goal is to develop tools that will help the industry improve its response when there is a smoke issue, such as anti-smoke sprays that could be applied to grapes. Resources for developing those tools is on the way: UC Davis will receive \$1.2 million in federal funding for smoke-taint research, and a bill has been introduced in the California state legislature that would set aside further funding.

In the meantime, these 2020 wines will always be a reminder of their uniquely challenging vintage, for better or worse. "I don't find that 2020 is a very fun story as a winemaker and a farmer," said Heitz, of Turnbull. "Wine is a time capsule. Who wants to go back to 2020? It was COVID, it was smoky, it wasn't an easy year."

He continued, "The wines I made, I really like. But I don't revel in 2020."

Napa wineries with 2020 reds to sell

The following Napa Valley wineries will be releasing red wines from the 2020 vintage.

Arkenstone Vineyards

B Cellars

Bell Wine Cellars

Bond Wine

Bouchaine Vineyards

Bougetz Cellars

Corison Winery

Crosby Roamann

Davies Vineyards

Di Costanzo Wines

Dominus Estate

Eisele Vineyard

Gibbs Vineyards

Grand Napa Vineyards

Grgich Hills Estate

Harlan Estate

Inglenook

Keenan Winery

Larkmead Vineyards

Lobo Wines

MacDonald Vineyards

Malk Family Vineyards

Matthew Bruno Wines

Memento Mori Winery

Patent Wines

Promontory Wine

Quilt Wines

Spottswoode Winery

Stags Leap Wine Cellars

Sullivan Rutherford Estate

The Vice Wine

Tres Sabores Winery

Trois Noix Wines

Turnbull Wine Cellars

Whitehall Lane Winery