

# Napa Valley's 2020s



BY JEB DUNNUCK | FEBRUARY 16, 2023



## The 2020s

Looking at 2020, this was an incredibly challenging year for northern California that saw the region ravaged by two wildfires: the LNU fire on August 17 and the Glass fire on September 27. The LNU fire burned 363,220 acres and was active for 46 days, while the Glass fire burned 67,484 acres and was active for 23 days. Both fires blanketed Napa Valley in smoke, but it appears that the later Glass Fire was the most consequential in terms of its effect on the final wines.

Smoke taint in wine is primarily caused when volatile phenols released from burning wood (or other compounds) are absorbed by grapes. These phenols can bind with sugars, creating glycosides, which mask the hallmark characteristics of smoke taint. This is the insidious side to smoke taint and one factor that makes it so difficult to evaluate. These binds, or glycosides, later break down during fermentation, or even worse, once in bottle, resulting in the presence of smoky, ashy, and gritty aromas and flavors.

The age of the smoke, distance from the fire, and time of exposure regarding the vine's growth stage can all play a role when trying to assess the smoke effect. Estates can try to combat smoke taint by washing the grapes, using reverse osmosis, fining with active carbon, shorter macerations, and other techniques, although to date, there does not appear to be a silver bullet.

Despite incredibly high air pollution levels during the LNU fire, many estates commented that detectable smoke on the grapes remained low, and it wasn't until the end of September and just before the Glass Fire that many reported detectable and adverse smoke levels in the grapes.

While few estates opted to release a 2020 due to widespread smoke taint, the good news is that for those in warmer terroirs who were able to harvest before the Glass fire at the end of September, it appears that some solid wines were made. St. Helena and the warmer, mid-valley appellations seemed to have the most success.

Looking at the style of the released 2020 wines, the hot early season weather, heat spikes during the summer, and the lack of sunshine at the end of the year due to high (and some low) levels of smoke, resulted in dense, concentrated, yet more linear wines. The wines show solid mid-palate depth and compact textures with firmer tannins. Whites, which are generally harvested earlier and see little in the way of skin contact, excelled, and there is a bevy of truly brilliant Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc in the vintage. I loved the precision and focus present in many 2020 whites, and these are clearly the silver lining in the vintage.

Unquestionably, 2020 is a challenging vintage that was devastating for many estates. As I've written in the past, consumers need to go in with their eyes open, recognizing that smoke taint can be hard to identify at low levels and can emerge with time in bottle. My experience with smoke taint goes back to 2008, when I purchased cases of Mendocino Syrah and Pinot Noir that were tainted due to widespread forest fires during the growing season. I watched those wines go from having almost undetectable levels of smoke taint to being mildly smoky to being completely undrinkable within three years. Thankfully, with the advances in testing and all-around better winemaking knowledge regarding smoke-affected vintages, I think (hope) the days of wines being bottled and released with massive amounts of bound smoke (or potential smoke taint) are over, but I am inherently cautious about vintages that were affected by smoke. I think you should be as well. Trying to decide if a young 2020 red that has firm, chalky tannins, or notions of scorched earth and smoky oak, is smoke-tainted or just closed and reductive, especially without lab results, can be incredibly difficult. I did my best to follow the wines in this report for as long as possible and to also drink bottles over multiple days, with the goal of understanding how the top 2020s will evolve for consumers. In some cases, the wines remained clean and enjoyable, and in other cases, the wines seemed to impart a grittiness on the palate that grew over time. The 2020s are not wines to be hidden away for years, and this is a vintage that consumers should routinely check in on.

I continue to follow the 2017s (which were also affected by devastating fires) and have been happy to see the successful wines from that vintage hold up with bottle age. This gives me hope that the best 2020s in this report will follow a similar trajectory.

At the end of the day, while 2020 is not a vintage to buy across the board, there are some terrific wines produced by Bond, Carter, Crocker & Starr, Dalla Valle, Harlan, Paul Hobbs, Spottswoode, and others highlighted in this report that unquestionably merit attention.