

The 2009 Grape and Wine Report

GRAPES 101

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Harvest of experimental plots at Cornell's CLEREL Laboratory in Portland, N.Y.

In 2009, New York's grape and wine industry faced significant challenges. Across the state, the growing season started with pleasant, relatively dry weather in April. Then the rains came, bringing early downy mildew infections into vineyards, and the rains stayed, challenging growers to keep leaves and fruit clean.

Although the average rainfall for 2009 in most grape production regions of New York closely matched historical averages, the timing of the rainfall presented challenges. The cool, rainy weather during bloom in the Concords dramatically reduced fruit set across the Lake Erie region, reducing already low crop potential across the belt.

Wine grapes with later bloom dates fared better, but were in danger of overcropping, especially in late season red varieties. Many growers adjusted their crops to ensure fruit could ripen. Growers received a break when the two weeks after veraison brought the nicest weather of the season. Clouds disappeared and allowed the sun to warm the vines and give the ripening crop a winning chance.

Most wineries that didn't face throughput/capacity pressure chose to delay harvest, leading to mid-November harvests for many. As a result, many facilities were still processing grapes into late November, bringing alcoholic, and especially malolactic, fermentations into December and potentially beyond. Even grapes picked later tended toward higher acid content, and many winemakers chose to make acid corrections in the juice.

One possible effect of longer hang time in situations where leaves were senescing is dehydration—a possible factor in reports of surprisingly good color in reds. Another explanation could be intensive thinning. In Western New York and on Long Island, yields were lowered naturally by early season weather, resulting in decreased volume from the 2009 vintage.

Where quantity is lacking, however, the beneficiary could be quality. Although the "numbers" (pH, TA, brix) were not what we normally see in New York, the flavors seem very promising, especially in the traditional cool climate varieties, including the usual whites New York is known for and also, notably, Pinot Noir. While climates both economic and meteorological were less than sunny in 2009, the result will still be good wine, and this fact alone makes 2010 look better already.