A RECORD LOW, BUT QUALITY SHINES

The South African wine grape harvest 2019 has hit a record low, largely due to the preceding drought and fluctuating weather conditions during the season. Winemakers are, however, positive about the quality of this year's vintage.

The 2019 wine grape crop is estimated at 1 225 620 tonnes, according to the latest estimate of industry body Sawis (South African Wine Industry Information & Systems) on 26 April 2019. Although only 1.4% smaller than last year, the crop has shrunk for the second consecutive year and 2019 represents a record low since 2005 when 1 171 632 tonnes were harvested.

“It has been a trying year for our wine grape producers and wineries. A decline in area under vines and challenging weather conditions contributed to the smaller harvest,” says Francois Viljoen, viticultural consultation service manager at Vinpro, which represents 2 500 South African wine grape producers, wineries and wine-related businesses.
Although most regions received good rainfall during the season, the after-effects of the preceding three year drought was still visible and vineyards and soils will take some time to recover. “The drought was still lingering during the post-harvest period, which meant many producers couldn’t apply crucial post-harvest irrigation. As a result leaves fell early and vines couldn’t accumulate the reserves needed to carry them through the season, which in turn affected the berry set and growth,” Viljoen says.

Severe weather fluctuations during bud break and flowering, followed by cool windy conditions during set, contributed to less and uneven bunches and smaller berries.

“2019 tells the tale of two harvesting seasons – the first easy with good weather conditions and great grape analyses up until the end of February, and the second challenging, characterised by slow ripening following cold, rainy weather in March,” Viljoen says.

The Northern Cape, Swartland, Paarl and Worcester regions produced larger crops than last year, but from a low base following big losses in 2018. Breedekloof and the Cape South Coast region had somewhat smaller crops, in line with average productions. Robertson and Stellenbosch also produced smaller crops, but the Olifants River and Klein Karoo regions were hit hardest for the second consecutive year due to the drought.

Despite the smaller crop, wine lovers can expect good quality wines from the 2019 vintage. According to Viljoen the smaller wine grape berries have a greater concentration of flavours. In general, wines also had good acidity, sugar and elegance which bodes well for quality.

“We saw once again this year virus-free vines which are managed well do much better than others in terms of both yield and quality. We encourage all wine grape producers to follow suit,” Viljoen says.

The 2019 wine harvest – including juice and concentrate for non-alcoholic purposes, wine for brandy and distilling wine – is expected to amount to 951.8 million litres at an average recovery of 777 litres per tonne of grapes.

South Africa is the eighth biggest wine producer world-wide and produces about 4% of the world’s wine. The wine industry contributes R36 billion to the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and employs nearly 290 000 people.

**2018/19 GROWING SEASON**

Winter had a late start with good rainfall following a drier than normal post-harvest period in autumn. Despite the good rainfall, warmer than normal temperatures – especially a number of hot days in July – initially led to low cold unit accumulation which in turn contributed to early and uneven bud break in some vineyards. The cold weather returned in August however, which slowed down bud break.

Spring was characterised by big weather fluctuations, which resulted in less, looser and uneven bunches, as well as smaller berries. Vineyards were off to a slow start and growth was erratic due to variations between warm and cold days, as well as cold soil temperatures.

A heat wave at the end of October was followed by cold, windy conditions during the flowering and set phase of many vineyards. This led to unevenness in bunches and berries between vines in the same block and even on the same grapevine. Frequent rain showers in this period also necessitated greater inputs from producers to control diseases such as downy mildew, which in some cases contributed to crop losses.
Weather conditions improved at the onset of summer. Warmer weather in November was conducive to vineyard growth, however berry development couldn’t fully catch up. Temperatures were moderate in December and January, followed by an initial hot February, as expected.

The harvesting season kicked off a little later than normal, with warm weather as reflected in the initial grape analyses. The harvest became more challenging, however, as cool, wet conditions dominated from the end of February through March. Many cultivars that ripen later in the season, especially red varietals, struggled to accumulate sugar and were ripe at lower sugar levels.

OVERVIEW OF REGIONS:

BREEDEKLOOF: A crop close to that of 2018, despite a challenging harvesting time and unevenness that made it difficult to determine ripeness.

CAPE SOUTH COAST: A smaller, but exceptional quality harvest, as this region was not affected as severely by the drought as other areas.

KLEIN KAROO: A very challenging season, with yields even lower than the previous two years due to the continued drought and hail damage in some areas.

NORTHERN CAPE: A blessed 2019 season, with higher yields per hectare and promising quality.

OLIFANTS RIVER: A second consecutive smaller harvest following a record low in 2018, due to the after-effects of the drought.

PAARL: Somewhat bigger yields, however from a low base following a much smaller 2018 crop, due to the preceding drought and weather fluctuations.

ROBERTSON: A challenging season led to a big drop in production for the second consecutive season, but quality remains high.

STELLENBOSCH: Despite good rainfall, the region was still affected by the preceding drought and realised a much smaller crop for the second year in a row.

SWARTLAND: Larger than a very small 2018 wine grape crop, with promising quality.

WORCESTER: A surprisingly larger wine grape production following a smaller crop in 2018, with good quality wines on the way.

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MEDIA ENQUIRIES: Wanda Augustyn
Tel: +27(0)21 276 0458
E-mail: wanda@wineland.co.za
REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Herewith an overview by Vinpro’s viticulture consultants of the season and wine grape crop size and quality in ten South African wine grape regions.

BREDEKLOOF

OVERVIEW

“The Breedekloof region is expecting a wine grape crop similar in size to the 2018 harvest, despite a challenging harvesting season and unevenness, which made it difficult to determine the ripeness,” says Pierre Snyman, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Breedekloof region.

The season was characterised by an unusual heat wave during the flowering period, significant variations in terms of ripeness in the vineyards and even on the same vines, as well as rain during March which contributed to disease pressure. However, the ripening period was relatively moderate and the colour of the red grapes is looking exceptionally good.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The earlier cultivars had lighter yields than in 2018, especially Sauvignon Blanc, Nouvelle and Pinotage. However, the later Chenin Blanc and Colombar blocks compensated for this. Merlot struggled this year in particular to achieve the optimal sugar levels and the grapes were only harvested towards the end of the harvesting season.

CLIMATE CONDITIONS

The post-harvest period was unfavourable and extremely dry, even though the first winter rainfall occurred early. The accumulation of reserves wasn’t ideal, and it was difficult to apply post-harvest fertilisation due to limited water reserves. Producers who relied on mountain water encountered problems in this regard in particular.

The winter rainfall started off well, together with sufficient snow, which allowed vineyards to accumulate sufficient cold units during this time. Bud burst was more uneven than usual and these uneven patterns occurred throughout the season until the harvesting season began.

The growth in the vineyards was initially slow, most probably due to major temperature fluctuations and cold soil temperatures throughout the growing season. However, the vineyards’ growth started accelerating after the flowering period which led to vigorous canopies, thus complicating timeous canopy management actions. Furthermore, most of the cultivars suffered a heat wave during their flowering period in October, which lasted for about eight days with an average maximum temperature of 36 °C and two of these days hotter than 40 °C. This heat wave was presumably the main cause of the lower yields in certain cultivars.
The industry was cautiously optimistic about the expectation of the crop, since the looser bunches and slightly smaller berries were noticeable.

The temperatures were relatively moderate during the ripening period and harvesting season. The harvest kicked off seven to ten days later than in 2018 and significant uneven patterns were evident with regard to the ripening within blocks, rows, vines and even on the same bunches.

This was surely one of the most difficult seasons to determine the ripeness of the vineyards accurately for harvesting purposes. Cultivars were harvested in a disorderly fashion. Many red wine grape cultivars had reached physiological ripeness at lower sugar levels, in particular.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The Breedekloof experienced an overall healthy year, with the exception of early autumn rain during March (± 20 mm) which caused some botrytis rot problems. Water supplies had improved since the previous years and weren’t generally a limiting factor. The Brandvlei dam is currently filled up to 25% compared to 12% in 2018.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

The colour of the red wine grapes was exceptionally good, due to temperature fluctuations and good leaf removal practices.

– Pierre Snyman, 083 455 5191, pierre@vinpro.co.za

CAPE SOUTH COAST

OVERVIEW

"Cellars in the Cape South Coast region have taken in a smaller wine grape crop this year, yet one with excellent quality," says Etienne Terblanche, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Cape South Coast region.

Irregular temperatures from winter to the flowering and berry set period, as well as cool growing conditions coupled with gale force winds led to major inconsistencies and a decrease in production. High sugar and acidity levels due to cooler ripening conditions contributed the industry expecting excellent wine quality from the 2019 vintage.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The Cape South Coast region produced a smaller crop this year than in 2018. This year’s harvest was predominantly influenced by conditions during the 2018/19 season, since this region has generally performed better than the other regions during the preceding drought.
Producers who adjusted their pruning techniques as a result of low bud fertility in previous seasons, had more success, as well as those producers who applied post-harvest fungal sprays, irrigation and fertilisation.

Delayed bud burst in early cultivars such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir had a massive impact on production, together with fluctuating weather conditions during flowering and berry set. Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc generally delivered lower productions than expected, whereas mid- to late cultivars delivered average to good productions.

**CLIMATE CONDITIONS**

The growing season was generally characterised by major variation with regard to vegetative growth – mainly influenced by a warm winter, uneven bud burst and the availability of plant reserves.

Leaf fall occurred at the latest stage of all the regions due to a cool post-harvest period, which had a positive effect on the accumulation of reserves. Leaf fall occurred even earlier in areas such as Bot River, since the soil water and available irrigation water were limited after the harvest. The accumulation of reserves could therefore not be established optimally.

Sufficient cold units were accumulated during the early winter in Elgin for the breaking of dormancy, although there were some shortages along the coastal regions such as Elim and the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley.

The winter rainfall recovered after the drought of the past three years, which replenished the soil profiles. The winter was extremely warm and windy, despite optimal low soil temperatures. Four warm periods with day temperatures above 22°C occurred during June and July, which hindered the accumulation of cold units along the coastal regions and led to early bud burst. This phenomenon was especially evident in early cultivars such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and the windy conditions of up to 70 km/h could have harmed newly formed buds. However, middle to late cultivars were not influenced by this.

The early cultivars experienced bud burst significantly earlier than usual, as was expected. Middle to late cultivars experienced late bud burst due to a relatively cool and wet spring. These cool, wet conditions also led to delayed initial shoot growth and uneven shoot lengths, which was evident afterwards in the vineyards for a continued time. Extreme inconsistencies in bud burst dates of individual buds were observed on the same vine in vineyard blocks such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, where chemicals for the breaking of dormancy were not applied.

The spring rainfall was less than usual, although the vineyards had minimal water stress as a result of the sufficient rainfall during winter. Irregular weather conditions had a negative impact on flowering and berry set. This explains the major inconsistencies between the blocks. It was unusually warm towards the end of October, followed by extremely cool weather conditions. Wind surges of up 75 km/h were recorded during this time in the Elgin and Grabouw areas.

Regular rain showers and cool weather conditions later in the growing season had a positive effect on vegetative growth. The canopies presented much better than during the past two years. Shoot growth also halted on time during véraison in cases where irrigation was adjusted according to the available soil water.
Regular, light rain showers and relatively cool day and night temperatures were quite common during the pre-harvest period. January to the end of March were cooler than usual, with the exception of a few moderate to warm days during February – therefore optimal cool climate and ripening conditions.

However, the stages of ripening varied dramatically between bunches. The early cultivars were harvested earlier than usual, possibly due to lower crop loads. Ripening was significantly delayed towards the end of the harvest season, due to cooler temperatures.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The occurrence of diseases was very high in general due to regular cool and wet conditions, and had a major effect on the crop size.

Powdery mildew occurred earlier than usual in particular and was accelerated by low temperatures and delayed initial growth. The high relative humidity levels caused downy mildew to flare up again. Producers who didn’t adjust their spraying programme accordingly, lost effective canopies and had crop losses due to the wilting of flowering bunches.

The occurrence of botrytis rot was no more than usual as a result of relatively looser bunches and small berries that allowed aeration.

Fire outbreaks in the Grabouw, Elgin and Hermanus areas caused minimal damage to the vineyards. However, birds and baboons caused significantly more damage due to the limited food resources in these areas.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

The Cape South Coast region is expecting wines of excellent quality, despite the season’s challenges.

Early cultivars are generally showing higher sugar and acidity levels, an indication of balanced wines. Malic acid levels are higher than normal, which could be ascribed to cool weather conditions, lower crop sizes and good sugar accumulation, despite the cooler conditions. Red wines achieved good colour as well as good phenological ripeness, with elegant structure and both optimal sugar and acidity levels.

– Etienne Terblanche, 072 402 7434, etienne@vinpro.co.za

KLEIN KAROO

OVERVIEW

“The Klein Karoo had a challenging year,” says Hennie Visser, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Klein Karoo region. “Production is on average even lower than the previous two years, due to the ongoing drought and hail damage occurring sporadically.”
PRODUCTION TRENDS

The Klein Karoo produced a smaller crop than in 2018, which was already significantly smaller than the previous year. The region endured an ongoing drought for the fourth consecutive year. The drought still had an impact on production, although the producers who received water from the scheme this year had more available water for irrigation. The low rainfall also led to an increase in salinity symptoms due to the accumulation of salinity in the soil.

CLIMATE CONDITIONS

The vineyards had earlier leaf fall than usual after the 2018 harvest due to the drought and insufficient irrigation water. Poor accumulation of reserves was therefore expected.

The drier weather conditions continued throughout the winter and the region had a below-average rainfall for the fourth consecutive year, especially in the Ladismith, Calitzdorp and Barrydale regions. July was significantly warmer than usual, whereas August was cooler than usual. The winter cold was sufficient for the breaking of dormancy.

The vineyards in the Montagu region experienced sufficient and even bud burst at the normal and expected time. The vineyards had good bud burst, despite the low rainfall, early leaf fall and possible low accumulation of reserves. In other regions of the Klein Karoo, the drought of the past few years contributed to a low accumulation of reserves and consequent uneven bud burst.

The dry weather continued throughout the spring, although good rainfall was measured in certain areas during September.

The first grapes ripened slightly earlier than usual, although the sugar accumulation was slow as the season continued. The harvest season went smoothly and there was no major pressure on cellar space, owing to the smaller crop.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Pressure from diseases and outbreaks of powdery mildew were much lower due to the low rainfall in the region. However, outbreaks of powdery mildew occurred later in the season which contributed to a delay in the ripening process.

Rain occurred during February in certain parts of the Klein Karoo, resulting in rot in particular the Chenin Blanc blocks. A major thunder storm in the Montagu area in March caused serious sporadic hail damage as well as consequential rot, which had a negative impact on the overall yield.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

The wine wines have beautiful, fresh flavours and the quality looks promising at this stage, with good acidity and pH analyses. Acidity levels were low after fermentation.

– Hennie Visser, 083 455 5193, henniev@vinpro.co.za
OVERVIEW

“The Northern Cape had a good and blessed season in 2019, with good yields per hectare and promising quality,” says Henning Burger, viticulturist at Orange River Cellars.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

A bigger crop was taken in at Orange River Cellars, despite the expectation of the 2019 wine grape crop being the same as in 2018. All wine grape cultivars produced higher yields per hectare than in 2018 at an average of about 35 ton/ha. Colombar and Chenin Blanc performed well, in particular, with Colombar performing exceptionally well.

CLIMATE CONDITIONS

The temperatures were extremely low from the end of August to mid-September due to strong, regular cold fronts and accompanying snow. This led to the vineyards experiencing bud burst ten to 14 days later than usual, during the third week of September. Luckily the vineyards escaped frost damage during the first half of September, a time during which the night temperatures frequently dropped to below freezing point.

Spring was dry and bud burst initially uneven, but it improved as the weather conditions warmed up during the first half of October. A heat wave and very strong, dry winds occurred during the last week of October – a time during which the majority of the wine grape cultivars were in the middle of their flowering period, which certainly had a negative impact on berry set. These extreme conditions were also unfavourable for the growth of young vines that were newly planted in August.

Very cool day and night temperatures followed after the heat wave and these extreme conditions had a negative impact on the vines during the crucial flowering and berry set stage. However, bunch counts were still higher than usual and berry set was generally good.

No significant rain occurred during early summer. The vineyards were mostly healthy and vigorous. The harvest season kicked off ten to 14 days later than in 2018 and most of the wine grapes were harvested over a relatively short, pressurised period from the third week in February until the third week in March.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The vineyards were healthy and vigorous in general, due to the absence of rain and no occurrences of extreme heat waves during the pre- and post-harvest periods. Grape intakes were also healthy throughout the harvesting period. The Northern Cape experienced no water shortages, since the dams in the Orange-Vaal system were filled to more than 70%.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

The quality of the grapes was excellent with good acidity levels and lower than normal pH levels. Well-balanced wines are expected as a result of healthy grapes which were produced under good, more moderate climate conditions.

— Henning Burger, 082 824 4941, henning@owk.co.za
OVERVIEW

“Wine grape producers in the Olifants River region once again experienced a challenging season, due to a carry-over effect of the preceding three year drought,” says Gert Engelbrecht, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Olifants River region.

The region produced extremely low yields in some cultivars and the harvest was in general somewhat smaller than a very low 2018 wine grape crop. However, the vineyards were more productive during the season due to more available irrigation water after the harvest and during the early winter, which will hopefully contribute to the recovery in the coming season.

“The wines are looking very promising as a result of the cooler ripening conditions with minimal heat spikes,” says Gert.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The 2019 crop is somewhat smaller than the small crop of 2018. Even though there was more water available this year, the carry-over effect of dry weather conditions during the previous season as well as a dry growing season in 2018 contributed to the smaller crop. Poor set, especially in the red cultivars also affected the crop size negatively.

Sauvignon Blanc, Pinotage, Merlot, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon produced very low crop weights in particular. It was also quite prevalent to observe red blocks with extremely low productions of below 5t/ha.

CLIMATE CONDITIONS

The post-harvest period was certainly the driest since the beginning of the canal scheme. Water provision to producers halted during the first week of March. The dry soils contributed to early leaf fall and the rebudding of vineyards was a common phenomenon. The temperatures were fortunately slightly cooler than the long-term average.

Winter rainfall started mid-May, although it was close to 25% below the average rainfall. The vineyards started bud burst straight after the first rains and the very warm, windy weather conditions led to continued bud burst and growth. The accumulation of cold units was consequently lower than usual.

The cold weather conditions during August and September eventually halted the growth of the vineyards and most of the cultivars therefore experienced late bud burst after the final pruning. Bud burst was also very uneven in most of the vineyards.

The flowering and berry set period were characterised by a heat wave during the third week of October, together with extremely strong easterly winds, which had serious consequences for cultivars such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Flowering and berry set also occurred very uneven due to uneven bud burst and growth during the first half of the season.
The vineyards had good growth during the growing season as a result of moderate weather conditions. Shoot growth was better than the previous record dry season and the canopies were denser. The weather from November to January was slightly cooler than usual with no heat waves and minimal hours above 35 °C.

The moderate weather continued throughout February and March and the temperatures in March were especially cooler than the long-term average. The harvesting season kicked off about a week earlier than usual, although certain red cultivars such as Merlot were harvested later.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Outbreaks of powdery mildew and downy mildew were both present throughout the season due to regular rain showers as well as the fact that producers attempted to save on spraying costs. Denser canopies and regular morning mist also contributed to rot, especially later in the season.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Juice analyses showed high acidity levels and very low pH levels in general, in particular in the white cultivars. The sugar levels were also generally lower in both the white and red cultivars.

The quality of the Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc shows promise at this stage, with good natural acidity, which will contribute to the improvement of the maturation ability and freshness of the wines. Alcohol levels are generally lower in both the white and red wines.

– Gert Engelbrecht, 072 152 4028, gerte@vinpro.co.za

PAARL

OVERVIEW

The Paarl region produced a slightly bigger crop, although still small in size, says Hanno van Schalkwyk, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Paarl region. The aftermath of the drought from the previous three years, together with fluctuating weather conditions had a negative impact on the crop, although the region had more available water resources than the previous year.

A cool spring led to uneven patterns between berries and bunches, although the cooler weather at the beginning of the harvesting season led to very good quality in turn. This could be seen in the excellent flavours, in particular the white cultivars, as well as the good colour development and soft tannins in the red cultivars.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The winter rainfall was very good and the water provision was also much better than the previous three drought-stricken years. However, the drought from the previous season in particular still had an impact.
on the crop and less bunches were observed on the vines. The crop is overall slightly bigger than in 2018, although still relatively small in size given a big drop in production in 2018.

Sauvignon Blanc yields were much lighter, while Chenin Blanc and Pinotage had bigger yields. Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon initially showed promise, but poor berry set led to looser bunches.

**CLIMATE CONDITIONS**

The post-harvest period was very dry with only minimal available water for irrigation, since producers were only able to use water from the Berg River irrigation scheme until the end of February 2018. This had a negative impact on root growth, the accumulation of reserves and the ultimate crop. Both April and May were relatively cool and the leaves remained on the vines for long. Producers were also able to plant their cover crops at an early stage, after the early autumn rains started falling.

Good rainfall occurred from mid-May to the end of June and the cold weather conditions were sufficient during this time to meet the vines’ needs. The rainfall during July was low with very high day and night temperatures. August and September showed improved rainfall statistics, which replenished the big storage and farm dams. The cover crops generated sufficient organic material.

The extremely warm weather at the end of July led to most of the vineyards experiencing early bud burst. Chardonnay, Shiraz and Cinsaut had uneven bud burst due to fluctuating weather conditions during September, which were characterised by regular cold fronts. Ongoing cold and wet conditions furthermore led to the shoot growth developing at a slower pace. The roots were not very active due to the low soil temperatures and the leaves appeared yellowish in general. However, the vineyards’ growth accelerated when the temperatures started getting warmer towards the end of September.

Gale force winds as well as a cold front during mid-October caused some damage to vineyards situated at higher elevation levels. The wind, as well as extremely high temperatures towards the end of October led to poor berry set in various Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards. Major uneven patterns occurred in Chardonnay, Shiraz and Cinsaut blocks after berry set, in particular.

January had cool weather conditions in general and the harvest period started on time. A very warm period at the end of January accelerated the harvest activities, although the temperatures fluctuated significantly after this, thus stabilising the harvesting pace. Regular rain showers and cooler weather towards the end of February caused the majority of grapes to reach sugar levels at a slow pace and to ripen at lower sugar levels. Uneven patterns in bunch and berry development were observed in the majority of the Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Cinsaut blocks.

**GENERAL COMMENTS**

Downy mildew and phomopsis or dead arm disease were observed sporadically during the spring, at which producers only started spraying after the shoot length was at least 10 cm. Most of the producers applied their last preventative fungal sprays by mid-December and the rain that occurred towards the end of that month led to downy mildew infections on the young leaves.
GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Grape analyses were initially promising at the beginning of the harvesting season, after which the pH levels suddenly increased during the second half of the harvest. Titratable acidity levels were very high, since malic acid levels remained stable due to the relatively cool weather. The colour development of the grapes was good and tannins were soft. Good quality wines are expected at this stage, in particular for Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc and Pinotage.

– Hanno van Schalkwyk, 083 455 5192, hanno@vinpro.co.za

ROBERTSON

OVERVIEW

“A challenging season leads to a significantly smaller wine grape crop, but one with surprisingly good quality,” says Hennie Visser, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Robertson region.

The fluctuating weather conditions, the carry-over effect of the preceding drought and the uprooting of vineyards contributed to a smaller crop, although the region had more available irrigation water, with less frost damage than the previous year.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The Robertson region generally delivered a significantly smaller crop than in 2018. This decrease in production can be ascribed to poor berry set in some cases, problems with saline soils due to the preceding drought, vineyards not receiving sufficient irrigation and/or fertilisation, as well as the fact that more vineyards have been uprooted than planted over time.

The 2019 crop year will be remembered as a year with two halves – the first part early and healthy with good analyses and the second part late with high pressure from diseases and grapes struggling to reach optimal ripeness.

The muscat cultivars and Colombar delivered good yields. However, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz produced smaller yields, with Sauvignon Blanc and Pinotage producing very poor crops. Normal juice recoveries are to be expected.

CLIMATE CONDITIONS

The vineyards experienced leaf fall earlier than usual after the harvest due to lower rainfall conditions and insufficient water resources for post-harvest irrigation, which in turn led to the poor accumulation of reserves.

The region received sufficient winter rain, almost the same as the long-term average. The day temperatures for June and July were both significantly higher than usual, followed by a slightly cooler August. The night temperatures were consistently lower than usual. The winter cold was sufficient for the breaking of dormancy, despite the warmer weather at the beginning of the winter season.
The first vineyards had very early bud burst this year – in some cases even as early as ten to 14 days – although bud burst was generally poor and uneven. The cold weather and snow during August delayed bud burst, but it eventually appeared to be promising with even patterns in the vineyards that started budding after these cold conditions. The initial shoot growth was slow and the leaves were yellow due to regular cold periods and cold soil temperatures.

The temperatures were very inconsistent during the spring with an average rainfall. A heat wave that lasted for about a week towards the end of October was followed by frost damage a few days later. This led to inconsistent and in some cases extremely poor berry set in certain cultivars, coupled with windy conditions during the flowering period.

The initial growth was slow due to the late arrival of cold weather and poor accumulation of reserves in the previous dry season. The growth was less vigorous than usual and halted early. The summer temperatures were normal, with lower night temperatures and about 10% higher rainfall than usual. A total of 60 mm rain was recorded during March, four times the long-term average. No heat waves were recorded during the ripening period, and only one day was recorded with a temperature above 40°C.

The vineyards matured about seven to 14 days earlier than usual during the first half of the harvesting season. However, ripening was delayed as the season progressed, especially after the rain during March, and it was a challenge to reach the optimal sugar levels in late cultivars. Some blocks had to be harvested, even though all the grapes were not optimally matured.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Pressure from diseases was minimal at the beginning of the growth season as a result of the low rainfall and no outbreaks of downy mildew occurring. However, there were a few cases of powdery mildew.

Downy mildew infections, botrytis rot and sour rot occurred after the high rainfall during the first half of March, even in cultivars such as Cabernet Sauvignon that is not susceptible to rot. Mealy bug outbreaks also occurred sporadically. Frost damage was recorded at the end of October, but was significantly less than during the previous season.

Most of the producers had more available irrigation water than they had in the previous season. Producers who relied on mountain water were under immense pressure due to the ongoing low rainfall.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Grape analyses appear to be promising with exceptionally high acidity levels and low pH levels. The grapes were very healthy with good colour and flavour, which surprisingly holds promise of good quality wines, despite the season’s challenges.

– Hennie Visser, 083 455 5193, henniev@vinpro.co.za
OVERVIEW

Wine grape producers in the Stellenbosch region received a smaller crop of high quality, says Etienne Terblanche, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Stellenbosch region. “The carry-over effect of the preceding three year drought was still evident to us in the 2019 harvest, despite the higher rainfall during the season.”

Irregular temperatures from winter to the flowering period, as well as the cool growing conditions led to major inconsistencies in the vineyards, although producers were able to manage it with effective canopy and crop management actions. Cool weather conditions and regular rain showers caused the vines to experience less water stress during the ripening period.

The early cultivars are showing good acidity levels and flavour profiles, while the late cultivars delivered elegant wines at lower sugar and alcohol levels.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The Stellenbosch region produced a smaller crop than in 2018 overall, with some variation in the region. Producers who had sufficient water to apply post-harvest irrigation at the beginning of the season had a successful harvest.

Delayed or even the absent bud burst in early cultivars such as Chardonnay and Pinotage had a massive effect on production. Cultivars were affected differently by fluctuating weather conditions during the flowering and berry set stages, depending on their normal flowering and berry set period. Early cultivars such as Chardonnay, Pinotage and Sauvignon Blanc as well as late cultivars such as Cabernet Sauvignon, suffered the most. While Chenin Blanc and Merlot delivered average yields. Average to below-average juice recoveries were observed.

CLIMATE CONDITIONS

Leaf fall occurred earlier than usual in the post-harvest period, especially in dryland vineyards and vineyards that didn’t receive sufficient irrigation water due to the drought. Less than normal cold units were recorded during the crucial breaking of dormancy period towards the end of May and beginning of June. Vineyards that suffered water stress during the previous season already showed post-harvest signs of bud burst on apical parts of the shoots, which could have had an effect on the plant reserves.

The winter rainfall was higher than the previous two winters, but still average compared to the long-term average. June to August were characterised by extremely high temperatures of up to 25 °C and higher, which had a negative impact on the accumulation of cold units. Chemicals for the breaking of dormancy could not be applied in many cases where vineyards already started budding on the basal bud positions early in August. However, the cold weather from mid- to late August limited further budding.

A relatively cool and wet spring, together with unseasonable bud burst of early cultivars led to uneven patterns during the initial growth phase. This was evident for quite some time after bud burst. Cultivars such as Chardonnay, Shiraz and Pinotage didn’t even experience bud burst on some spurs. Irregular bud burst of early cultivars in particular complicated the application of fungicides and chemical herbicides during the spring. Cool weather conditions limited young shoot growth later in the spring.
The temperatures were very inconsistent from October to November and this had a negative impact on flowering and led to major inconsistencies in berry set, together with lower than normal rainfall and strong winds at times.

There were major inconsistencies in vegetative growth during the growth season, mainly due to the warm winter, uneven bud burst and availability of plant reserves. The growing season itself was relatively cool during the day and night, with triple the amount of rainfall as in the previous two seasons. The ripening patterns still differed significantly between the bunches, although the vegetative growth accelerated due to the rain.

The cool weather conditions constituted smaller berries, despite the relatively low water stress. Less irrigation water was necessary this year, even in vineyards that would normally receive additional irrigation water.

Most of the blocks were harvested around the normal time, with the exception of later red cultivars. The harvest season was characterised by regular rain showers with more than 100 mm recorded from January to March. January was relatively cool, with February being warm as expected, after which the temperatures dropped significantly towards the end of the month. The later red cultivars reached optimal sugars levels at a very slow pace during this time and some vineyards struggled to reach optimal ripeness.

There was relatively little pressure on cellar space due to the smaller crop and timeous ripening.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Sufficient cover crops facilitated weed control, although the regular rain showers during the harvest season impeded the control of weeds on berms.

Pressure from fungal diseases was generally high, in particular powdery mildew and downy mildew, and the relatively high humidity led to even more outbreaks of downy mildew. Producers who weren’t able to adjust their spraying programmes suffered crop and canopy losses.

Snails occurred especially after the rain showers during the winter and bud burst stage. Producers had to manage these outbreaks. Mealy bug, weevil and katydid outbreaks were successfully kept under control this year.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

Wines from the Stellenbosch region are looking very promising at this stage. Early cultivars showed high acidity levels in general, which implied that cellars didn’t have to adjust the acidity level. Colour and tannin analyses are lower than in 2018, but still contributed to wines with an elegant style.

– Etienne Terblanche, 072 402 7434, etienne@vinpro.co.za
OVERVIEW

The 2019 wine grape crop in the Swartland region is bigger than the significantly smaller crop of 2018 and the quality of the wines is promising, according to Hanno van Schalkwyk, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Swartland region.

The vineyards’ canopies were the best in years due to sufficient winter rain, although the drought from the past three years still had a negative impact on the amount of bunches. Bunches also appear to be more uneven due to major fluctuations between the cold and warm periods.

PRODUCTION TRENDS

The total crop size was bigger than in 2018, but follows a much smaller 2018 wine grape crop. The Swartland region mainly cultivates dryland vineyards, which implies that the winter rain was very favourable. The preceding three year drought still had an impact on the vineyards, as can be observed in a decrease in the amount of bunches.

Shiraz delivered poor yields after the drought, while Chenin Blanc and Pinotage produced much better as a result of fuller bunches.

CLIMATE CONDITIONS

The post-harvest period in the Swartland region was warm and the soils were very dry. Vineyards that struggled during the 2018 harvest season had early leaf fall and some blocks had no leaves remaining by the end of March. The conditions for root growth and the accumulation of reserves were therefore unfavourable. Sufficient rain during April enabled producers to sow cover crops early.

May and June were reasonably cold and wet – sufficient to meet the vineyards’ cold needs. July was dry and warm, but the rainfall was still lower than the long-term average, although the total rainfall was better than the previous year. Cover crops produced more organic material and were in most cases sprayed before bud burst.

A very warm period towards the end of July caused some vineyards to experience early bud burst. However, inconsistent weather conditions during September with regular cold fronts decelerated shoot growth and bud burst. This led to uneven patterns in most cases. The warmer conditions during October, especially towards the end of the month, accelerated shoot growth once more.

Strong winds during the flowering period led to poor berry set in the majority of the Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon blocks. This eventually led to lower productions.

The temperatures were very moderate during December and January. The first heat wave only occurred at the beginning of February. The harvest dates were quite normal at that stage and some Sauvignon Blanc blocks were even harvested earlier. The majority of the blocks were harvested towards the end of February, with the exception of mostly Cabernet Sauvignon. Cooler weather conditions during March led to these blocks struggling to reach the required levels of ripeness.
Ripening was uneven between the bunches, but also within individual bunches. The extent of the uneven patterns differed between the cultivars, with Shiraz and Cinsaut showing particular unevenness.

**GENERAL COMMENTS**

The condition of the canopies during the harvesting season was generally much better than the preceding dry years and the grapes were also very healthy. The rain during mid-December caused outbreaks of downy mildew on the younger leaves. Outbreaks of powdery mildew especially occurred after the harvest.

**GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY**

Early indications show that it will be a good year for wine quality, in particular Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinotage, which are showing early promise.

The grape analyses were initially very good (high acidity levels and low pH levels) and colour analyses in the red grapes appeared to be promising. Acidity levels decreased significantly in the second half of the harvest season.

– Hanno van Schalkwyk, 083 455 5192, hanno@vinpro.co.za

**OVERVIEW**

“The 2019 wine grape crop in the Worcester region is surprisingly bigger, despite challenging weather conditions during the flowering and berry set period, as well as in the middle of the harvest season,” says Pierre Snyman, Vinpro’s viticulturist for the Worcester region. Wines of good quality are expected from this year’s harvest.

Temperature fluctuations during spring and an unusual heat wave at the end of October led to uneven bud burst and flowering. It also led to major inconsistencies with regard to ripeness in the vineyards and even on the same vines. The high rainfall during February and March also increased pressure from diseases.

**PRODUCTION TRENDS**

The 2019 wine grape crop is bigger than in 2018, after a significantly smaller crop last year. Early cultivars such as Sauvignon Blanc, Nouvelle and Pinotage yielded less, but crops from cultivars such as Chenin Blanc and Colombar vineyards that matured later were significantly bigger, which balanced it out. Merlot struggled to reach optimal sugar levels in particular due to the rainfall during February and March and was harvested mostly towards the end of the season.
CLIMATE CONDITIONS

The region suffered a few very dry years which lasted until the 2018 post harvest period. The vineyards were under pressure and saline soils were a major hindrance since it could not be managed with irrigation water. The fine roots were especially impaired, which in turn harmed the entire system of the vines. Post-harvest fertilisation could in most cases not be applied properly due to the dry conditions.

It was a good winter with regard to the accumulation of cold units and the rainfall was generally much better than in the previous seasons. This was accompanied by sufficient snow fall which would replenish dams and rivers.

This was one of the seasons with probably the most uneven bud burst, which continued throughout the season. This made it difficult to determine the physiological ripeness of the grapes during the harvest season.

The season was also characterised by major temperature fluctuations which ultimately had a negative impact on berry size. Frost damage occurred in the early spring in certain areas, but the extent of the damage was less than in the previous season.

The region experienced an unusual heat wave in the last week of October with an average maximum temperature of 36 °C, which affected the flowering and berry set of most vineyards negatively. The size of the berries of these grapes was overall noticeably smaller and the bunches appeared to be looser than usual. The lower yields in some cultivars are mainly ascribed to this.

It was quite evident since January that the crop might be smaller than expected, especially when the early cultivars and vineyards were harvested. The grapes were very uneven with regard to ripening and the inconsistencies were major, even on the same vine and shoot.

The ripening period, as well as the harvesting season itself were characterised by moderate temperatures, which had a positive effect on the quality of the wine grapes. However, high rainfall was recorded during February and March, which increased pressure from diseases.

GENERAL COMMENTS

It initially appeared to be a healthy year but the above-average rainfall during February and March increased pressure from diseases and the occurrence of rot significantly. This placed immense pressure on cellar capacity with regard to the intake of grapes and production thereof. Hail damage was also observed in a small area.

The water supplies seemed more promising during the season but it was still difficult to apply good salinity management.

GRAPE AND WINE QUALITY

The season will be remembered for two parts, especially with regard to the white cultivars. The first half had good analyses with high acidity levels in particular, but there were some problems later in the season with regard to the acidity and pH levels. The colour of the red grapes was exceptionally good and this could be ascribed to the temperature fluctuations as well as good leaf removal practices.

– Pierre Snyman, 083 455 5191, pierre@vinpro.co.za