



WILLAMETTE VALLEY WINES EXCLUSIVE 2021 PRELIMINARY HARVEST REPORT

Vintage 2021 Key Takeaways

- Quality overall was very high, with winemakers rating the harvest from “beautiful” to “epic” and some describing it as a career high point.
- Many, but not all, producers saw 20–30% reduced yields compared to normal.
- Hot and dry conditions were mitigated by sporadic rains in June and, to a lesser extent, during harvest, saving vines from heat stress.
- Comparisons to prior vintages are all over the map, with winemakers citing resemblances to aspects of 2002, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2016 while acknowledging the unique conditions of this vintage.
- Many producers harvested and finished early due to the warm season, but were pleased to see balanced structure in the wines.

What are your overall impressions of the 2021 vintage? What were the growing conditions?

“Outside of the pure joy of just being able to bring in and produce wine again, the 2021 is shaping up beautifully. We had a warm growing season, with some strangely high temperatures as we are all aware, which made for some extremely early sampling on our end. Sugars tended to be a bit higher earlier, but we didn’t find the flavors had really hit full maturity. It was a delicate dance of waiting just a little longer to see some extra flavor development. The rains helped knock back some of the higher sugars and also gave us some time to see malic acids drop (they had been showing pretty high). Overall, the grapes held onto a fair amount of acid and these wines are expressing some lovely and lively characteristics.”

– Kate Ayres, winemaker, Penner-Ash Wine Cellars

“EPIC VINTAGE. I would describe it as 70% 2015 vintage with a 20% splash of 2012 and a 10% dash of 2009. I felt really high intensity this year, as we actually had more fruit than last couple years, and it was just a really fun year—I was always buoyed by quality and people in a positive way.

“The warm/hot growing season was unprecedented. I’m somewhat surprised (and thrilled) that the vines, especially mature ones on volcanic soils, navigated the heat and lack of precipitation as amazingly as they did. I expected more vine stress and,

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potentially, more desiccation in the clusters, both of which didn't really materialize. (All of our estate and sourced fruit are non-irrigated.) I did leave more shading than a typical year, with less leaf removal and slightly heavier canopy than average. Seemed like a solid hedge against the heat/potential sunburn of the season.

"Grapes were of really high quality: richness of physiological ripeness but also good and requisite structure for balance, requisite acid for brightness/luminosity, good tannin load from skin tannins, which lend body, volume, and weight. Considering the trajectory of the season, we somewhat expected all the fruit to be ripe and ready in a small window, but that didn't come to fruition either.

"We began picking on September 6th, through the morning of the 17th. Then we saw cooler weather and a few sprinkles that didn't have much impact on grapes (the uber-dry soils sucked the precipitation up immediately), but did have a big effect on hang time and lengthening out the picking window. We began picking again on the 25th and wrapped up at a solid pace, working 48 straight days, almost all of those 12-18+ hours each. (My kids still recognize me, so that's good.) So, yeah, it was pretty intense at the top of the bell curve."

– Jesse Lange, winemaker, Lange Estate Winery & Vineyards

"The 2021 vintage, my 34th, is one which will easily come to mind over the future years. Mother Nature threw us record heat during a very dry spring and summer, followed by cooler weather just in time for harvest to slow things down and bring on full flavors. The wines are rich, highly flavored; they are delectable already in barrel and will deliver beautiful balance into the bottle. The vintage reminded me of 2006 and 2009. We will see which vintage the wines resemble."

– Joe Dobbles, founder, Dobbles Family Estate / Wine By Joe

"2021 was overall a very good vintage. Yields were near normal at Utopia, averaging just under 3 tons per acre, and the quality of the fruit is excellent. The vintage did contain a few challenges and surprises. It was very dry with drought conditions prevailing throughout the growing season. We had no measurable rain the entire months of April and May—something that I have not experienced previously in my 21 years in the Willamette Valley. The rain that we did get in June (approximately 1 1/2 inches) came right in the middle of flowering and contributed to a less than ideal fruit set, although the rain, any rain, was welcome at the time.

"Our yields were close to normal, except in our Chardonnay blocks which have been down 35-40% the last two vintages. Some of this I attribute to the rain at flowering and some to the drought which resulted in smaller, lighter-than-average clusters. We also experienced some sunburn with the spike in heat in August that brought multiple days of triple-digit temperatures."

– Dan Warnshuis, winemaker, Utopia Wine Company; Ribbon Ridge AVA president

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“Overall I thought the 2021 growing season and grape quality looked a lot like 2020 before the smoke events. One might also favorably compare 2021 to 2016, 2012 or 2002 I think. The unique elements to 2021 were the two record-setting heat waves. Rainfall accumulation for the calendar year in 2020 was slightly higher than for 2021 but otherwise looked very similar, including the near-record dry spell from late June to mid September.

“At our estate vineyard we were about 19% lower yield than average since 2012 on Pinot noir and about 13% lower on Pinot gris. The reduced yields in the Pinot noir resulted from a combination of frost damage in some lower-lying areas of the vineyard, and the bloom-time rains. What I was seeing after veraison was a relatively fast-paced accumulation of sugar compared to development of flavor, seed maturity and acid balance. Later in the ripening season sugar levels slowly came into alignment with flavor and other factors we consider to make picking decisions.”

– Aaron Lieberman, winemaker, Iris Vineyards

What do you predict will be the signature qualities of 2021 wines?

“These 2021s are some of the best wines that I have seen during my 13 years making wine at Yamhill Valley Vineyards—bold fruit forward aromatics, ripe black fruit flavors, deep dark hues, lush soft texture from the phenolic ripeness in the vineyard, beautiful wines. I’m looking forward to observing and guiding their development. I’m calling it like it is: this is a ‘tall poppy’ year.”

– Ariel Eberle, winemaker, Yamhill Valley Vineyards; McMinnville AVA president

“What I am seeing in the cellar is relatively intense color in Pinot noir due to the small berries (directly related to the rain during bloom). We also have a really good balance of acid and tannin in these wines.”

– Aaron Lieberman, winemaker, Iris Vineyards

“The 2021s are bright and gregarious wines overall. I think they’ll be very well received. They’ll tend ripe, but certainly have capacity/potential for both structure and longevity.”

– Jesse Lange, winemaker, Lange Estate Winery & Vineyards

“The 2021 wines won’t disappoint—dark, rich with ample acidity and decent texture.”

– Joe Wright, winemaker, Left Coast Estate

“Surprisingly, given the heat and dryness, the fruit retained high levels of acidity and lower than expected pH. As a result, the wines are blessed with fresh, bright fruit aromas and flavors with plenty of backbone, and should continue to improve in the cellar for many years.”

– Dan Warnshuis, winemaker, Utopia Wine Company; Ribbon Ridge AVA president

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“I think we are seeing a mixture of red and black fruits similar to what we see in warmer vintages, but we are also seeing some strong spice and liveliness which I tend to think of in the slightly cooler years. It really feels like a push and pull between both, making for some intriguing wines.”

– Kate Ayres, winemaker, Penner-Ash Wine Cellars

What were some of the unique vintage conditions in the nested AVAs?

“The Dundee Hills’ volcanic soils played a role in vine balance and overall health in a way that windblown and marine-sediments (depending on soil depth) don’t have, especially for water-holding capacity. (This variable is heightened for young/maturing vines.)”

– Jesse Lange, winemaker, Lange Estate Winery & Vineyards

“Ribbon Ridge fared quite well across the board. We had enough heat to fully ripen the fruit and the rains in September extended the growing season, giving us more phenolic ripeness, balance, and complexity. The weather cooperated and harvest here was leisurely compared to other years being spread over several weeks.”

– Dan Warnshuis, winemaker, Utopia Wine Company; Ribbon Ridge AVA president

“Yamhill-Carlton certainly came on early—earlier than I was anticipating. It caught us a little off-guard as we kicked off, but I’m happy with the quality of the wines we brought in, both from our own site as well as our neighbors that we source from. Our greatest challenge was getting those grapes in before we took on too much rain. I think we are seeing the dark fruit and strength classic to our sites from Yamhill-Carlton.”

– Kate Ayres, winemaker, Penner-Ash Wine Cellars

“Certainly our location in the Van Duzer Corridor AVA helped—it allowed us to leave the majority of our fruit on the vine through the end of September and well into October. It was close; I was getting ready to pick fruit based on high sugar accumulation, but the fruit had not softened or truly physiologically ripened yet. Long story short, by mid and late September our vineyards easily and acceptingly endured a few moderate rain events, resulting in softer, riper and much, much tastier fruit. Again, another vintage in the Willamette Valley that proves just how easily the last seconds can be so critical to the overall outcome.”

– Joe Wright, winemaker, Left Coast Estate

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***Did you try anything new or different this year in your winemaking decisions?
Any experiments?***

"Always! (Though winemakers never 'experiment,' we only 'trial.') We did some machine/handpick comparisons (very cool). We did some Pinot noir stem ferments (not whole cluster). Scores of yeast trials, barrel trials, and some co-inoculation trials. The jury is still out on all those, but early returns look compelling and promising."

– Jesse Lange, winemaker, Lange Estate Winery & Vineyards

"I experimented in one block of my vineyard by not shoot positioning in half the block to see if it made any difference in the ripening; it did not. I plan to test this again in several blocks next year and if I get similar results, I will eliminate shoot positioning across the vineyard. In the winery, I am co-fermenting some of my Pinot clones—in the past I have fermented all of the individual clones separately and blended at the end. I have a lot of experience with this vineyard, so I wanted to try a different approach to some of the lots this year. So far it's really going very well; I like what I am tasting in the cellar and the co-fermented lots seem more integrated early on."

– Dan Warnshuis, winemaker, Utopia Wine Company; Ribbon Ridge AVA president

"We have started backing off on our cap manipulation a bit over the years and took it a step further this year. With the warmer growing season, I find the grapes tend to give up their color and tannins pretty readily and I didn't want to find ourselves over-extracted. We played around more with whole-cluster across a greater number of vineyards, but found ourselves pretty crunched for time and couldn't get too crazy with experiments! Overall, things look really good and I'm thrilled with the quality. Harvest for us was condensed into about two weeks, so things went pretty fast!"

– Kate Ayres, winemaker, Penner-Ash Wine Cellars

We hope you've enjoyed this preliminary report capturing some of our winemakers' thoughts just after harvest. Watch for a more comprehensive 2021 Vintage Report in spring 2023, when we debut the vintage at Willamette: The Pinot Noir Auction.

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