

AUSSIE WINEMAKERS
SAY **EARLY HARVEST**
AND EXCELLENT
QUALITY DISTINGUISH
THIS YEAR'S CROP

Australian Vintage Report 2015

by Jim McMahon



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Here in Australia early vintages appear to be the order of the day in a number of wine regions, with lower yields in some quarters but normal yields in others. However, all I spoke with agreed there was excellent quality across the board.

The wine grape crush for 2015 vintage was 1.67 million metric tons compared to 1.66 million tons in 2014, an increase of 0.4%. The varietal mix was neck and neck with the 2015 red crush at 835,500 tons and the white crush standing at 834,000 tons. The top three red varieties by crush were Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, which accounted for 85% of the total red crush with Shiraz dominating at 47%. In the white wine department, Chardonnay still dominates the white crush at 45% with Sauvignon Blanc in second place with 11%, followed by Pinot Gris/Grigio accounting for 9% of the total white wine crush.

South Australia is by far the biggest state when it comes to total crush accounting for 47%. According to Clare Valley-based winemaker David O'Leary of O'Leary Walker, "The whites across the board show excellent purity of fruit. The reds on the other hand are at the bigger end of the spectrum, with intense color and flavors, with crops down in such places as McLaren Vale and Barossa."

The Murray Darling-Swan Hill regions, which straddle the borders between New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, account for 25% of this year's grape crush. The area stretches along the Murray River into the Riverland region of South Australia. The Riverland accounts for half of the

South Australia annual crush.

New South Wales crushed 22%, not including Murray Darling-Swan Hill. Mudgee-based winemaker David Lowe of Lowe Wines reported "A 20-year trend in early vintages with spring conditions of summer and summer conditions of spring. Yields were down 15% but an exceptional vintage with both reds and whites with lighter extractions, softer structures and backing off the heavy alcohols.

Four percent of the crush came from Victoria. Winemaker David Morris, proprietor of Morris of Rutherglen, said "It was a solid vintage throughout the state, nothing outstanding; the reds including Pinot Noir are good; the whites are every bit as good as the reds. An early vintage but a fantastic growing season with no weather issues or disease pressure."

In Western Australia (2% of the crush), winemaker Evan Thompson of Margaret River-based Cape Mentelle commented, "It was a challenging vintage with varying weather conditions throughout. Chardonnays and Semillon/Sauvignon Blancs were good; Shiraz was good, but it was a challenge with the red Bordeaux varieties. The vintage is not on par with the 'even' years."

The Australian Capital Territory, Queensland and Tasmania contributed to just less than 1% of the crush. ACT winemaker Ken Helm of Helm Wines said it was the vintage of his lifetime—and he has been making wines for 39 years in Canberra. "The Rieslings are excellent; the jury is still out on the reds as they're in wood but were also fantastic. Some varieties were the biggest intake on record in

both quality and quantity. The vintage was early with the hottest weather recorded in November while January saw the coolest, wettest weather on record."

Granite Belt winemaker Angelo Puglisi of Ballandean Estate in Queensland also reported an early vintage, with many winemakers having cut right back with production. "Having said this," he added, "red and white wines both showed good flavor and fruit quality but alternative red and white grape varieties were outstanding."

Tasmania winemaker Jeremy Dineen of Josef Chromy Wines said, "Excellent sparkling wine base and the same for Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris/Grigio, including Pinot Noir. It was a solid vintage all round."

Australian wine sales in the domestic market remain flat with the added impact of imports from New Zealand, France, Italy and Spain. Internationally, it is the U.S. market which presents opportunities especially in the premium wine category. Australia does however face major challengers in this market from France and Italy in particular, but also from other European producers. The Europeans have the advantage of the European Commission's National Support Programs (NSP) with an export market promotional spend that is to double from €22 million in 2009–2013 to a staggering €1.156 billion during the 2014–2018 period.

While Australia has had a stable but good 2015 vintage there are still challenges ahead. However, early vintage or not, no one appears to be complaining. ■

Source: Winemakers' Federation of Australia 2015 Vintage Report