

Balancing Act

Flexibility required for vintage 2022

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Marlborough's 2022 vintage was "edge-of-your-seat" stuff, with higher yields, inclement weather and the impact of Covid on crews, says Sophie Parker-Thomson, MW.

And it required a change in mindset from industry, following three consecutive drought years and light crops last year. "There has been a temptation to replenish the very empty pipelines with the bountiful yields - principally Sauvignon Blanc," says Sophie, who owns and runs Blank Canvas Wines with her husband Matt Thomson.

Producers had to be "scrupulous" in balancing that against the processing capacity of their wineries, a widespread shortage of labour, and an Omicron impacted workforce, "as well as the dynamics of ripening crops in La Niña conditions", Sophie adds.

"Timing was everything" for the vintage, says Plant & Food Research weather expert Rob Agnew, noting that Marlborough grape growers "dodged a bullet, but not entirely". December rainfall coincided with flowering, creating latent botrytis infection that was awakened on some blocks by February rain, impacting early Sauvignon Blanc going through véraison, the onset of ripening in grapes.

A subsequent "very dry" period, from 20 February to 20 March, was a "godsend" that mitigated the impact, says Rob. "If it had continued to be wet over that four-week period it would have been very ugly."

A very warm October, November and December meant good fruit set, with berry numbers per bunch well up on average, as well as high berry weight. But a cold and wet February "caught everyone out", dampening the "powerhouse" ripening period, says Astrolabe owner and Winemaker Simon Waghorn. However, those with the luxury of time were rewarded with beautiful autumn conditions, he adds. "We started out with a lot of potential issues, particularly with Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir, but the later finer weather kept that in check and meant we could get our fruit to the ripeness levels we were hoping for."

Pernod Ricard Winemakers Group Winemaker Jamie Marfell says their yields were significantly up on the long-term average, putting the company back in balance after the light 2021 harvest. They had an early start, partly due to the looming threat of Covid-19. "We were very wary of the risk of losing a lot of staff," says Jamie, a Marlborough Winegrowers Association board member. They contracted three crews for sparkling wine hand harvest instead of the typical two, to spread the risk, and got through "like a dream".

By mid-March, Omicron started to impact on staff numbers and flexibility became key, with daily workforce decisions, such as closing a shift or slowing machine harvest and grape intake to ensure fruit got to ferment within a 48-hour period, "in pristine condition". And despite all the Covid and climate challenges of the season, there are "some pretty good stonking wines", he says. "Commercially they are looking pretty sharp."

Fellow board member James Macdonald, Senior Winemaker at Hunter's Wines, agrees flexibility was vital this harvest. And while he's happy to see the back of it, he's even happier to have typical tonnage in the tank, including Sauvignon Blanc with ripe fruit flavours that promises to be a "crowd pleaser". But it's the Chardonnay that really stood out in 2022, as being "bullet proof in a tricky year", says James.

The Waihopai Valley subregion was a good performer, with later ripening blocks that benefitted from stunning late harvest weather, with the Awatere Valley also providing good yields and flavours, James says.

Wine Marlborough General Manager Marcus Pickens says it's been a year of challenges, with supply pressures, labour shortages and global shipping issues causing companies great stress. "While these things look set to continue to disrupt us, there's a lot of relief that we successfully navigated vintage 2022."

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N.B. The total vintage tonnages and further breakdowns will be released by New Zealand Winegrowers mid-June.