



Bergman Euro-National Wine Country Professionals: Vineyards, Estates & Wineries



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Has Mother Nature Gone Crazy? Spring 2008

In our last article we talked about the coming Grape shortage by mid 2009. However with fickle Mother Nature, we have a turn of events. Normally the grape farmer begins to feel confident around April 15th, the date that we stop worrying about frost. We never have frost that late in spring, right? As the old saying goes, "Never say never." Mother Nature had a rude surprise for us in the last part of April. Someone must have really made her mad, because it appears that the North Coast grape industry may lose 10% -50% of its crop in 2008. Some areas were hit much harder than others where record breaking temperatures were as low as 24 degrees.

The "Early Bloomers" such as Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and several other varietals were hit the hardest. The last time we saw a frost of this magnitude was back in 1971, then 10 years later we had a mild frost, but even a mild frost caused a set back and grape shortages for the two following harvests.

This is an example of a vineyard that was hit by frost. You can see a very defined difference in the vigor of the vineyard on either side of the photo compared with the center. The center of this vineyard is in a lower lying area than the rest, and took a direct hit from the colder than normal temperatures. Meanwhile the rest of the vineyard came out fine.

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This frost was a very unique. A typical frost normally takes effect in the low-lying areas, “bowls” and valley floor locations. This frost not only hit the usual suspects but also some ridge tops, places that have never had a problem with frost in the past. As we all know, cold air runs down hill to the bottom of your vineyard, so it’s always wise to put your frost control at the lowest point of the vineyard. No one figured that the ridges would get hit so hard. The ridge top damage seems to be due to the wind chill factor from the unusually blustery and icy winds.

We have seen and heard about vineyards with everything from minor damage to complete and total loss of this years harvest, a devastating blow for any farmer. No one knows for sure how bad it will be but we do know one thing, we will have a very short crop this year. The areas hit hardest were Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino and Lake Counties.

“Frost, Heat, Rain.... What season is this anyway?”

As if to put an exclamation point behind Mother Nature’s recent erratic behavior, she dished out an extreme heat wave on the heels of this years frost. Not long after the frost we had several days of heat where temperatures reached 104 degrees in some areas. The very next week we had fall like weather with temperatures in the 50 to 60 degree range and three days later it rained. It seems that we have seen all four seasons in less than a month. What’s next? We can’t say for certain but we’re pretty sure she’ll have a few more surprises before she settles down.

These factors point to what will surely be an interesting trend in grape prices and vineyard values. We had projected that we would see a shortage by mid 2009. Go ahead and make that 2008. We feel strongly that due to the recent frost the shortage will start in earnest this year for some varieties and continue in a broader fashion moving in the next few years. This shortage will push the demand for grapes (especially high quality grapes) way up. We are seeing some wineries start to scramble in an effort to replace fruit that was lost in the frost. This will help both growers and the bulk wine market.

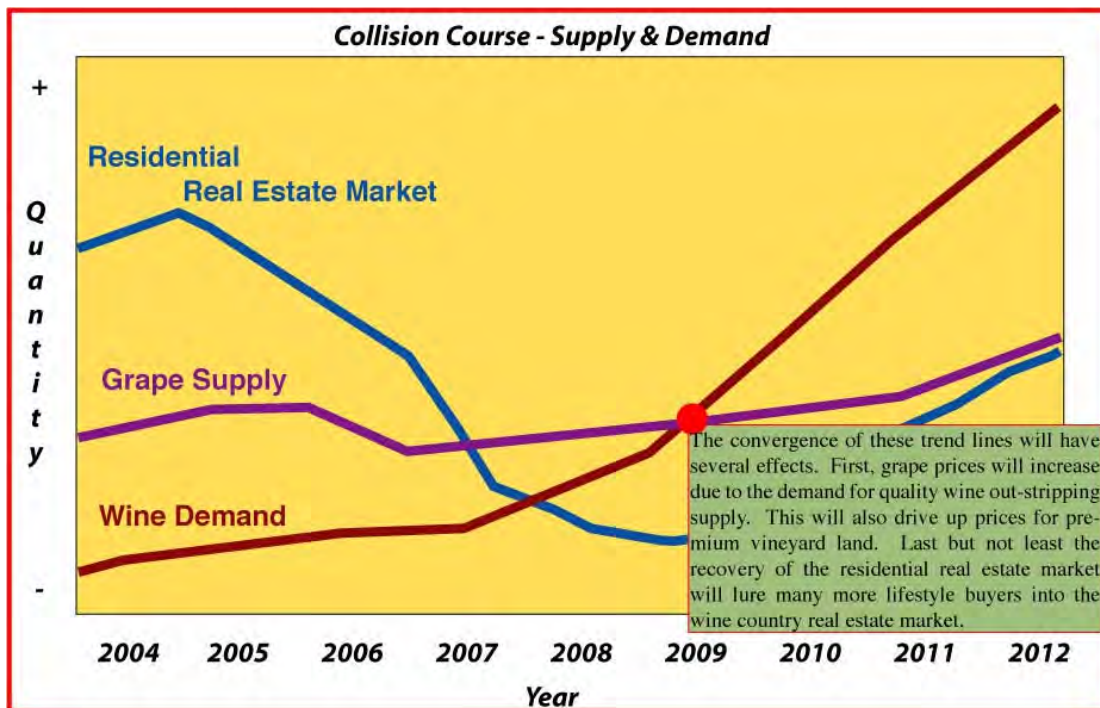
It’s kind of like the stock market, the bulls (the wineries) have been in charge for a few years, now the bears (the grape growers) are looking stronger, which in turn will start the raising of the per ton grape prices climb. Hence, the wineries and growers will change positions. This frost will affect things for at least 2 to 3 years down the road or longer unless we have a bumper crop in 2009. Combine the frost set back with the near total lack of planting for the last 5 years, the continued demand for more premium wine and what you get is that the farmer is now in control of his/her destiny, finally.



The other fact is that there are still numerous “Life Style Buyers” wanting to invest in the wine country and live the good life on their “Vineyard Estate” property. As we watch the per ton grape prices climb the values of these vineyard estates will also increase.

Even though there is a so-called “Real Estate Melt Down”, we have seen vineyard values and vineyard estate properties

climb continually and steadily through it all. Most of the Life Style Buyers that we work with are insulated against the down-turn taking place in the lower end of the residential real estate market (due to the rapid interest rate increases, thanks Mr. Greenspan.)



Our feeling is that we will see values continue to climb steadily over the next 10 years with perhaps a set back or two along the way. In Napa and Sonoma Counties the trend line will be as positive as it has been with 100% to 300% appreciation on vineyard property every decade as they have done for over 50 years.

Looking back on this recent “Frost Set Back”, some people will say that it came at a good time to “set things straight” and bring back the balance that has been missing for a number of years. Some people will say the sky is falling and the wineries will be left out in the cold at the mercy of the growers. Whatever side of the fence you’re on, it doesn’t really matter, because Mother Nature will do as she pleases.

If we stop and look at the bigger picture of what Mother Nature dished out to several other parts of the world lately we should consider ourselves lucky regarding the frost. With that in mind Mother Nature surely helps us produce some of the finest fruit in the world. Not only that, we are fortunate to live in one of the absolute best and most beautiful places on the planet.

As we see more and more buyers popping out of the woodwork, we can say that there aren’t enough wineries, fine vineyards, or vineyard estate properties to meet the demand. So, if you have had any thoughts of selling or just wish to get an idea of what your property is worth, we would be very happy to come out (on a confidential basis) and discuss the value of your property.



We wish you health, prosperity and a little help from a happier Mother Nature.

John Bergman & David Ashcraft

ps - on to another subject....

What do you think about the light brown apple moth? We’ve heard that it is like godzilla dressed in brown. We aren’t aware of any of these little buggers being found in Sonoma County yet, nor Mendocino and only one in Napa County. Are people panicking for nothing or are we in for a devastating seige of brown grape leaf eaters?

Our feeling is that we had better be sure we really have a problem as we learn from the negative results of the spraying that occurred in Santa Cruz County.

As a result of the spraying in numerous areas millions of pollinators, thousands of bats, birds, squirrels, natural predators, domestic and wild animals died within five days after the spraying. Several hundred children and over 650 adults became sick after the spraying. If they spray here, what will happen? Think about the plants, animals and our loved ones. What will happen to the status of organic vineyards?

Perhaps the sky is not falling, or is it? We should make sure before we potentially start killing off many of the important insects and animals we’re used to seeing around the countryside, as well as making our friends and loved ones sick. What will take place in our vineyards, gardens and how will it affect the already precarious imbalance in our ecosystems?

Please do some real reasarch and thinking before we allow this to happen in Mendocino, Sonoma and Napa Counties. We urge you to go online and type in “Light Brown Apple Moth” and see what comes up.

It may surprise you.



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