

## 2008 Growing Season

In comparison to the drought of the previous year, the slightly below average rain fall totals of 2007 and 2008 on the Central Coast were most appreciated. Although, the timing and spacing of major storm fronts was less than desirable, they allowed for good soil saturation.

Winter dormancy was enhanced and instilled by several cold, low pressure systems in December and January. Our estate started sporadic bud break near the end of February and all vines had pushed by the end of the first week in March. Cool yet sunny conditions continued until April when warmer weather heated the soil and enhanced vine growth. As can happen, the false summer like temperatures turned back to winter like conditions just in time for the Santa Barbara County Vintners Festival on April 19<sup>th</sup>. During the morning of April 19 and April 20 many vineyards experienced frost damage from freezing temperatures prior to sunrise. Many vineyards in frost prone locations, such as eastern Santa Ynez Valley and Paso Robles having no means of frost protection, were devastated and lost all existing foliage, as well as their primary shoot grape flowers.



Our estate vineyard had irregular frost damage on five to ten percent of our vines, but was fortunate to have the majority of its flowers spared, and it did not experience significant crop loss.

2008 was a year of weather extremes with the Santa Maria Airport experiencing its highest ever reported temperature of 110°F on June 20. We had a high of 114°F at the winery that afternoon and a weather station at a local avocado orchard recorded a high of 118°F that same day. Official weather records since 1906 have never seen such heat. This extreme episodic heat did have the positive effect of reducing the berry size of some varieties. The small berries made for low yields, but the high skin to juice ratio resulted in some deeply concentrated wines. Temperatures were high all over the state. The heat convection spurred dry lightning strikes in Central and Northern California. On June 23 over 7,500 lightning strikes were recorded in less than 20 hours, which led to over 1,000 wild fires. The Big Basin fire of Big Sur and the Arroyo Seco fire burned for over a month, and darkened the sky for quite some time. July continued with warm conditions but a strengthening marine layer increased onshore air flow returning Santa Maria to its typical summer temperatures with persistent morning fog.

“Mother Nature” and “Father Climate” seemed intent on playing some kind of variation of [Engineer Bill's](#), green light, red light, milk chugging game – *Now I am dating myself*. The green light of hot weather caused rapid shoot growth and the red light of cold weather stunting growth. Instead of milk shooting up your nose from trying to stop gulping it rapidly, vines stopped growing and berry fruit cell development ceased. Grapevines are survivors and are very good at acclimating to growing conditions but the numerous red light, green light scenarios of the 2008 growing season took its toll on vine physiology. In some area's vines set few berries after terrible shattering post fruit set. In some cases vines never properly sized the berries they set resulting in some strangely misshaped grape clusters. In low elevation vineyards from the Santa Rita Hills up to vineyards in San Benito County the green light, red light scenario culminated the end of the season with sub freezing conditions occurring off the Central Coast on October 10, 11 and 12.

The Paso Robles Airport recorded the lowest temperatures since modern record keeping on the dates of October 11 recording 31°F, October 12 recording 27°F, and October 13 recording 30°F. The Paso Robles Airport is by no means the coldest part of the Central Coast wine growing region. This cold stint left some vineyards looking like they were hit with a blow torch. This was not an early frost; this was a multi-night freeze resulting in complete defoliation of the vineyards that may not have been mature. An early freeze is not only devastating to this year's crop, it weakens the vine for the following growing season, because it deprives the vine of all nutrients and sugars that otherwise would have translocated back into the vine if a full canopy of leaves remained. We were very fortunate to be nearly finished with harvest when these low temperatures came, and only our Angiano and Touriga Nacional were lightly frosted at our El Pomar Junction Vineyard in Tempelton.

The Santa Maria Valley had the closest thing to a normal growing season and harvest of all the areas we source fruit from. The results are some very nice Pinot Noir and Chardonnay being produced from the 2008 vintage. The small crop size and hot growing season north of the Cuesta Grade often generated the frustrating situation where physiological ripeness, flavor development and tannin balance lagged behind high sugar conditions. I'm not a fan of post harvest irrigation, but juice bleeding and watering back was a necessary evil after waiting so long for desired flavor development. 2008 was a challenge, but I'm very confident that we will continue to produce some of the best wines of the region.

Someone once told me ugly grapes make the best wine just as less attractive people make the best lovers. If there is truth to that statement we're in for some great wine and good loving from the 2008 vintage.

-Ken Volk, November 2008