

Smallest wine grape harvest in a decade

The South African wine industry is bracing itself for what might be the smallest wine grape harvest in more than a decade. According to a survey by the industry body SAWIS (SA Wine Industry Information and Systems) in the last week of November, wineries and viticulturists are predicting a much smaller 2018 crop compared to 2017 - and possibly the smallest since 2005.



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Drought, a shrinking area under vines and frost damage will have the greatest effect on the crop size.

Water resources cut

According to Francois Viljoen, consultation service manager for the wine industry organisation VinPro, the drought conditions that have been prevalent in the Western Cape for the third consecutive season will have a major effect on the 2018 harvest. "Most of the industry's large irrigation dams are 30% to 40% full. This means that wine grape producers' water resources were cut by 40% to 60% and they could not fully meet their vines' water demand," he says.

The Olifants River region is especially expected to experience a substantial decline in yield, as producers in this region were allocated less than 25% of their usual water quota from the Clanwilliam dam in the course of the season. The Orange River region is currently the only wine region not experiencing water shortages.

Industry uprooting more vineyards than it plants

The area under vines has also shrunk annually since 2007. The industry uproots more vineyards than it plants – a trend that has accelerated in the past two years. In 2016 the total area under vines amounted to 95,775 ha compared to 100,568 in 2011 – a 5% decline in the past five years.

Widespread frost damage

Finally, widespread frost damage at the end of September and start of October will result in large crop losses in certain areas in the Orange River, Bredekloof, Worcester and Robertson wine regions.

Vineyards in good condition

“Despite the fact that the 2018 harvest might be much smaller, vineyards are in very good condition due to frequent rainfall in October and November, as well as cooler weather up to the end of November,” says Viljoen. Vineyard growth is generally good and there have been no noteworthy occurrences of fungal diseases or pests thus far.

“The low dam levels and insufficient water resources are the greatest determinants of a smaller 2018 harvest. Good, regular showers in December and January may, of course, bring great relief and change the outlook for the better,” says Viljoen.

“Seasonal employment opportunities will be cut significantly due to the smaller harvest, which will have a negative effect on the socio-economic prosperity of wine industry communities. The Olifants River region will most likely be affected the worst by this,” says VinPro managing director, Rico Basson.

Other wine producing regions also under pressure

However, South Africa is not the only wine producing country expecting a smaller harvest. The yields of France, Italy, Spain and California were also under pressure from natural phenomena and this, combined with a greater demand, is set to lead to a wine shortage in specific categories worldwide. “Although wine shelves won’t suddenly be empty, the relative wine shortage creates an excellent opportunity for the industry to compete at higher price points,” Basson says.

The South African wine industry is the ninth largest producer of wine in the world and contributes 4% to global production. South Africa exports 440 million litres of wine annually and sells 400 million litres locally.

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