

Harvest Report 2022

by Nancy Tisch

Preface: The descriptions of the Finger Lakes Grape harvests that follow are based on the author's recollection of events and anecdotal reports shared by other growers in the region. For a more detailed description of weather patterns, as well as grape harvest parameters, please visit [Véraison to Harvest | Viticulture and Enology \(cornell.edu\)](https://www.cornell.edu/viticulture-and-enology/veraison-to-harvest).

In the Finger Lakes AVA, vintage variation provides challenges for growers and winemakers alike. Recall a near perfect vintage in 2020 with warm, sunny days, and cool nights leading into the start of harvest during September of that year. The harvested grapes had exceptional quality with high Brix (sugar levels), low acid, and minimal disease. Wines made from this vintage are typically fuller bodied and more expressive than those from the previous two years. The many great wines of the 2020 vintage are truly wines that are made in the vineyard.

In the following year, 2021, the summer started out warm and sunny in the earliest months of May and June, but sunny skies gave way to clouds, rain, and high humidity in July and August. Respectively, these conditions yielded good fruit set and large berry size and ultimately resulted in higher-than-average yields. Toward the end of the 2021 harvest, it was not uncommon to see posts on a Facebook group for New York Winemakers that read “where can I find more barrels?” Even the Western Square barrel racks were difficult to source at that time: cellars were full, and no one had racks or barrels to spare. Even with our own small operation, it was challenging to find space for all the juice and wine in the cellar. Repeated games of Tetris got us through the winemaking process for that vintage. Like many others, we found ourselves “tank bound” (meaning we had no empty tanks to receive racked or filtered wine).

Indeed, grapes were abundant in 2021. However, diseases like botrytis and sour rot, were also rampant. Diseased fruit leads to numerous problems in winemaking. Anecdotal reports from colleagues suggested that winemakers were adding more sulfites than usual to ensure oxidative and microbial stability; these reports mirrored our own experience. In comparison with 2020, the 2021 vintage was a winemaker's vintage: quality of the wines depended on the skill and experience of the winemaker more than on the quality of the fruit going into the wine. Not surprisingly, B.E.V. New York (conference on Business, Enology, Viticulture) included a session on best practices for diseased fruit in their March 2022 session.

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By now, you may be asking “what does all this have to do with the 2022 vintage?” In our vineyard, between 2021 and 2022, our fruit yield dropped by about 60%. That was startling! To be clear, ours is not the only vineyard to report such decreases in yield. Many vineyard owners throughout the region shared similar stories. In fact, some of the fruit that we typically source from other growers was not available to us in 2022.

What are the factors that led to this dramatic decline in yield for 2022? The explanation is likely to include multiple factors, not the least of which were the high yields of 2021. When vines are fully cropped in one year, the vine can be weakened by ripening so much fruit. Additionally, we saw warmer than average temperatures through the end of December 2021. Dave Wiemann of Sheldrake Point Winery shared his opinion that the vines may not have fully hardened off or entered complete dormancy by the time arctic air spread through the region in mid-January 2022. This opinion has been echoed by other growers including our Hector Vineyard Management team of Jon Beckhorn and John Wilkens. Typically, vinifera vines do not tolerate temperatures below -10° Fahrenheit for even short periods of time. At our vineyard, we have recorded temperatures of -16° F for just a few overnight hours on a single night in January. Overworked, not fully dormant, vines that are exposed to extreme cold even for brief periods of time, can lead to high bud mortality. More serious injury, such as complete loss of the vine, was thankfully limited to only a handful of vines. Interestingly, one could see the micro-scale distribution of damage to vines (bud mortality and occasional vine loss) even within our tiny 4-acre vineyard. Slight rises in topography showed areas of lower mortality in comparison to some lower lying regions, where cold air could settle in and harm the vines.

We grow three varieties of vinifera grapes in our vineyard (at Bet the Farm). In the Gamay Noir, bud mortality was lower, so we used a more typical two to four-cane pruning strategy (depending on the individual vine). In contrast, the Cab Franc and Lemberger had high bud mortality, so we opted to spur prune those blocks. In spur pruning, all tied canes from 2021 were left tied to the fruiting wires, and shoots from those canes were trimmed back, leaving 4 to 6 buds per shoot. Our goal was to get as many clusters as possible and to provide adequate canopy to support those clusters.

Renewal canes were needed in these winter-damaged blocks, to establish new canes for the 2023 growing season. Pre-emergent weed spray, used to keep the weeds between vines at bay to minimize any damage to renewals, could not be used. Weed management for the vineyard was done mechanically with green and Braun hoes. In a more typical year, shoots growing off the trunk or cordon are not protected, but removed early in the growing season to focus energy into ripening fruit. Our vineyard manager, Kit Kalfs, refers to this process as “cleaning the basement” because it typically involves cutting back new growth from the base of the vine. The process is more commonly referred to as suckering the vines.

As noted above, there was a lot of heterogeneity in the patterns of winter damage. Any type of vineyard sampling was challenging at best. Mid-summer crop estimates, based on average cluster weight multiplied by average number of clusters per vine, were nearly impossible, due to the variability in clusters per vine. Literally, some of them had zero!! In fact, as a small grower, we skipped this process entirely.

Following the spring pruning season, the summer of 2022 was relatively warm and dry (much like 2020). An additional factor that contributed to low yields is the small berry size associated with warm, dry conditions. Thankfully, disease pressure in 2022 was minimal. The only remaining factor to influence the fruit quality for 2022 was the decisioning around the picking date. Such decisions are made by factoring in grape quality (sugar and acid levels), disease pressure, and upcoming weather forecasts. Due to the already low crop, fruit sampling was kept at a minimum. Weather forecasts in mid-October were predicting a week of rain that never materialized. The threat alone, however, to an already small crop was enough to drive the decision for early picking. Nevertheless, fruit quality from the vintage is above average and wines are likely to be expressive and elegant.

How else does this low yield effect the industry? Many of my colleagues (and me, too) often lament the long hours of work faced during harvest. Nothing could have been further from the truth in 2022. Winemakers generally had time to spare, because of the low yields. Not only did winemakers have spare time during harvest, but wineries now have empty barrels (probably lots of them?) and tanks. The good news: none of us should be tank bound this year! And the wines should be of high quality. We have much to look forward to.