

2003 McLaren Vale (South Australia)

McLaren Vale's 2003 vintage was one of extremes. Windy conditions during flowering and fruitset in the spring of 2002, and the worst drought in more than 100 years, affected yields, making pre-vintage yield estimates down by 5 to 20% on an average year.

Yields were further affected when rains hit in February, causing some smaller berries to split at the collar of the berry where it connects to the bunch. This caused the berries to shrivel, resulting in a reduction of bunch weight of 30 to 60%. These factors combined to reduce yields in the worst instances by more than 50%.

Steady breezes off Gulf of St Vincent left the vineyards free of powdery mildew, downy mildew and Botrytis. Deep rooted vines, older vines and vines in the eastern end of the region suffered less from the dry conditions.

The shrivelling of the split berries and low crops caused Baume levels to rise rapidly to 15 and 16 degrees in a matter of weeks. This drastic increase caused a flurry in the wineries as the winemakers tried to find space for all the ripening fruit. One grower reported a first: picking Chardonnay, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon in the same week! A great deal of the fruit was picked at 14.5°Be and higher and some of the berries rehydrated during vinification, causing alcohol levels to reach 17%.

Vignerons comments did not focus on the limited quantities but on the incredible flavour and fantastic colour, the result of perfect ripening conditions from veraison to harvest, indicating that the 2003 vintage is not all doom and gloom. In fact, Shiraz showed an incredible elevation in its spicy pepper characteristics.

Despite the trials and tribulations that were part of vintage this year, the wines, especially the reds, while limited in quantity, lack nothing in quality.