

# Decanter

PASSIONATE ABOUT WINE SINCE 1975

MAY 2024

## AMERICA Past and present

Pioneers, Prohibition, and today's  
hottest winemaking talents

CHATEAU  
MONTELENA  
ESTABLISHED 1882



NAPA & ALEXANDRIA VALLEYS  
CHARDONNAY  
1975

Produced and Bottled by  
Chateau Montelena Winery, Napa Valley, California  
Harvest 2022, 100% Cabernet Sauvignon

### Que sera, Syrah

30 buys that say it's time to start  
taking US Syrah seriously

### Tasted & rated

Argentinian Premium Malbec  
US Merlot, California & beyond

### Plus:

- Chappellet producer profile
- Napa Cab 2022 in barrel
- US Riesling top picks

+  
**335**  
wines tasted  
in this issue



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FUTURE

# Andrew Jefford

## 'Barcelona declared a drought emergency on 1 February'



**W**hat happens when the rain stops? Yes, farmers face multiple challenges. But this is the worst. No water, no life.

The grape vine is well adapted to dry climates. It has, though, its limits. These are site-dependent and depend on evapotranspiration rates, but in warm climates vines will struggle on less than 450mm a year. Around most of the wine-growing rim of the western Mediterranean (Spain, France, Italy, North Africa), the European Drought Observatory is recording soil-moisture deficits. In western Languedoc and Roussillon in southern France, and in northern Spain's Catalunya, drought is reaching catastrophic levels. Reports from major producers show rainfall in these areas was often below 400mm in 2021 and 2022, and below 300mm in 2023. Plants die of thirst slowly: pine trees brown, in blotches; the landscape drains to grey. Even spring this year has struggled to find its flush of emerald.

'Vines are dying,' wrote an observing Justin Howard-Sneyd MW from his Domaine of the Bee vineyards in Roussillon in a 23 February 2024 email circular ominously titled 'Sorry to be the bearer of sad news...'. 'Roussillon is in crisis,' confirms leading producer Jean-Marc Lafage, with more than 300ha in six different zones of French Catalonia. 'Many vineyards in the area are already marginal, and this is pushing them over the edge. We've only had 300mm of rain in the last 18 months; winter was completely dry. We've never pruned the vineyard so fast – because there's so little wood to prune.'

The situation in Catalunya is no better. As widely reported, Barcelona declared a drought emergency on 1 February 2024, as its reservoirs fell to just 16% of capacity. Spain as a whole is missing half its normal water reserves, and the Spanish drought is now among the world's 10 most costly active climate disasters (*per capita, according to a December 2023 report by Christian Aid*). Pepe Raventós of Raventós i Blanc called 2023 'the harvest of suffering'. The weather station on his property recorded just 326mm of rain during the 2021 seasonal cycle, 366mm during 2022 and 287mm during the 2023 cycle. Since then, says

Pepe, 'only a couple of drizzles'. All of nature feels this. Production of Parellada and Macabeu fell by about 60% in 2023, though Xarel·lo copes better. At Can Sumoi, the Raventós farm in the hills, the roe deer were so thirsty they ate 90% of the vine shoots in April 2023. Miguel Torres wrote to me in August 2023 to point out that the three-year drought was seeing crop levels fall by up to 70% in parts of Penedès and Priorat.

Everyone is responding, of course, and notably with strategies which can broadly be grouped under the 'regenerative viticulture' banner. By the end of this year, Jean-Marc Lafage will be re-using all his winery water: a significant 18 million litres a year. He's also doubled soil water-retention by using biochar, and achieved further-benefits with low-density cover crops, minimum-strategy irrigation and contour plantings.

Torres, too, is working on similar schemes: changes to row orientations, increasing soil organic matter (a 1% increase helps keep an extra 240,000 litres of water per hectare in the soil), using pine mulch and changing rootstocks. 'But you don't get immediate results,' says Miguel's sister Mireia Torres, 'so it isn't helping us much with the immediate crisis.'

Another problem is the tussle between different agricultural sectors for existing supplies of irrigation water. Peach and apricot trees, for example, generally need more water than vines. Whose livelihood matters most?

Yes, an end to this drought will eventually come, just as it did with Australia's 2001-2009 and 2017-2019 droughts, and California's 2011-2017 and 2020-2022 droughts. (As I write in late February, folk are kayaking in Death Valley.) Europe is warming at twice the rate of other continents, though (WMO 'State of the Climate in Europe 2022', June 2023). It's the drought-prone, land-encircled Mediterranean – with its proximity to the hyper-arid regions of North Africa – that will bear the brunt of this. Southern European wine-growers must adapt if they're to survive. **D**

Andrew Jefford is a *Decanter* contributing editor and multiple award-winning author

### IN MY GLASS THIS MONTH

If any of the Torres range evokes the climate battle, it's perhaps the 2020 **Purgatori**, a blend of 85% Garnacha and 15% Cariñena from Costers del Segre (£18.95-£24.99 at Fareham Wine Cellar, Fine Wines Direct UK or Grand Cru Co). The name derives from the fact that this remote inland estate was founded by errant monks, banished from their mother house as a penance. It smells of crushed fig and strawberry, and tastes stony and lunging, wild yet vivid with life and sinewy force. The wine will endure – let's hope the vines, too.

