



PHIFER PAVITT

NAPA VALLEY WINERY



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## NAPA'S WINEMAKERS DISCOVER SCORCHED VINES AND CLOSE CALLS

By Kim Marcus, Oct 6, 2020 WINESPECTATOR.com

After Suzanne Phifer Pavitt and her husband, Shane Pavitt, evacuated their winery near Calistoga, they feared the worst. Watching the feed from their Nest camera online, they could see the flames of the Glass fire come all the way to the front door of the house. When they returned three days later, they found both comfort and sorrow.

"The inferno swept through our property and burned all 23 acres," Phifer Pavitt told *Wine Spectator*. "But I believe in miracles. [We're] incredulous but Phifer Pavitt stands." Her house is also still standing, though it has sustained significant damage.

But the vines in their estate vineyard were not so lucky. "The vineyard is a complete loss. We literally harvested our very first Cabernet—after 10 years of waiting—just two weeks earlier. We were planning to make an estate Cabernet rosé and see how the fruit profile was coming along."

More than week after it started in the hills above St. Helena, the Glass fire continues to rage across northern Napa Valley, threatening multiple towns and numerous wineries. More than 200 wineries are in evacuation zones. A few vintners have managed to return to their properties to assess damage in recent days. But evacuation orders remain in place for much of the area, keeping many out.

Worry hangs in the air as thickly as the smoke. Have their wineries and their vines survived? And how many will suffer a complete loss of their 2020 harvest?

The Glass fire had consumed more than 66,880 acres as of the morning of Oct. 6, according to Cal Fire, the state fire agency. Firefighters have established 50 percent containment. Crews spent the weekend trying to keep flames away from the towns of Calistoga and Angwin and establish fire control lines north of Oakville. There is hope that rain may arrive later this week. More than 1,230 structures have been confirmed destroyed. Wildfires have burned more



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than four million acres this year, Cal Fire announced during a Oct. 4 briefing. That is more than double the previous record for the most land burned in a single year.

Not far from Phifer Pavitt, Kirk Venge of Venge Vineyards in Calistoga reports that his winery survived, but just barely, thanks to his tenacity and a lot of help from firefighters. "I arrived around 4:30 [on Sept. 28] after a very sleepless night and looked south from my home on Tubbs Lane. The glow [of the flames] was quite close and I felt I better get in the truck to have a look." By the time he weaved through neighbors' vineyards to get to his winery, fire was all around the property.



*Flames burned in the forest above Venge Vineyards earlier this week. (Courtesy Venge Vineyards)*

"I met up with a fire chief scouting in an SUV on the crush pad and he gave me the 100 percent loss talk and to get the hell out of there immediately," he said. "I started saying prayers and goodbyes and drove off through the vineyard while wind pushed the fire in a dance that engulfed the mountain. The hillside and clusters of trees exploded. Ember showers easily flew to where I was and I could see spot fires around the structures here and there."

When things settled down enough that he felt safe, Venge moved back to his winery, deployed hoses and started spraying out spot fires. Two trucks of firefighters eventually joined him. After an hour, the flames had moved on.

Between the flames in the vineyards and the smoke blanketing the region, he's not hopeful for harvest. "If it's not harvested yet it's going to be dicey," he said. "I'm really thinking about calling it quits for the rest of the harvest. I like to be optimistic, but this is not the time. It's time to be realistic."



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*One of the destroyed buildings at Davis Estates. (Courtesy Davis Estates)*

Mike Davis and his wife, Sandy, flew in early Sept. 28, the day after the fire ignited in the mountains behind Davis Estates in Calistoga. They passed through a gauntlet of roadblocks along the Silverado Trail to reach their 155-acre showplace estate that they had spent years building. What they found filled them with a mixture of emotions. The winery was still standing, along with its historic barn and offices. But the area around it was devastated, including the forest behind the winery, three hillside vineyard blocks, several houses and some of their equipment. "It's very difficult for us to process all this right now," Davis told *Wine Spectator*.

Fortunately, Cal Fire was able to make a stand at the estate because they were able to tap into four 100,000-gallon steel water tanks that Davis had installed in 2012, and the cellar team had already laid out fire hoses and hooked them up to three fire hydrants when the Hennessey fire broke out in August. They spent two days putting out spot fires on the property and clearing the roads.



*The fire came right through Davis Estates. (Courtesy Davis Estates)*





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Davis hopes to get the winery running again soon. "Currently we have a large generator for power so we can process 2020 wines," he said. "Our entire team is working toward a goal of opening the winery patio for tastings on or before Oct. 12."

Nearby, Scott Chafen of Dutch Henry Winery found devastation. "The winery was destroyed by the fire," he told *Wine Spectator*. "Our cave survived, but we have not been able to determine status of wine in barrels. The infrastructure (water, electricity, etc) has been mostly destroyed. The Syrah Vineyard out front will not be harvested and we will need to assess if the vines are alive. I have Cabernet unpicked at my house in Rutherford. Between the smoke and the lack of facility it may be left unpicked this vintage. First time in 37 years I have not crushed a single grape."

To the east, on Howell Mountain, Elton Slone, president and CEO at Robert Craig Winery, reported on Oct. 1 that helicopters were dropping water on the fire not far from the winery. He and his team are trying to get back there to keep the winery running, fueling up a generator to keep electricity on. "We now have [agricultural] passes [to get through roadblocks] and are hoping to get back up [Oct. 2] to get the ferments off of the skins," he said. "We don't know when they will allow workers with passes back up. For now, the tanks were all still cool, so the generator had not been off long."

Not far away, Mike, Matt and Brian Lamborn were able to get to their family's Howell Mountain winery on Oct. 4. While hot spots raged around the property, they posted on social media, all the structures were still standing. "The sour part of this sweet news is the destruction caused by this disaster," they wrote. "The drive up Howell Mountain was almost unrecognizable. The poor people of Deer Park got hit so hard. It is impossible for us to celebrate when so many have lost so much, and the drive up today was a sobering reminder of the power of fire."



*The Calistoga Ranch resort was another victim. (AFP via Getty Images)*

On the western side of Napa Valley, vintners continue to battle spot fires on Spring Mountain. Flames continued over the weekend as Bothe State Park burned. The fire raged along the lower portion of Schweiger Vineyards & Winery and Vineyard 7 & 8's property lines all day. Vineyard 7 & 8's Wesley Steffens said several neighbors lost their homes but believes that Schweiger winery was saved. "A good fight on it all day," he said. "The cavalry arrived today, perhaps 10 fire engines on the hill."



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Tina Minor, who co-owns Ritchie Creek Vineyard with her husband Andre, posted a statement that they had lost the winery and their home and that their vineyard had been damaged. "Most unfortunately, our case good storage was destroyed as well, which contained much of the library wines of Ritchie Creek," she said. "Thankfully we were all able to evacuate safely."

David Nassar, founder of Flying Lady Winery, also posted a statement that his winery had burned. "While the fire destroyed our winery, which we had just finished renovating, we will rebuild," he promised.



*Spot fires continued to endanger vines on Spring Mountain. (Courtesy Wesley Steffens)*

High winds have died down. But record temperatures are still in the forecast, which means firefighter teams may not be able to contain the blazes for several more days. It means more smoke, more flames and more lost fruit.

Yet vintners remain dedicated to salvaging what they can and rebuilding what's been lost. Looking at the remains of her scorched vineyard, Phifer Pavitt had one thought. "Now we start again."



*Items salvaged from the ruins of Sherwin Family Vineyards. (Courtesy Wesley Steffens)*