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Severe drought is forcing one of Sonoma's best Syrah vineyards to make no wine



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Pinot Noir vines at Griffin's Lair shown on August 4, 2021 (left) are parched and weak due to the drought. Last year's crop (right) was healthy.

John Flynn

Because of drought, one of Sonoma County's best Syrah vineyards will bear no fruit this year.

The grapevines at Griffin's Lair Vineyard in Petaluma are parched, said owner John Flynn. Unlike the typical lush, full, green canopies that you'd expect to see this time of year, as harvest approaches, the vines look haggard and weak. Some leaves are already turning brown. With no water available to give them, Flynn made the decision this week to drop the entire crop, which in a good year would supply Pinot Noir and Syrah grapes to eight wineries including Pax and Spottswoode. It's the best way to ensure the crop's survival, he said.

Cutting off the grape clusters before they ripen means that Flynn will have no income from the vineyard this year. "It really becomes a near-term economic question versus a longevity question," Flynn said. In their thirsty state, the vines would have depleted themselves of too much energy in trying to bring their grapes to full ripeness. "By dropping the fruit, we can improve the retention of carbohydrates into the vines and improve the health for future years," said Flynn.

Or, to put it a little more bluntly: "The vine is going into survival mode," said [Pax Mahle](#) of Pax Wines, who has made Syrah from Griffin's Lair since 2002. "It's like when a person is trapped in an avalanche, the body will stop sending blood to your ears and toes in order to keep your liver and heart and lungs functioning." Getting rid of the unnecessary appendages — the fruit — helps the vine conserve its energy for its vital organs.

It's a stark reminder that climate change [is already making a fundamental impact](#) on Wine Country.

Compared with other crops like almonds, grapes need relatively little water. Moreover, the effects of drought on California wines have not always been uniformly bad. In fact, by some measures, [they've been good](#). Although droughts tend to result in lower crop yields, they have often led to high-quality wines, since dry conditions can produce concentrated, flavorful grapes.

But the outcome at Griffin's Lair this year would seem to refute any notion that chronic, severe droughts might coexist peacefully with grapegrowing in California in the long term.

This is the second year in a row that Griffin's Lair won't produce fruit due to weather-related issues. Last year, most of the grapes from Griffin's Lair were marred by wildfire smoke taint, rendering them unusable. At the time, Flynn did not have crop insurance; he's since secured it. The vineyard is a side business for him, not his sole source of income, so he'll be OK, "but this is a horrible reflection on the aggregate industry," he said. "There's no way most people could survive having negative income for two years."

Ironically, what makes Griffin's Lair such an ideal site for Syrah — rocky, sandy soils that drain water, rather than retain it — is exactly what compromised the crop. "It's this glorious soil to grow wine in, just beautiful and filled with minerals and all those things we want," said Mahle. Syrah is one of the hardiest grape varieties; stressful conditions, like low water availability, often result in a better wine.

So it's a testament to the severity of this drought that even these hardy plants could not withstand dry the conditions. Petaluma has gotten just under 7 inches of rain so far this year, compared with about 24 inches by this time in 2019.

Griffin's Lair does have irrigation — unlike some vineyards that are dry farmed, relying solely on precipitation for their watering. Those irrigation lines are fed from wells and ponds on the property, which are supposed to fill up during winter rainfall. Anticipating a drought, Flynn put in a fifth well this past year. But there wasn't enough rainfall to fill any of it. The new well has come up dry, and the ponds are empty. The other option, trucking in water, was out this year, too; by the time Flynn looked into it, there was none available.

Many in the area are trying to pinpoint solutions. A neighboring vintner, Ana Keller of Keller Estate, is working on a proposal to build a pipeline that would carry water from Petaluma's water recycling plant to farms in the area, specifically along Lakeville Highway, where Griffin's Lair is located. She's gotten the buy-in of about 15 farmers — which include dairy, hay, tomato and other types of farmers — along that stretch, and hopes to be able to bring a formal proposal to the city of Petaluma in September.

Such a pipeline could potentially be a lifeline to water-depleted vineyards like Griffin's Lair and Keller Estate, helping them to keep their wells and ponds full so that they can irrigate their plants. Still, even if the city is receptive, Keller said the project would take several years. In the meantime, Flynn is hopeful that the 2022 growing season will be OK: He plans to install yet another well, in the hopes of catching that winter rainfall, and order water to be trucked in earlier.

The drought is affecting many aspects of life in California beyond just vineyards. The state has already cut off water to many farmers in the state, and this week, regulators voted to further restrict water access to thousands of Central Valley farms. Drought conditions can also make land more vulnerable to wildfires, an issue that's top of mind for the wine industry right now as peak fire season approaches.

"It points to the question — as time rolls on, where will be the places that we can still grow wine?" said Mahle.

