

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend. And I'm Jim Burke with local news and commentary for Wednesday, September 11, 2024, beamed in from the Jefferson County *Beacon*.

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Today, we're looking at how climate change is impacting winemaking in the Puget Sound region. Andrew Wiese, who has worked as a sommelier and restaurant manager, wrote in for the *Beacon* this week to discuss what the future holds for our local vineyards as they contend with shifting temperatures, changing weather patterns, and the all-important factor of rainfall.

At the risk of oversimplifying, there are two major climatic challenges facing Peninsula vineyards: the amount of warmth and sunshine – typically measured in Growing Degree Days – and the timing of rainfall. These elements form a line between what's viable and what's hopeless for winemakers in this region. The Puget Sound area, as it happens, is borderline. But even a small distance, say between Bainbridge Island and Port Townsend, can drastically alter a vineyard's chances for success, especially when it comes to producing quality red wines. The critical factor here? Warmth above 50 degrees.

And for all those who recently lost a weekend's blueberry picking through rain, you might imagine similar rain ruining the prospects of a good vintage if it comes just before the harvest. Rainfall, especially at the wrong time, can be disastrous for grape growers.

Few farmers have paid closer attention to climate change than viticulturists. The way vineyards have adapted – or in some cases, struggled – to survive the changing conditions is a story in itself. For instance, winemakers in places like Germany and Switzerland have noticed that the sugar levels in their grapes—and therefore the alcohol levels of their dry wines—have been rising steadily over the past few decades. Red grape varieties are now thriving in areas that were considered too cold just a few decades ago.

Meanwhile, growers in France are experimenting with Spanish grape varieties, hoping to keep ahead of increasingly hot summers that are proving too much for their traditional grapes. And here in the United States, West Coast vineyards are dealing with a different problem: heat waves. When temperatures soar above 102 degrees, grapevines shut down their fruit development. Worse still, the heat can cause sunburn on the fruit and stress on the vines, leading to reduced yields and lower quality wines.

What about Jefferson County? How are local winemakers adapting to these climatic shifts? Well, just ask Kit and Claire Africa, owners of Sailor Vineyard, located right here in Jefferson County. They're using innovative methods to protect their crops – like the occasional use of a shotgun to scare away birds from feasting on their grapes.

Kit and Claire's vineyard produces Marechal Foch, a relatively unknown variety to most. Marechal Foch is a red-fleshed grape that yields a fruity and relatively robust wine. It may be a bit rustic and simple compared to what you might expect from classic reds, but Kit and Claire have worked long and hard to perfect their craft. Over time, they've gotten to know their vines and fine-tuned their winemaking process, producing a wine that pairs well with food year-round.

And speaking of food pairings, their Marechal Foch wine is especially well-suited for traditional Thanksgiving and Christmas dishes – a niche that has found a small but loyal following in the local community. But what does the future hold for Jefferson County wines? Will we ever see more classic red varieties, like Syrah or Merlot, grown here? As Ben Thomas, winemaker at Port Townsend Vineyards, says, "we should theoretically benefit from warmer weather, but for the fires".

Ben raises an important point – one that all of us living in the Pacific Northwest have become all too familiar with: wildfire smoke. Warmer temperatures don’t necessarily promise better growing conditions. In fact, while the prospect of drier, warmer summers might sound like a win for vineyards, the increased frequency of wildfires could present a whole new set of challenges. Smoke from these fires can block out the sunlight that grapevines so desperately need, stalling their growth and even imparting undesirable flavors to the wine. This phenomenon is called “smoke taint” and it’s something that winemakers across the West Coast are starting to grapple with more and more each year.

As we look ahead, it’s clear that Jefferson County’s winemakers, like those in other wine regions, are finding themselves at the frontlines of climate change. The warm weather may increase Growing Degree Days and create opportunities for growing new varieties of grapes, but it also brings with it the specter of wildfire smoke and the unpredictable nature of rainfall.

So, the next time you enjoy a glass of local wine, take a moment to think about the delicate balance of nature that made it possible. From the growing days of summer to the looming threat of fire season, every bottle tells a story that’s as much about the land and climate as it is about the people who made it.

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