

Ma Nature, lack of publicity hurt El Dorado wineries

By Kathryn Reed

FAIR PLAY – Not a cloud in the sky, not many people in the wineries. From a consumer standpoint the first day of the El Dorado County barrel tasting event was great. From the viewpoint of some of the 27 wineries that are part of the event, Saturday was disappointing.

Coming off a harvest that was bizarre by most definitions, having a special event that is less than successful is not welcome. The event continues today. But at \$35 for the weekend, it is more money than 2011.



Barrel tasting
continues
today at
designated El
Dorado County
wineries.

Photos/Kathryn
Reed

Some industry officials who spoke to *Lake Tahoe News* off the record on Jan. 28 attributed the less than stellar turn out to the public relations-marketing firm that is in its first year for El Dorado Winery Association.

The latest stats on the website are from March 2011. The latest press release is from February 2009.

Twenty-seven wineries were on the list this year as participants in the barrel tasting event – one more than 2011. In 2010, 1,200 tickets were sold, while 2,000 were sold in 2011. Ticket sales for this year have not been released.

An increase in price during a recession could be a contributing factor to the decline of participants in this event that started in 2007. This year the weekend pass is \$35 (tickets still available for today), compared to \$20 or \$25 for the two days in 2011. No Sunday-only tickets were for sale, as was the case last year for a price less than the weekend rate.

A Fair Play winery said the barrel tasting event in 2011 attracted about 1,400 visitors. About 10 were at this particular winery midday Saturday. Usually people are flowing out of the tasting area – even when the weather has been less than ideal.

Lake Tahoe News reporters are used to having to struggle to get to the counter to get a pour. Of the five wineries visited Saturday, the opposite was the case.



Vines are dormant -- but it's still dry, as evidenced by the brown at

Skinner
vineyard.

Besides the lack of people, the lack of rain is everywhere. Brown terrain proves moisture has been scarce. Cows are munching on grass in fields that are normally green and several inches tall.

John Latcham, who manages the vineyards for Latcham Winery, says he knows of people who have already started to irrigate.

"If this continues, we'll be irrigating soon," Latcham said. "The water table is way down."

The irony about this dry winter is last year was extraordinarily wet – setting records for moisture totals in so many parts of Northern California.

But growing grapes is farming. And farmers and Mother Nature have a love-hate relationship. The love seems to be lukewarm based on the inconsistencies.

Last year at this time Single Leaf Vineyards had 70 inches of rain. This year 10 inches have been recorded. Pam Miller, who owns the winery with her husband, said somewhere in between would be ideal.

"Don't tell me there is not climate change," Miller told *Lake Tahoe News*. "There is no doubt Northern California is changing."

With the abundance of moisture a year ago, which kept coming during the fall harvest of grapes, it meant Latcham lost 40 percent of its harvest. The white grapes were off the vine before the problems arose, but the reds – especially the tender Zinfandel grapes – were hit hard.



Scott Miller
is about to
pour from the
barrel Jan. 28
at Single
Leaf.

The rain drops the sugar content of the grapes.

“Not only was it a difficult harvest, it was expensive,”
Latcham said.

Bunch rot was a problem for some wineries.

Still, winemakers believe the 2011 vintage will be good.

“We’re optimistic about 2011,” said Greg Baiocchi, winemaker
at Miraflores.

What will come of 2012 remains to be seen. This is the normal
dormant season for the vines. Every place is below normal for
rainfall, but there is still time for that to be made up.