

Great hopes for noble late harvest

Following a tough year for vineyards, the 2010 harvest is one of the most labour-intensive and logistically demanding vintages in recent memory. However, according to Erhard Wolf, Distell's chief of grape and wine supply, there will be some exceptional results from this year's harvest, especially Pinotage and Chardonnay but not confined to these two varietals.



The rainy, humid conditions late in the picking season, followed by drier weather, meant the rare and very desirable botrytis cinerea fungus could flourish to create fruit of rich and exquisite intensity for noble late harvest wines.

Spring rains, severe southeast winds and the unseasonal hail that preceded this year's ripening season, as well as a 10-day summer heat wave made for tough conditions. He explained that the adverse vintage conditions had been overcome through access to sophisticated weather-station data, research and an extensive team of viticulturists working across Distell's own farms and in close concert with supplier growers.

'You can't outwit the weather'

"Close vigilance of weather conditions allowed us to plan ahead and act swiftly in terms of vineyard management. The company employs talented and experienced viticulturists, whose immediate, on-the ground decisions helped to ameliorate the risk of weather-related vine diseases and to minimise the wind and hail damage to fruit in the lead-up to the picking season. Careful planning during the harvesting period itself also ensured grapes could be optimally harvested by working at dawn, at night and on weekends.



Erhard Wolf

However, he did say that yields in organic vineyards, representing a very small part of the company's production, had suffered heavy losses. "There is no way you can outwit the weather if you follow accredited organic wine-growing protocols and we were not prepared to make any compromises in terms of spraying to save the grapes. On one of our biggest farms, yields from organically grown vines were down by as much as 80%."

He said the company had the infrastructure in place to begin bottling this year's vintage with South Africa's new sustainability seal as a guarantee of eco-friendly production.

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