



Vintage cranks up across the country

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Vintage is well under way in some regions of Australia, with reports of grapes being harvested two weeks earlier than usual. And initial signs indicate the size of Australia's crush will be similar to, if not higher than 2007. An official 2008 harvest update will be delivered by the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation (AWBC) at the end of February (prior to publication), and this forecast is likely to be revised upwards from the original November 1.22 million tonne figure due to the following factors:

- above average rainfall during November and December in many of Australia's wine regions
- sufficient water allocation for an average crop in the Riverina
- improved water allocations in the Riverland, significant levels of water purchases in South Australia and the Murray Darling-Swan Hill areas
- minimal carryover effects from widespread frosts prior to the 2007 harvest allowing for a better budburst than initially anticipated.

Meanwhile the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has released its wine and viticulture figures for the 2007 vintage. The statistics confirm that the total Australian winegrape crush in 2007 was 1.4 million tonnes, 27% down on the above-average 2006 season. But the ABS reported that sales volumes were up 7% for 2006-07, and stocks being held by Australian winemakers have dropped by 17% to take the stocks-to-sales ratio to the level of 1.5 years. The ABS also says that net plantings have fallen for the fifth year in succession.

Back to the 2008 harvest and Queensland's Sirromet Wines will cane cut 20% of Cabernet Sauvignon fruit at its Granite Belt vineyards. The winery's chief winemaker Adam Chapman says five-hectares of Cabernet Sauvignon at Sirromet's vineyards at Ballandean would be cane cut in late March, about three weeks

before being harvested.

"When the water evaporates in cane cut Cabernet it creates a higher concentration of sugar and acid, and a more complex variety of flavours," Chapman said.

Chapman says Sirromet expected to harvest about 600 tonnes of fruit from its 162 hectares of vineyards in the 2008 vintage, a similar total to 2007. The company has 150 hectares of vineyards at Ballandean, and 12 hectares at its headquarters at Mount Cotton, between Brisbane and the Gold Coast.

Sirromet's 2008 vintage started on 29 January with the harvesting of 20 tonnes of Chardonnay from its Seven Scenes vineyard at Ballandean for sparkling wine bases.

Chapman says no fruit was lost from the 199 centimetres of rain that fell on Sirromet's Granite Belt vineyards on 5 January.

"The extra rain topped up our water holdings which is good for the 2008 growing season," Chapman said. "Since then the weather has been cool and overcast, which made better ripening conditions for the rest of January compared to previous years. Our total acidity levels are the best seen on the Granite Belt for many years."

Recent record-breaking rain across the New South Wales Hunter Valley may well have broken the drought, but for the region's vineyard operators it's created major problems. The summer rain and high humidity have provided an ideal breeding ground for bunch rot and other diseases.

Hunter Valley Vineyard Association member Bruce Tyrrell says there probably wasn't a bunch of white grapes in the Hunter in February that didn't have some sign of rot.

"You've got botrytis, noble rot, the good bunch rot, which, if you let it go, it takes over and destroys the whole bunch", he told the ABC. "If you've got a bit of it, you can actually add some really nice character and complexity to the wine. And then you get black rots and bitter rots, which are not very pleasant".



A harvest update will be provided by the AWBC and this forecast is likely to be revised upwards from the original November 2007 figure of 1.22 million tonnes.