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Grape volume on the rise

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Inferno-type weather hit California in late June with temperatures as high as 122 degrees scorching the Coachella Valley, and temperatures near 110 degrees visiting the San Joaquin Valley. The result was a drop in July grape production from Coachella and a slow start to the San Joaquin Valley deal.

“The high temperatures have played havoc with color and sugar,” Keith Andrew, sales manager for Columbine Vineyards in Delano, CA., said on July 7, speaking of both the June heat wave and temperatures that were still in the 105-108 range during the first couple weeks of July. “The red varieties have had trouble coloring and the green varieties have had trouble getting enough sugar. And next week (July 10-16) we are supposed to get more of the same. I don’t think we will be in full production until the week of July 17.”

But Andrew said by the end of July, volume should be heavy and promotable supplies should be the norm.

Jared Lane, vice president of sales and marketing for Stevco in Los Angeles, said the slower start from the San Joaquin Valley appeared to work in the industry’s favor as it allowed both Mexico and the Coachella Valley to clean up the end of their deals before the more northern California district hit its stride. Lane is anticipating promotable volume to kick in during the end of July, early August time frame.

John Harley, vice president of sales and marketing for Anthony Vineyards Inc., which has its corporate offices in Bakersfield, CA, said predicting volume spikes too far ahead of time is very difficult because of the many new or fairly new varieties now on the market. It seems like each shipper has a significant amount of volume devoted to these newer proprietary and limited edition

varieties. “The nursery tells you when they think it’s going to be ready for harvest, but that’s not always the case.”

In addition, he said different micro-climates around the valley produce different growing conditions and different timing. While growers plant various varieties in an effort to have both consistent and predictable volume throughout the season, that is virtually impossible to assure early in a variety’s life span.

Growers have had decades of experience with the previous volume leaders — Thompson Seedless and Flame Seedless. Though weather patterns obviously alter when particular vineyards hit their peak, the general time frame was well known — surprises were rare. Not so for these newer varieties, Harley said.

However, discussions with more than a half dozen grower-shippers did produce some consensus on timing. The early varieties are a week to 10 days later than is typical, which may also be the case on the later varieties. The fruit volume on the early vines also appears to be mixed with quite possibly less volume than is typical. The fruit on the mid- to late season vines appears to be more robust.

Everyone is also noting that the newer varieties are sweeter and produce larger fruit. With regard to the size of the fruit, that should mean increased volume as cartons are packed by weight. It tends to reason that larger fruit will create more weight per bunch, with each standard carton needing fewer grapes to make weight.

There was also general consensus that it has been very hot during the summer, but that the heat should not have a lasting impact on California’s summer grape deal. However, all bets are off when it comes to the weather. Temperatures in the 110 degree range in the San Joaquin Valley are rare but so are 122 degree days in the Coachella Valley. In fact, 123 degrees is the highest ever reached, which occurred four times in the last 40 years, yet 122 was hit on two different days in early July. This year has been a strange one with cities throughout the West smashing long-held records. Phoenix hit 118 degree, breaking a record set in 1905. Downtown Los Angeles broke a record one day in early July that had stood since the 1880s.

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