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S.L.H. WINEGROWERS WRAP-UP 2010 HARVEST

A Challenging Year but Potentially Exceptional Pinot Noir Vintage in the Santa Lucia Highlands

Monterey County, CA: "I would sum up this harvest, after much angst, as near perfect." A strong statement from Santa Lucia Highlands' winegrower Kirk Williams, assessing the recently finished Crush. Mr. Williams has just completed the 2010 harvest on his KW Ranch Vineyard, located in the heart of the S. L. H. appellation. The coolest spring and summer in recent memory gave way to a warm, dry fall pattern. "Aside from a couple heat spikes in August and September, we were really in the sweet spot, weather-wise, compared to the winegrowing districts north and south of us," Kirk comments. Yields on his Pinot Noir blocks were 1 to 1.5 tons per acre lighter than 2009. Small bunch and berry sizes made for a focused crop. Kirk continues that "the long 'hang time' of this extended, later than normal harvest meant the grapes achieved flavor maturity before they achieved actual sugars' ripeness. A recipe for very high quality fruit!"

Dan Lee at Morgan Winery echoes that opinion - high quality after a somewhat nervous, delayed start. At Morgan's organically farmed Double L Vineyard, in the Highlands' northern section, it was a case of "wait, wait, go!" comments Dan. "With the cool summer, fruit ripeness was achieved later this year. We normally pick about 40% of our fruit in September but this year it was only 20%. That meant a very busy October and first week of November with 80% of the harvest squeezed into a 5 week window. The good news is that we had good ripeness and flavors while avoiding the rains that dampened the North Coast and the Santa Barbara regions. That's was great about the Highlands - we tend to miss the tropical storms coming up from the south and normally miss the storms from the north at harvest time. I think 2010 will prove a very good vintage locally, with very solid wines."

At Pisoni Vineyard, in the southern end of the S.L.H., Mark Pisoni reports that "2010 will be a vintage that shows one's commitment to patience and trusting your vineyard. For us, it was a very late harvest, which made it very compressed, as well. We started with Pinot Noir in late September and finished with Syrah on October 23rd."

Mark continues that “the cold summer was great for gentle fruit development but growers had to ensure that canopies were balanced and yields were low. We made more individual passes through our vineyard to pick rows as they became ready. It was a necessary, more intense routine but the resulting wines are beautiful.”

Jason Smith, at Paraiso Vineyards, one of the Santa Lucia Highlands’ original plantings, is relieved it’s over. “The 2010 harvest was one of the most trying on record with Mother Nature throwing the book at us. In the end, though, the stress and hard work paid off with some of the prettiest Pinot Noir we’ve ever produced. It was one of the latest and smallest harvests in a while. We didn’t really start picking until October 1 (normally when we finish). That extended season meant great ‘hang time’ and flavor development as well as ideal skin to juice ratio. Small berries can’t be recreated by thinning crops and this year we had small berries, good color, and the makings of a great vintage in all of our clones of Pinot Noir. The only disappointment is the lower yields mean less of the eventual vintage for folks to enjoy.”

The Santa Lucia Highlands is one of the crown jewels of California viticulture, growing and producing some of the state’s best cool climate Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Riesling, and Syrah. The appellation encompasses 46 estates, with 5,900 acres of prime vineyards; the area’s unique character was recognized with official A.V.A. status in 1991.

Formed in 2005, the Santa Lucia Highlands Wine Artisans is a formal association of vineyards and vintners that grow grapes here or use this region’s fruit to craft their wines. The group’s online home is www.santaluciahighlands.com

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Contact: Dave Muret 408.205.1516 dave@santaluciahighlands.com