

Katherine Cole

'Is the real question whether wine regions could shield the rest of us from wildfires?'

Sitting by the hearth with a glass of wine, I'm thinking about fire. Flames may warm my toes now, but they can be devastating in dry months. As wildfires have battered the wine industry in recent years, follow-up reports have largely focused on the damage. But perhaps we've missed the larger point. What if the real question isn't how fires threaten wine, but whether wine regions could shield the rest of us from wildfires?

Consider Napa's recent transformation from victim to warrior. After the devastating fires of 2017 and 2020, Napa Firewise CEO Joseph Nordlinger and his team identified two barriers to resilience that plague fire-prone regions: fragmented efforts and simple complacency.

In response, the team built a shared-services hub for Napa County, coordinating equipment, planning and funding 'so we don't have 23 Fire Safe Councils competing with one another for grant funds', explains Nordlinger.

Napa Firewise next developed a countywide network of 'enhanced resilience sites' – strategically located properties where advancing flame fronts tend to break. Mapped, catalogued and funded from pooled resources, the sites eliminate the costly, time-consuming scouting and set-up typically required after a fire starts.

Now, Cal Fire's live incident-command system can immediately dispatch crews to these staging sites, with their essential access roads and water sources. Response times have dropped from hours to minutes, saving not just vineyards, but entire communities. During the August 2020 Pickett Fire, firefighters used Napa Firewise enhanced resilience site data to deploy promptly and contain the blaze.

Wine regions are uniquely suited to this approach. Growers already manage large, contiguous areas that are wild yet accessible via vineyard roads. They already coordinate across property lines, whether for water, disease prevention or ecosystem management. And they already think in generational terms.

They also have a far-reaching incentive to stay ahead of fire risk. On the US west coast, wildfires often strike during harvest, when grape skins are

thinnest and most vulnerable. Even far, far away from a burn zone, ripe grapes can absorb acrid smoke compounds, making for undrinkable wines that worsen with age. Here in Oregon, energy utility company PacifiCorp recently paid a \$125 million settlement to wineries for smoke-taint losses from Oregon's 2020 Labor Day fires.

Wine-growers also have a secret weapon in the war against wildfire: vine rows. 'Vineyards provide a good firebreak,' affirms Oregon climatologist and vintner Greg Jones. Well spaced, high in moisture and low in fuel, vineyards – especially irrigated ones – can slow or even stop the flames' advance.

Sadly, this was illustrated in the reverse in August this year, when conflagrations swept across the Aude region in southern France. The disaster was aggravated by the recent removal of fire buffer zones in the form of some 5,000ha of wine grapevine plantings, incentivised by subsidies provided by the French Ministry of Agriculture.

So, what now? Searching for answers, I recently called the co-founder of a UC Berkeley-founded lab developing an AI-driven wildfire-prediction model, called Interlinked, that forecasts ignition risk with remarkable precision in real time, à la the 'pre-crime unit' of the 2002 film *Minority Report*.

But the more I learned, the less relevant predictive technology seemed to be for vineyards. Annual-crop farmers can replant tomatoes or move livestock if warned of an encroaching fire. Wine-growers, whose vines stay in the ground for decades, can't just rip up and relocate every time the wind changes and an AI model raises an alarm.

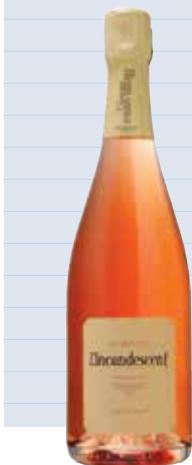
Rather, they must be smarter, more strategic, more vigilant. And increasingly, they are. Napa County, for one, is proving that wine regions are not just vulnerable landscapes. They are also filled with people of radical practicality. □

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IN MY GLASS THIS MONTH

Twice lately, I've returned to Portland, Oregon restaurant L'Echelle for **Champagne Mouzon Leroux's L'Incandescent** (£55-£70 Lay & Wheeler, Parched, Sip Wines), a Pinot Noir-driven, silex (flint) soil-powered extra brut from biodynamic grower Sébastien Mouzon in the grand cru village of Verzy. Fourteen hours of maceration make for a saignée rosé that's a gorgeous ruby colour, with berry, spice and mineral notes that match the heartiest winter fare.



PHOTOGRAPH SHE SAW THINGS