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California Winemakers Report an Unusually Early 2026 Harvest

Smaller berries and lighter yields are raising hopes for wines with concentrated flavors, strong aromatics and fresh acidity.

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California winemakers are reporting an unusually early 2026 harvest and are expressing optimism about quality after a growing season marked by lighter yields, smaller berries and closely timed picks across many regions of the state.

In a vintage preview released from Sacramento, Wine Institute said vineyards from the North Coast to the Central Coast have been running several weeks ahead of normal. The industry group said concentrated flavors, strong aromatics and fresh acidity are emerging as common themes in the first fruit brought into wineries, even as growers contend with lower crop levels than they had expected earlier in the season.

The early pace of the harvest followed unseasonably warm weather in March, which pushed the growing season forward. That was followed by rain and strong winds during spring flowering, conditions that disrupted fruit set in many wine regions. According to the institute and growers it cited, the result was lighter clusters, uneven berry development and smaller berries, a combination that reduced volume but may have increased flavor concentration in the grapes that did ripen.

Terah Bajjalieh, owner and winemaker at Oakland-based Terah Wine Co., said the season is shaping up to produce wines with bright acidity, intense aromatics and a leaner tannin structure. Her company sources fruit from Lodi, Amador County and the Central Coast. She began picking Lodi Sangiovese on Aug. 5, which she said was 20 days earlier than in 2025.

In the North Coast and Central Coast, moderate summer weather appears to have helped fruit ripen without long stretches of damaging heat. Wine Institute said harvest began in the South Central Coast in late June, and that some vineyards in Sonoma County’s Russian River Valley had finished picking by mid-September. Growers and winery teams had to adjust schedules in both vineyards and cellars because the compressed timing brought multiple varieties to maturity in a shorter window.

Sean W. McBride, owner and winemaker at Crosby Roamann in Napa Valley, said the vintage has been one of the most unusual he has seen, citing the early start and mild summer conditions as factors that supported even ripening. That view was echoed in other parts of the state, where producers said lower tonnage did not necessarily translate into weaker fruit quality.

Mendocino County-based Bonterra Organic Estates started harvest on July 22 with Pinot Gris, nearly two weeks earlier than it did last year. General Manager John Kane said smaller berries appear to have increased flavor intensity in several lots and that the

early harvest helped preserve freshness and natural balance. In Sonoma County, Bacigalupi Vineyards in the Russian River Valley reported similar signs in Pinot Noir. General Manager Nicole Bacigalupi said the variety is showing more color and stronger flavor concentration than is typical, which she linked to very small berries and clusters.

On the Central Coast, Rhône varieties are also drawing attention. Tablas Creek Vineyard, in the western Paso Robles area, said its first pick was a small lot of Viognier on Aug. 7. Partner and General Manager Jason Haas said the fruit is showing vivid color and distinct varietal character. He also said the season’s low yields remain a concern from a volume standpoint, even as quality indicators look strong.

The preview reflects views from wineries and growers at a point when many fermentations are still underway and final blends remain months away. Wine Institute said a broader California harvest report with additional regional detail will be released later this fall, after more of the state’s 2026 wines have taken shape in the cellar. The organization, founded in 1934, represents nearly 1,000 California wineries and affiliated businesses, and says its members account for more than 80% of U.S. wine production and 95% of U.S. wine exports.