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The silver lining of california's 2023 grape harvest

California's 2023 grape surplus boosts quality of budget wines

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In an extraordinary turn of events, the 2023 vintage in California is shaping up to be a remarkable year for wine, particularly in the affordable price range. The 11th annual WIN Expo trade show and conference, held in Sonoma County, has brought to light an intriguing development: an unexpectedly large grape crop in California has resulted in an abundance of high-quality grapes, some from prestigious regions, being available for

use in less expensive wines.

This year's grape yield in California far exceeded expectations, not due to increased plantings or intentional strategies for higher yields, but rather through a natural enlargement of grape clusters. The long, cool summer allowed the grapes to grow larger and heavier than anticipated, leading to a surplus. Glenn Proctor of The Ciatti Company, a key player in the global grape and bulk wine market, estimated that up to 14% of the total grape crop was either left uncontracted or rejected by buyers.

This excess in production comes at a time when wine sales are stagnant or declining worldwide, putting downward pressure on prices. Interestingly, this large crop size was not anticipated by growers, leading to a significant amount of high-quality grapes being available for cheaper and mid-range wines. As a result, consumers can expect an unprecedented quality in affordable wines, especially reds, starting from late next year.

Despite the apparent boon for consumers, winery principals and vineyard owners face challenges. Winery-grower contracts often include maximum limits on fruit by weight, and with the unexpected surplus, many wineries rejected the additional produce. Consequently, a substantial portion of high-quality grapes, particularly Cabernet Sauvignon, which dominates California's vineyard acreage, has been left unused.

This development in California contrasts sharply with the global scenario. The International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV) estimates the 2023 global harvest to be significantly smaller than average, marking it as the smallest in 60 years. This decrease in global production, ironically, is seen as beneficial by industry experts like Greg Livengood, president of Ciatti, considering the ongoing decline in worldwide wine consumption.

The economic outlook, as presented by Robert Eyler, a professor of economics at Sonoma State University, suggests a challenging period ahead, potentially impacting wine tourism and consumer spending habits. However, the unexpected quality of the 2023 vintage in California presents a unique opportunity for wine enthusiasts, especially those favoring more budget-friendly options. The coming years might see a shift in consumer preferences towards high-quality, yet affordable wines, a trend initiated by this year's unforeseen bumper crop.