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Ups and Downs of California's largest crush in four vintages

From chardonnay's rise to zinfandel's struggle

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Ah, the dance of the grapes—a yearly spectacle that wine enthusiasts and industry insiders watch with bated breath. This year, California's grape crush report delivered a narrative rich with intrigue, triumphs, and a few sobering realities. With the preliminary numbers rolling in at a robust 3.67 million tons, marking an 8% increase over the previous vintage and claiming the title of the largest crush in the last four years, there's a lot to uncork and savor in this tale.

But let's not get too carried away just yet. Imagine a world where this year's grape crush could have tipped the scales at a staggering 4 million tons. According to the folks at Ciatti Company, a realm of bulk-wine brokerage, this dream wasn't too far out of reach—if only all the grapes that had stretched their vines towards the Californian sun had been harvested. So, why were some grapes left to hang, you ask? The plot thickens with the twist of softening demand for wine, an omen that could herald the need to rip up vineyard acreage.

But there's more to this story than just economics. It's also a tale of resilience and principles. Many growers, faced with the prospect of selling their grapes at barely break-even prices, chose to leave them hanging. This wasn't just about avoiding financial loss; it was a stand against devaluing the hard work and passion poured into every vine, every grape, every bottle of wine. They knew too well that selling at cost today could press down prices to unsustainable levels tomorrow.

Now, let's swirl our glass to the varietal stars of the year. Chardonnay, with its elegant and versatile character, has dethroned Cabernet Sauvignon as California's most-crushed grape variety, making up 17.5% of the crush compared to Cabernet's 17.3%. This twist in the vineyard tale isn't just about numbers; it's a reflection of changing tastes and a nod to the increasing consumer thirst for white wines. The white-wine grape crush surged by an impressive 15.3%, while the red-wine grape crush grew by a modest 2.3%. And let's not forget about the underdogs and the victors in this vintage saga: Zinfandel faced a tough year with a 26% reduction in its crush, while Sauvignon Blanc basked in the spotlight with a 28% increase, riding the wave of its growing popularity among wine drinkers.

As we anticipate the release of the wines from the 2023 vintage, the excitement is palpable. The preliminary grape crush report paints a picture of a bountiful and high-quality vintage, despite the challenges and strategic decisions faced by growers. The dance of the grapes continues, and as we get ready to taste and recommend the best of the 2023 vintage, one thing is clear: the world of wine is as dynamic and vibrant as ever, filled with stories of resilience, change, and the relentless pursuit of excellence.