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From the Publisher

Unless we've been personally hit by unusually extreme weather conditions, most of us are not paying close attention to climate change issues. But farmers always pay attention to weather, especially wine grape farmers, because the weather directly affects nearly everything they do from their daily activities to the end product. Until

now, the news has been all good in California. Those who have been farming grapes for at least several decades notice that killer frosts in the spring that can destroy crops are exceedingly rare. Today, grape farmers have frost protection systems in place, but these systems are no longer as important as they once were because frosts are rare to non-existent in coastal areas, where most premium California wine grapes are grown. And even when early rains delay harvest, every year produces fully ripened fruit, so ripe in fact that if farmers blink and don't pick on an appointed day, sugar levels rise like helium balloons in the hot sun. So why worry?

On July 11th, the biggest story on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle reported a new study recently published in "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences." According to Chronicle environment writer Jane Kay, authors of the study, including Noah Diffenbaugh from Purdue University and Filippo Giorgi from the Centre for Theoretical Physics in Trieste, Italy, predict that an increase of very hot days could eliminate premium wine grape growing in Napa, Sonoma, and Santa Barbara counties by the end of the century. But way before then, the inference is that what are now premium wines would degrade to the inexpensive, mass-produced wines that come from the hot central valley of California, where most of the state's entire agricultural output is now located.

Because grapes quickly shrivel to raisins in continuously hot weather, premium wine grapes require hot days cooled by low nighttime temperatures so that fruit takes longer to grow and ripen. Such conditions create intense and varied flavors, the hallmark of premium wine. In coastal counties as well as the Sierra Foothills region, nighttime temperatures can drop as much as 30 degrees at night, while coastal fog mitigates daytime temperatures. Apparently, temperatures in California, Oregon, and Washington have already increased by 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit between 1948 and 2002, mostly because minimum temperatures are higher. But an increasing number of hot days would obviously impact the cultivation of wine grapes.

According to scientists quoted in the Chronicle story, warming has mostly affected the West with little change in the East and Southeast. But land east of the Rocky Mountains has experienced heavier rainfall and bigger hurricanes. Perhaps the center of wine grape growing will shift from the West coast to the East. Other studies that have evaluated the results of warming in Europe predict that premium grape farming will shift northward, and in Australia, grape farming will move to southern and coastal areas.

Although we may not know where our next bottle of wine is coming from, we can at least be sure that wine will always be with us.

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