

ROAD 31 WINE CO.

Fall 2017

Dear Truckers,

Well, it's been a hell of a harvest. Actually, it was the tale of two harvests. At first it was the best of times. Owing to the previous winter and spring rains, and a very moderate growing season, the fruit was damn near perfect. The fermentations were clean and tasty, and it's gonna be a great 2017 vintage for Road 31 Pinot Noir. Truly.

But about a week after I put all my wine to bed in barrel, the wine country fires hit. Boy, did they.

No doubt it was a windy night, and Janet and I both awoke around 3 a.m. to the smell of smoke. I wandered the house to make sure Owen's latest Lego robotics creation hadn't overheated, assumed it was a simple grass fire nearby (not uncommon this time of year), closed the windows and crumpled back into bed. A few hours later, though, Janet was in the shower prepping to take the kids to school when I glanced at the news and saw that almost a dozen major fires had broken out in rings around Napa and Sonoma.

Ultimately, our family and home were safe and sound; we were never directly threatened. But it was, frankly, chaos for the first few days. I wasn't the only one to wonder if it was arson (or, as another friend only half-jokingly suggested, Kim Jung-un had indeed launched). The fires surrounded the valley, constantly shifting and growing, and information was sparse. Power, internet, and cell all went down, so you who were watching CNN often had more information than those fleeing their homes. It is alarming and sobering just how disorienting it is to have the iPhone disconnected during an emergency. No calls, no texts, no Google news, no Pokémon...

The chaos reigned for about five days until the firefighters started to get the upper hand and information began to flow; the extent of the damage started to emerge. Media sensationalism is always a possibility, and in truth, 95% of Napa was never in harm's way. That said, some of the more shocking images being broadcast on TV were very real.

One of the wineries that did burn was White Rock Vineyards. Many of you Truckers have visited me at the White Rock property, as this is where I have made my wine for 15 years (I rent the back of their caves). A crazy twist to this year's harvest is that when it came time for me to pick, White Rock was overloaded with their fruit; when the fires hit, I was temporarily storing my barrels of wine off-site. This was such a blessed and lucky coincidence for me; my wine, both in barrel and in bottle, stayed entirely out of harm's way.

But the family that owns White Rock had only minutes of notice. The conflagration roared from the ridgeline right down the canyon and through their property. The owners fled in the family car with basically the clothes on their backs. Their houses, barns, winery, and their hillside are now ash. Images made the front pages of SF Chronicle, the NY Times, and even Time magazine. Tragic.

Despite all this, scratch below the charred surface, and ... there are signs of life that stand in defiance of the fire. The vines themselves are very much alive; unlike man-made structures, vines

~ over please



don't really burn as a wildfire passes quickly through. Next year's harvest will be just fine. Most important, the White Rock caves, where their barrels of wine are stored, were unaffected.

I drove back up to the property this morning before writing this update. The power company is restoring power, much of the debris is already hauled away, the insurance company is on site with clipboards and cameras, and the county is offering to fast-track permits. FEMA is throwing money around. The architects are already at work. Rebuilding has begun.

One side note is that the finish to the entire Napa vintage — post fires — was a distinct challenge. For one, the smoke sitting in the vineyards tainted the remaining 10% of this vintage's fruit; it was lost. The second issue was that, in the aftermath of the fire, labor and electricity were scarce. But wine country folks are hearty and inventive. Long hours are part of the life, and wine has been made for thousands of years without electricity. We just had to band together to do things the old-fashioned way for a couple weeks.

To borrow (and mangle) a phrase from Mark Twain, "The reports of the death of wine country have been greatly exaggerated." The smoke has cleared, and Napa is enjoying an absolutely beautiful fall. Yes, if you drive the canyons of the hills around Napa you can see the scars, but the vibrant soul of the valley has returned in full force. You should consider a visit, both to enjoy Napa and to support a community that took one on the chin. Come on in; the water is fine.

Everyone we know in wine country was affected in some way. For the lucky like us, it was mostly dealing with the thick smoke. And for that first week, we hosted the evacuated family of one of Lila's fourth-grade friends. Lila thought it was the greatest week ever: no school and a buddy over for an extended slumber party. We had to reorient her perspective. But in truth, the visiting family was also a wine family, and we did indeed pull some great bottles from the cellar. I discovered later that — uncoordinated and unprompted — this was going on all over town. My grandparents back in Kansas used to tell of heading down to the "root cellar" for safety when tornadoes threatened, pulling out the guitars and opening up the special jars of pickles. I guess there is something universal in the human desire and ability to accept helplessness and make the best of hunkering down. I realize in retrospect that we were even drinking the wines from vineyards in harm's way. Liquid solidarity, if you will.

In that spirit, as you and your loved ones sit down for Thanksgiving this year, I'd urge you to pull a bottle from your cellar (a bottle of Road 31 or from any winery in Napa or Sonoma) and toast the unvanquishable spirit of wine country. In rereading this letter just now, I realize I've dedicated this entire fall harvest update to the fire, but, well, it seems appropriate. It was a big deal. That said, I look forward to offering a new vintage of Road 31 Pinot Noir — the 2016, which is tasting fantastic — to you next spring. And as always, I thank you for your support.

Feeling lucky,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent Fortner". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kent Fortner (Winecrafter/Truck-Owner/King of the Road)