

“The love in the air is thicker than the smoke.” – anonymous note left on Sonoma storefront.

The wind, my least favorite weather, was howling when Lizanne woke me up at midnight on October 8th. The air was thick with smoke and there was a bright orange glow to our north. Except for that thumping wind, it was eerily quiet. There were no sirens, no alarms, and no police.

Lizanne immediately started packing her favorite artifacts while I milled around, turning on irrigation, waking our neighbors and trying to find out what was happening. The fire seemed to be far away, but we had no way of knowing because there was no information. 911 was busy, while the internet and TV focused solely on Santa Rosa's fire. All we knew was there was a fire near by and the wind was blowing it in our direction. It seemed it was just a matter of time.

Around 2 a.m. the power went out and so we no longer had water. The glow appeared to be getting brighter. Then around 4 a.m. the glow seemed to dim and it appeared as if the fire was heading east towards Sonoma Mountain. I became a bit optimistic and even tried to go back to bed and close my eyes.

At sunrise I walked up and down the vineyard, seeking vantage. A huge oak had fallen over the road. The smoke was thick and visibility was limited. Another fire suddenly appeared just across the highway, with flames clearly visible. There was a brief moment I hoped the highway would buffer us, but minutes later there were flames coming towards the vineyard. Our northern horizon was blazing!

Lizanne fled with Little Boy the cat, while I stayed behind, not sure what to do. We still had no information or contact from the authorities. As I walked around the house, I took stock and decided the only thing I would really miss was my stepfather's bowler hat. Hat in hand, and dogs on leash, I evacuated to rendezvous with Lizanne and the rest of my family at our sister-in-law's in southern Sonoma. Watching the news, we began to understand the scope of the situation.

Early that afternoon, about five hours after we evacuated, my nephew Jack and I drove to Bedrock vineyard and hiked about a mile north towards Old Hill and the fire. Besides the smoke, each property we crossed was unscathed, but when we got to Old Hill there was fire. Jack sprang into action to save some old vines that were burning, and I ran up to our house where there was some smoldering brush. Jack figured out a siphon so we could get water out of our tank into buckets that we hauled around on the flat bed. Once we had my house contained we worked our way down toward the area from where the fire had come. I had not even noticed yet, but the vacation rental cottage was gone, vaporized. We moved on to the two houses at our entrance. They were intact, but the fence was burning dangerously close. After we had extinguished those flames I noticed we had lost my office and shop too. Fuck!

That night Lizanne and I stayed at Morgan Peterson's house (he owns Bedrock) with several other winemaker refugees. All of us, including our cats and dogs, were very well taken care of - to the considerable detriment of Morgan's cellar. In hindsight I think we were all in mild shock, but we were in good spirits and there was love everywhere.

The ensuing days were filled with stories of heroics and sadness and loss. Everyone wanted to help and the offers were so meaningful and wonderful. I believe Bucklin has the best customers, so please accept our heartfelt thanks for all the notes and calls of support and help. They have really helped us get through these emotional and difficult times.

Now we are well fed, rested and restless. It is day 13 and we still do not have legal access to Old Hill. We had planned to harvest the Cabernet the morning of the fire, and because we still can't get in we have grapes hanging. I know the crew is anxious to get busy, so the moment we get the word we will pick. Winemakers are abuzz about "smoke taint," offering solutions and techniques to ameliorate the problem. I am not familiar with it in wine, but I welcome a characteristic aroma that is part and parcel to this experience. It will be the terroir of the 2017 vintage, and it will serve as a reminder for decades to come of the firestorm of 2017

The generosity of family, friends, neighbors, strangers, and customers has been overwhelming. In the end we lost some stuff, some of it meaningful, most of it replaceable. The place looks and feels different. So many trees are gone along our northern border and everything is now exposed. It will grow back. The wild life will return. Our irreplaceable ancient vines are mostly intact. We have insurance. We are safe and we will make a full recovery. We are the lucky ones.

The most affected from these fires are the least fortunate. For the land I am supporting are the Sonoma Land Trust. For the wildlife I am supporting the Sonoma Ecology Center and for the humans, the La Luz Center. There are many ways to give support, so please consider making a donation.

