

There is something comforting about the familiar, whether it is your mother's home cooking, a classic Rolling Stones album or a Lindsay Lohan hot mess situation. Well, maybe, the later is a stretch.

What I am trying to say is that the timeless should not be forgotten. In regards to California, much ballyhoo has been made of the emerging AVAs (appellations) of the Central Coast, i.e. Santa Barbara, Lodi and Paso Robles, in the past decade. But what of the regions that started it all- Napa and Sonoma? Without these historic locals, there would be no California wine history. So, with this in mind, it is time to get back to the basics, with a refresher look at the different AVAs and what they do best.

### Sonoma County

Contrary to popular opinion, California's fine wine history started in Sonoma County, not Napa. This, thanks to the arrival of Hungarian nobleman Agoston Haraszthy. In 1857, he bought a small vineyard and christened it Buena Vista vineyards, ordaining California's first premium winery. More importantly, in 1861, he visited Europe's famous growing regions. While there, he collected over 10 000 cuttings of 350 different varieties, which he then transplanted to the soils of Sonoma. He would also publish reports and books about his wine growing activities. His tireless work would bring the state of California worldwide notoriety, as well as earning him the moniker 'The Father of the California Wine Industry.'

Today, Sonoma County's 350 wineries grow 66 different varietals over 62 000 acres, producing 6% of California's yearly production. The moderating factor here is the 100 kilometers of cool pacific coastline. The air currents and fog reach many of the AVA's via three routes. This explains why Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are the two most planted grapes throughout the county.

### The Major Sonoma AVAs

Alexander Valley: Sonoma's warmest AVA is inland, away from the Pacific Influence. In this twenty mile long by two mile wide region, Cabernet Sauvignon is King. Planted on the hillsides and mountain ridges, plump/ripe wines are the norm, with a definite cocoa quality. Valley floors give way to tropical fruit Chardonnays and rich Merlots. Sauvignon Blanc, Nebbiolo and Sangiovese have also shown promise.

Chalk Hill: There is no chalk at all, rather it is volcanic soil. Elegant and mineral driven Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnays are the calling cards. Cabernet Sauvignon tends to have an herbaceous edge.

(Los) Carneros: This AVA crosses over into Napa, so wines are produced on both sides of the border. North of San Francisco Bay, this, the original cool climate area, received it AVA status in 1987. The proximity of the fog and pacific influence has created an area that is noted for its Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and consequently, is the hub of California Sparkling wine activity. But, as you head into the North western portion (Sonoma), the climate becomes markedly warmer, and ripening of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot becomes facile.

Dry Creek Valley: This AVA abuts Alexander to the west. As the name denotes, it a region of low rainfall- on average 8 inches during the growing season. The first plantings were by French immigrants. The Italians soon followed, bringing Zinfandel. America's grape thrives on the infertile red volcanic soils,

making for small concentrated bunches. Today, both Zin and Cab Sauv are neck and neck in terms of plantings and quality. For whites, seek out Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

Northern Sonoma: This multi appellation AVA is for blending, encompassing most of Sonoma County, except for Carneros and Sonoma Valley. It was petitioned for by Gallo, as they wanted a more prestigious appellation (instead of basic Sonoma) for blending their huge tracts of land all over the county.

Rockpile : This AVA was ordained in 2002. The original plantings were by Italian immigrants at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Full bodied, Zins are the hallmark.

Russian River: RRV occupies one sixth of the entire acreage planted in Sonoma County. The cool fog is responsible for the large diurnal temperature shift. With night time temperatures dropping as much as 35 to 40F degrees, from daytime highs, makes this area ideal for the star varietal, Pinot Noir. All things being equal, some superb Zinfandel and Cab are sourced from hillside plantings. Chardonnay is very good too. The Green Valley AVA, which is located in the south western portion of RRV, is one of the main access points of pacific influence into upper Sonoma County. Read very cool climate.

Sonoma Coast: The largest region within the county is also the coolest and wettest. Despite this, it has become the rising star. Why? The long hang times required to mature the fruit gives extra dimension and fruit to the crisp and elegant Chardonnays and dark cherry laden Pinots.

## Napa County

In appearance, Napa has carved out its reputation on traditional French grapes (Chard/ Cab) as opposed to the more 'fuzzy' multi grapes of Sonoma. That being said, diversification has arrived. As a general rule, it is warmer than Sonoma as the fog tends to be relegated to the southern portion of the county.

Napa's godfather was Russian (via France) André Tchelistcheff. When hired as chief winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyards in 1938, he started the modern wine movement in the County, introducing the concepts of French barriques, cold fermentations, frost machines and malolactic fermentation. He is also credited with defining the style of Cali wines, notably Cabernet Sauvignon. His efforts earned him the title of 'Dean of American winemakers' and countless winemakers, including Louis Martini and Robert Mondavi referred to him as 'maestro.'

Speaking of Mondavi, his winery was the first to be built in the Valley, post prohibition. He was also one of the early proponents of varietal labeling, and became California's wine Ambassador, until his death in 2008.

Napa is also home to two wines which beat the French in the infamous 1976 tasting, Chateau Montelena Chardonnay and Stag Leap Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon. If you have seen the movie Bottle Shock, you know the story.

## Major Napa AVAs

Howell Mountain: On the eastern side of Napa, in the Vaca mountains, vineyards are planted between 1400 and 2200 feet above sea level. The soil is volcanic and some of the finest Merlots and Cabernets I have ever tasted have come from this AVA.

Mount Veeder: Located on the western cool Mayacamas mountain range, many vineyards are on 30 degree slopes. Stylistically, the reds are powerful and structured with firm tannins. Cab is King!

Napa Valley: Is a designation used when blending fruit from different AVAs within the county.

Oakville: Oakville is Napa's heartland. The soil is sand and gravel and the climate is neither too warm nor too cold. These conditions are perfect for the ripening of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay.

Rutherford: Tchelistcheff said, "It takes Rutherford dust to grow great Cabernet." Although other AVAs successfully grow the varietal, Rutherford is considered one of the premier Cab producing regions of Napa.

Spring Mountain District and Diamond Mount Ridge: Both are very similar to Mt. Veeder, in that the styles of the wines, namely the Cabernets, are firm/ powerful and full of blackcurrant fruit, minerals and mint/cedar.

Stags leap District: Was the first appellation to achieve AVA status based on the terroir characteristics of its soil -namely clay, loam and volcanic sediment. Elegant and perfumed reds and whites are the norm.

## White

92 Beringer Chardonnay Private Reserve Chardonnay 2008, Napa Valley (\$44.95)

Sourced from Yountville fruit, this full bodied white kicks up the concentration, ripeness and oak over the regular Napa Valley bottling. Full bodied, this rich offering churns out cream, banana, apple, fig and pineapple. In the mouth there is a creamy texture, with good acid and a spice tinged finale.

90 Beringer Chardonnay 2008, Napa Valley (\$24.95)

Beringer's Napa Chardonnay is a value priced offering (in California terms). Mid weight, the aromas of banana, tropical fruit, lemon and fuju apple mesh together with subtle oak notes of caramel, vanilla and spice. It finishes lengthy and refreshing.

89 Etude Chardonnay Estate 2009, Carneros (\$49.95)

This wine epitomizes the modern style of Cali Chardonnay. One in which elegance and subtle oak has supplanted the two by four/oily style. Sourced from the cool Carneros region, there is definition and freshness beneath the apple, spice, vanilla, honey, minerals and yellow plums. Lengthy finish and perfectly suited for grilled salmon in a butter sauce.

88 Sonoma-Cutrer Russian River Ranches 2008, Sonoma Coast (\$24.95)

A cool climate bouquet of apples, minerals, hay and cinnamon meshes together with flavours of lemon, banana and caramel. It is elegantly styled, with fresh acid a touch of creaminess. (ES)

Red

92 Caymus Cabernet Sauvignon 2007, Napa Valley (\$79.95)

A sleek yet powerful purple/black coloured offering. The nose is still extremely youthful, and a tad closed, but cassis, vanilla, cocoa, tobacco and spice are all present on the nose and palate. Full bodied, the tannins give the grip on the finale, ensuring a long life ahead for this beauty. From 2011 to 2023.

91 Chateau St Jean Cinq Cépages 2007, Sonoma County (\$89.95)

Sourced from many different AVAs within Sonoma, this Meritage is the flagship red wine of the winery. Cassis, boysenberry, cocoa, spice, vanilla and cocoa come together on the nose of this youthful wine. There is excellent length as well as a medium plus body. Drink over the next 7 years to take advantage of the exuberance.

91 Stags Leap Winery Petite Syrah 2007, Napa Valley (\$50)

Even though the wine is labeled Napa Valley, the grapes are sourced from the home vineyard in the Stags Leap AVA. This is a powerful offering with a dark nose of plums, cassis, cherries, violets and spice. Gutsy, to say the least, the wine has at least 15 years ahead of thanks to the pronounced tannins. Needs meat, lots of meat, to tame this baby.

90 Rodney Strong Symmetry 2007, Alexander Valley (\$50)

The 07 Symmetry is a blend of 87% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Malbec, 3% Merlot and 1% each of Franc and Petit Verdot. Aromas of After Eight mints, blackberries, violets, cinnamon and raspberries are constructed on a full bodied frame. The jammy texture is laced with dark fruits, raspberries and spice. Great persistency and structure will allow the wine to age for a decade.

89 Sonoma-Cutrer Pinot Noir 2007, Russian River Valley (\$49.95)

This mid weight Pinot opens up with dark cherries, raspberries, flowers, vanilla and cocoa on the nose. Spice, herbs, raspberries and smoke come together on the taste buds. There is a lengthy finish, supple tannins and a touch of heat. Ready to drink

89 Beringer Knights Valley Alluvium 2007, Knights Valley (\$39.95)

This elegant blend is made primarily from Merlot (78%), with the remainder a mix of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Malbec. Cassis, mint/herbs, boysenberry, violets and mocha are all present. There is good persistency with tannins popping up at the end. Drink over the next 5 years.

87 La Crema Pinot Noir 2008, Sonoma Coast (\$29.95)

Here is a smooth and easy Pinot which possesses a medium ruby colour. Cherries, spice, herbs, vanilla are all constructed on fresh tannins and soft tannins. Very good length.