

WINES FROM THE “WINE ZONES” OF CALIFORNIA

The United States, like every country that produces wine in significant quantity, has set up geographical areas with boundaries as a way to describe wine. Bordeaux in France, Chianti in Italy and Rioja in Spain are geographic areas. These are all established and regulated by the national government of the country. In the United States, it is the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (used to be the ATF). But in the United States, these geographical areas are that and only that. This is in contrast to the rest of the world, which I demonstrate with the example of *Amarone*, a wine from Northeastern Italy.

The full name is *Amarone della Valpolicella*. The Italian province, which forms a top-level area, is Veneto; the wine must come from grapes grown in the specific area in Veneto around Valpolicella. Valpolicella is the DOC zone. Unlike the United States, there are further requirements for Valpolicella wine. It must consist of at least 80% of the Corvina grape, with the possible addition of any of six other grapes for the remainder. The Amarone version of a Valpolicella wine further requires drying the grapes before they are crushed.

In the United States what I am calling a “zone” is an “Approved Vinticultural Area” which is abbreviated “AVA.” The AVA demarcates where the grapes are grown, not the location of the winery. As of today, not every state grows grapes for commercial wine production, but each of the fifty states has at least one winery. Nonetheless, each state constitutes an AVA. Texas, Oregon, Washington, New York and Michigan each have multiple AVAs. However, California has literally dozens.

NAPA VALLEY is the most well-known American AVA. It is one of several AVAs in Napa County, and includes almost the entire county. Other AVAs in Napa County are smaller areas within the larger Napa Valley AVA, and include **CARNEROS**, **DIAMOND MOUNTAIN**, **OAKVILLE**, **RUTHERFORD**, and **STAGS LEAP DISTRICT**. As in France and Italy, the wines that can use the smaller area appellation generally will, and so generally a wine with the location name of Carneros will be a finer wine than one with the location name Napa Valley. Napa County is home to both of California’s ubiquitous grapes: **Cabernet Sauvignon** and **Chardonnay**. The **Zinfandel** grape does well in Diamond Mountain, and **Merlot** in Oakville and Stags Leap. Among the great producers using Napa fruit are *Abreu*, *Caymus Vineyards*, *Colgin*, *Dominus*, *Harlan Estate*, *Kongsgaard*, *Screaming Eagle*, and, for the rest of us, *Beringer Vineyards*, *Cornerstone Cellars*, *Etude*, *Groth*, *Larkmead*, *Lewis Cellars*, *Pahlmeyer*, *Robert Foley*, *Sean Thackrey*, *Spottswoode*, *Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars*.

Sonoma County, which is just north of Napa County, has AVAs justly famous for Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, and for Merlot, **Sauvignon Blanc**, and **Pinot Noir**. Some of these AVAs are **ALEXANDER VALLEY**, **CHALK HILL**, **DRY CREEK**, **LOS CARNEROS**, **RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY**, **SONOMA COAST**, **SONOMA MOUNTAIN** and **SONOMA VALLEY**. Producers of note here include *Clos du Bois*, *De Loach*, *Gary Farrell*, *Gallo of Sonoma*, *Hartford Court*, *Jordan*, *Kistler Vineyards*, *Peter Michael Winery*, *Pride Mountain*, *Ravenswood*, *Walter Hansel* and *Williams-Selyem*.

In Mendocino County, the world class sparkling wine of *Roederer Estate* is made of grapes grown in the **ANDERSON VALLEY** AVA. No other American sparkling wine comes close to its quality. (Only wines from the Champagne AOC in France may properly use that name.)

High-achieving wineries are also in Santa Barbara County, in the AVAs of **SANTA MARIA VALLEY**, **SANTA-RITA HILLS** and **SANTA YNEZ VALLEY**. The more established producers shine with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but the new kids on the block are the Rhone Rangers, producing spectacular wines from **Syrah**, **Grenache**, **Viognier**, and other grapes indigenous to the Rhone Valley in France.

There is now almost total devotion to the Rhone grapes in San Luis Obispo County in its AVA of **PASO ROBLES**, while the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes still rule in **ARROYO GRANDE VALLEY** and **EDNA VALLEY**. Great Rhone Rangers include *Alban Vineyards*, *Copain*, *L'Aventure*, *Saxum*, *Sean Thackrey* (of Napa County), *Tablas Creek*, and *Turley*. Other notable producers of the Central Coast counties include *Au Bon Climate*, *Bonny Doon*, *Brewer-Clifton*, and *J. C. Cellars*.

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