

A neighbor knocks on your front door. He states that he must go to Sonoma, California on business for 10 days and that he really does not want to go alone. He states that, if you accompany him, it is a trip with all expenses paid and no conditions attached. Believe me when I say that this neighbor just became your new best friend. Fantasy? Of course it is. However Sonoma, and many other wine regions in California, present to the visitor many opportunities for fantasy, including sensational scenery, manicured wineries, quiet and peaceful surroundings and very talented and pleasant people. At the heart of all this is some pretty terrific wine.

Sonoma County is home to approximately 235 wineries. The Sonoma region is further divided into 13 AVA's (see Winespeak for American Viticultural Area.) It is located just north of San Francisco and next to The Napa Valley. There are approximately 2,000,000 acres under vine. Close to 1100 growers produce 32 different types of grapes; the most popular are Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, and Zinfandel. Until twenty years ago, Sonoma was clearly overwhelmed by its more sophisticated cousin, Napa Valley. Now Sonoma is producing wines to rival anyone near or far. Sonoma is the more diverse of the North Coast counties, with an enormous range of soil types and multiple microclimates. This situation provides an exceptional opportunity to each vintner, as he is able to pick and choose his growing area suitable to each type of grape that he wants to produce. Speaking from a location frame of reference, the subregions closer to the pacific are cooler and better suited to the Burgundian variety of Chardonnay. The eastern slopes inland are hotter and better suited for Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, and Zinfandel. In any case, Chardonnay produced from this area can be exceptional and Pinot Noir from the inland Russian River Valley is probably the best expression of this tricky variety in all of California. Some examples of Chardonnay that are common to the Lowcountry area are Chateau St. Jean, Kendall Jackson, Chalk Hill, Ferrari-Carano, and Kistler (if the wallet can afford it). Some examples of red wines from Sonoma available in the Lowcountry are Chateau St. Jean Cabernet Sauvignon, Rafanelli Zinfandel, Geyser Peak Cabernet Sauvignon, and Silver Oak Cabernet. Are there others? Yes; by the hundreds. This is key. As testament to the fact that California, in general, has a good thing going, and is producing quality wine wherever you look, just watch how big the crowds are that visit the wineries on any day of the week. Truly amazing how big the crowds are. Doesn't anyone work?

Wine production in California probably started in the 1700's when the Religious orders were establishing themselves and wine was required for sacramental purposes. Normal growth for alcoholic beverage products took place as the population of California increased. Prohibition came and went. When Prohibition ended, the wineries that had survived went back into production. Forty-four years later, in 1976, the California wineries were ready for international competition. Steven Spurrier, a wine merchant from Great Britain, arranged for a blind tasting to take place in France between the best wines of California and the top growths of Bordeaux and Burgundy. First Place (called Pride of Place) went to Stags Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet

Sauvignon and Chateau Montelena Chardonnay (both from Napa). The French were mortified and considered the comparison unequal, since only recent vintages were tasted and French wines are generally “unopened” (see Winespeak) in their youth. It mattered not, because the competition showed a far greater result; that California was ready as a SERIOUS contender in the world of wine. (By the way, the above short narrative is the subject of a movie called “Bottle Shock.”)

Although the wineries of Sonoma, for the most part, do an exceptional job of producing wine, there is one winery that I would like to call to your attention. Benziger Family Winery, located in the Glen Ellen AVA of Sonoma, produces wine with a philosophy that emphasizes Sustainable Farming. I mentioned this concept in the article on Mendocino. According to the Benziger write-up that I was able to locate, the entire portfolio of Benziger wine is certified sustainable, organic or Biodynamic. In the mid 1990’s, Michael Benziger came in contact with Alan York, the leading expert in Biodynamic farming. The approach to this type of farming is to eliminate chemicals and fertilizers and to replace them with “natural balances.” Flowers that attracted insects were planted. Habitats were created for birds and owls. Cows, sheep and chickens were brought in to live on the property. This effort literally conditioned the land and led to a new caliber of wines. This approach to growing grapes met with a high degree of acceptance then, and is carried on today in many wineries. I have seen it at the Benziger winery and I was witness to the determination to make it work that is exhibited by the winery owners and workers. A tour of the winery will convince anyone.

Next stop is a mystery. Stay tuned.

Cheers

WINESPEAK

What is an **AVA**? AVA stands for American Viticultural Area. An AVA is defined as a delimited grape-growing region, distinguished by geographical features, the boundaries of which have been recognized and defined. On United States wine labels such place names as Sonoma or Columbia Valley, etc. are AVA's. There are approximately 140 AVA's in the US.

What is meant by “**unopened**”? When the competition took place, the French wine entries were “young.” French Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay generally takes longer to age. Therefore, the French Winemakers cried foul.

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