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What's in a name?

sometimes not much, sometimes a lot

More than any other grape growing location, Napa Valley is widely recognized as producing wines of quality. Wines with the words “Napa Valley” on their labels often command twice the price of similar quality wines produced elsewhere, for consumers are convinced that Napa wines will be superior without knowing anything more about the wine other than its point of origin. Actually, Napa’s reputation for fine wine is well deserved, but whether a \$90 bottle of Napa Cabernet is three times as good as a \$30 bottle from Sonoma is another story that we won’t consider now. Sonoma County is another widely recognized wine location, although it might have a little less instant cachet than Napa Valley. Winemakers are highly aware that after those two place names, consumer recognition diminishes rapidly. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, a department of the U.S. Treasury, has defined about 160 viticultural areas in the United States, and about 93 are in California. I would venture that the geekiest of wine geeks would be unable to list even half of these names. Nevertheless, the system of American Viticultural Areas (AVA) and appellations attempts at least to certify that what’s on the label is in the bottle, and at most sophisticated consumers can use the information to predict value.

The San Francisco Wine Institute defines American Viticultural Areas as “delimited grape-growing areas distinguishable by geographic, climatic and historic features, and the boundaries have been delineated in a petition filed and accepted by the federal government. In size, AVAs range from extremely small to extremely large. AVAs are one kind of *appellation*, but not all *appellations* are AVAs.” An *appellation* can also be a political designation, such as the name of a country, the name of a state or states, the name of a county or counties within a state.” But regardless whether the name is an AVA or an *appellation*, the law governs what percentage of the grapes must originate in the place named on the label and mandates that the wine be made in that location, among other restrictions.

Because some AVAs are gargantuan, critics feel that the system is only marginally helpful to consumers. For instance, the Ohio River Valley AVA includes Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia, an area of 26,000 square miles. Knowing that a wine came from somewhere in that area is helpful only in that we know that it wasn’t made in China. Clearly, the more winegrapes that are concentrated in an area, the more meaningful AVAs become, depending how much homework the consumer has done.

North Coast

For instance, the large “North Coast” AVA in California covers more than three million acres and includes Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, and Lake counties, and parts of Marin and Solano counties, an area about 100 miles long and 50 miles wide, with about 730 wineries located within a number of smaller AVAs. Roughly half the wine production in California comes from this area. Seeing “North Coast” on the label tells us that the grapes were sourced from two or more of these premium wine-producing counties and is probably fairly good. The smaller the appellation, the more we know about the wine, as long as we know something about the appellation. If the label says Napa Valley, we can assume that the wine will be even better than a “North Coast” wine because “North Coast” designates a much larger area. The Napa Valley AVA includes 14 smaller AVAs, such as Howell Mountain, Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena, among others. Without knowing anything about these specific areas, we wouldn’t know much more about a particular Napa Valley wine, except that possibly higher altitude locations with the word “mountain” in the name, like Howell Mountain, might produce more intense, tannic wines than a warmer valley location, which might produce riper fruit. But generally, the smaller and more specific the location inscribed on the label, including the name of the vineyard, the more pride the winery exhibits in that bottle of wine and the more information is available should the consumer want to do the research. But the key word is “generally.” Many wineries name a “single vineyard” on the label because of its marketing value, and the particular vineyard may or may not have a reputation for quality.

Central Coast

The Central Coast AVA covers another large area that includes smaller AVAs, including the San Francisco Bay, the Monterey and San Benito AVA, and the San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara AVA. This entire Central Coast AVA contains 47,600 acres of winegrapes and 265 wineries. Of course, these three areas include even smaller AVAs and appellations (place names). The northern San Francisco Bay AVA covers Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, San Francisco, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Cruz counties with about 5,000 acres of planted vineyards and more than 100 wineries. The area is cooled by the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean with warm days and cool night, classic grape growing conditions. The central part of the Central Coast AVA covers Monterey and San Benito counties with 38,200 acres of wine grapes and

75 wineries and growers. The Monterey Bay cools this area and rainfall is less than more northern areas. Much of the land is flat with rolling hills and accommodates large vineyards. In fact the largest contiguous vineyard in the world, San Bernabe, is located here with 8,700 acres. The southernmost part of the Central Coast AVA is San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara with 44,000 acres and 90 wineries. San Luis Obispo County is generally without clouds, fog, or severe winds, but nighttime temperatures nevertheless drop by 40 degrees because of the area’s proximity to the ocean. Santa Barbara County is influenced by the coastal range of mountains that turns abruptly and forms an unusual east-west channel to the Pacific Ocean.

Southern California Region

The Southern California region extends from north of the city of Los Angeles to the southern border of California below the city of San Diego and includes five AVAs and 44 wineries. Although this area is influenced by the Pacific Ocean, temperatures are generally quite warm.

Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys and the Delta and Sierra Foothills

The vast interior valley of California, normally called the “Central Valley,” where giant agricultural corporations farm huge tracts of land, consists of the Sacramento Valley in the north and the San Joaquin Valley in the south. Although these two valleys are not designated AVAs, they produce a dramatic 71 percent of the state’s winegrapes, including the Delta area, located where the two valleys meet. But parts of the Delta, only 100 miles east of San Francisco, are capable of producing premium winegrapes because as temperatures rise in the vast interior valley, cool maritime breezes are pulled from the San Francisco Bay through the Delta, cooling the area, which allows the grapes to hang longer on the vines for premium flavors. On the other hand, without any cooling influences the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys are home to mass produced wines which often end up in jugs or boxes, including French Colombard, Chardonnay, and Zinfandel (as in White Zinfandel). The Sierra Foothills AVA is another premium region in the eastern part of the state, cooled by higher altitudes and descending cool streams from the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

Just like real estate, the viticultural mantra is location, location, location. And we, as consumers, can understand to a greater degree what is locked up in the bottle on the shelf if we know some geography. But it is also true that the AVA system is a work in progress.