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Carneros Wineries And Wines

By Benjamin Bicais

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Although Carneros Wineries are located in both southern Napa and Sonoma Counties, the region has always had its own unique identity. Being a huge Pinot Noir fan, I really enjoy exploring new, interesting wines from this region.

Carneros is an example of an AVA that has a more uniform terroir than most. Whereas the borders of some AVAs have been extended beyond their natural climactic boundaries because of politics and influence, Carneros resisted this all too common tendency.

History

During the Spanish era of California, the region was a natural place for settlement in the North Bay due to its proximity to San Francisco, and accessibility by water routes. When General Vallejo secularized the Spanish Missions in 1834, he divided the region amongst several of his cronies. The area was initially developed to produce subsistence crops and livestock.

The first vineyards were planted in the 1830s, and Carneros Wineries flourished for many decades until phylloxera devastated the region's grapes along with most vineyards throughout California.

Prohibition appeared to be the last nail in the coffin for Carneros Wineries. After this unfortunate law's repeal, Andre Tchelistcheff and Louis M. Martini took an interest in the region's unique climate. Investment in Carneros Wineries was slow until the 1970s when it began to surge with the rest of the Napa Valley.

Terroir

Regular fog derived from the San Pablo Bay and Napa River has a cooling effect on the region. Wind is a constant factor, and it blows relatively unobstructed throughout most of the AVA.

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Additionally, rainfall is relatively scarce, causing most Carneros Wineries and growers to irrigate their crops. The lack of abundant fresh water as well as the encroachment of sea water into some parts of the ground inhibit rampant vineyard expansion.

As one moves north from the San Pablo Bay, rolling hills begin to replace the extremely flat terrain in the south. There are a few hills that rise to 1000 feet, but they do little to shield the wind and fog. Because of Carneros' consistent climate, certain varieties grow in a very methodical manner.

A multitude of fossilized sea life exists in the soil, and is reminiscent of when the San Pablo Bay covered much of the region. The soil has relatively low fertility, giving grape vines only enough nourishment to focus on scarce, concentrated fruit. The soils of Carneros are generally made of relatively compact clay and are quite shallow.

Varietals, Wines, and Wineries

Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are quite compatible with the terroir of Carneros, and the AVA produces some great examples of these two varieties. About 80% of the grapes produced here are either Pinot Noir or Chardonnay. Carneros Wineries also produce some excellent sparkling wines. Some parts of the region have also had a degree of success producing Merlot and Syrah in the northern, slightly warmer parts of the AVA.

Benjamin Bicais is the webmaster of <http://www.california-wine-tours-and-accessories>. This site contains original articles about California Wine Regions, and general wine knowledge.

Sonoma Valley Wineries And Wines

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Although many AVAs in Sonoma County are well-known for one or two specific varieties, the Sonoma Valley enjoys diverse terroir, and successfully grows many different grape types. The Sonoma Valley AVA was established in 1982, and is approximately 160 square miles. About 28,000 acres are planted with vineyards.

History

The history of viticulture in the Sonoma Valley began when a Franciscan Padre named Jose Altimira established the Sonoma Mission in 1823. This was the last, and northernmost Spanish Mission built in California. Altimira established the first of the Sonoma Valley Wineries, and simple wines were produced for ecclesiastical purposes.

After Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1835, General Vallejo was sent by the new government to secularize the Sonoma Mission and its surrounding properties. The Bear Flag Revolt

occurred 11 years later, and authority shifted to the United States Government shortly thereafter.

Agoston Harazsthy founded the first commercial Sonoma Valley Winery in 1857. Harazsthy experimented with different vitis vinifera varietals and greatly increased the perception of the Sonoma Valley as a quality wine region. Although Harazsthy's winery ultimately went bankrupt, it laid the foundation for future wine producers. Because of his contributions to Sonoma viticulture, Harazsthy is known as the "Father of the California Wine Industry".

The combined devastation of Phylloxera and Prohibition eliminated all but the most hearty and innovative Sonoma Valley Wineries. Sebastiani was able to persevere due to a contract with the Church to make wine. However, most vineyards were converted to other crops or used to raise livestock.

Despite the fact that the Sonoma Valley AVA has a long history of winemaking, it was not until the 1970s that quality wine production became widespread. The legacy of Phylloxera and Prohibition caused the region to stagnate for over a generation. Between the repeal of Prohibition and the renaissance of the 1970s, Sonoma Valley Wineries primarily produced jug wine.

During the 1970s, renowned wineries such as Gundlach–Bundschu, and Chateau St. Jean experimented successfully with several different varietals. As a result, one varietal does not dominate production as Cabernet Sauvignon does in the Rutherford and Oakville AVAs.

Terroir

The terroir of the Sonoma Valley AVA is dominated by unpredictable fog patterns. A substantial amount of fog from the Southern San Pablo Bay regularly covers the region. Additionally, a lesser amount of fog creeps through a gap in the mountains near Santa Rosa in the north.

The Southern Sonoma Valley is very cool and includes the eastern part of the Carneros AVA. Temperature steadily rise as one travels north. The town of Sonoma is located about one-third of the way north within the AVA and has a moderate, pleasant climate. The northern towns of Glen Ellen and Kenwood are substantially warmer.

Wines, Wineries, and Varietals

As alluded to earlier, unpredictable fog patterns make it difficult to typecast specific areas in the Sonoma Valley AVA as being suited to particular varietals. Although exceptions abound, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay generally thrive in the southern part of the Appellation. At the same time, there are areas around Kenwood in the northern part of the AVA that produce great Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Pinot Noir from Sonoma Valley varies dramatically from the south to the north. Northern Pinots have almost Rhone-like characteristics, while southern Pinots are lighter and more reminiscent of production from the Russian River Valley.

The eastern hills of the valley below Sonoma Mountain are increasingly best known for Zinfandel.

McCrea Vineyards is an exceptional example of this production. While great Cabernet Sauvignon can also be found on the Eastern Sonoma Mountain, Louis M Martini's Monte Rosso in the Western Mayacamas Mountains has arguably been the most consistently excellent Cab grown by any Sonoma Valley Winery. Exceptional Gewurztraminers and Sauvignon Blancs are also produced in the Sonoma Valley AVA.

Ben Bicais lives in the Napa Valley and is the webmaster of <http://www.california-wine-tours-and-accessories.com>



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