

Are AVA's - Another Value Assumption?

Some, perhaps many, of the most sophisticated wine lovers will admit having difficulty with the understanding of the intricacies dwelling in European wine appellations of origins. Every major winegrowing nation has their own idea embracing the virtues of certain *terroir*. Some edit elements rather often, such as the similar French AOC and Italian DOC - now AOP and DOP respectively. It's confusing stuff but within the precision limits of European origin borders are some rigid controls of production that can provide useful consumer information beyond just a map location.

Of What Value are AVA's?

There are some winegrowers and even some wine gurus who rail upon the importance of one or another American Viticultural Area (AVA) on a label. My view is that AVA's are little more than geography. Along with the meaningless all-encompassing "American" and individual political state names distinguishing U.S. wine sources are more than 200 TTB approved AVAs. Some of them are huge areas such as the Upper Mississippi River Viticultural Area that is about 120 miles wide and 225 miles long. When we see the "California Central Coast" AVA posted on a label it tells us simply that it was grown within the vast 100,000-acre 250 mile-long stretch south from Monterey. It helps when vintners there disclose which of the several counties are involved in a given wine - and even more so when they define which of the more than 30 sub-districts that reach from the cool Pacific coastal climate to the scorching upper plains. But, for the most part, they still remain just places on the map. Wine from each and all of them can be made in any manner that a vintner may choose. There are no production standards even close to those enforced by European national, regional, local and association regulations.

Napa and Sonoma are admittedly among some finite AVA names that are magic for wine producers and marketers, but I wouldn't pay their typical lofty prices with only that information. Sure, the more defined venues housed in the Napa and Sonoma counties, along with specific vineyard sites, are glamorous label statements. But who in a blind tasting of ten comparable quality red wines grown in these two locales would bet their retirement assets upon which five were grown in the Napa Valley and which five in the Sonoma Valley? Reality is that for all of

the many nice epithets on AVA wine labels it is the integration of variety or propriety blend, vintage and vintner identities that make any AVA meaningful.

More to Wine than the AVA

For my money it is essential upon an American-produced wine label that variety or blend elements be made clear. Our taste buds immediately go into anticipation when we read these. Anyone who has enjoyed the movie, *Sideways*, will recall the passion that separated the virtues of Pinot Noir and misfortunes of Merlot - but little concern for either Los Olivos or Happy Canyon or any other Santa Barbara AVA sub-district.

While vintage is elemental on the label of all premium wine estates and especially where AOP, DOP and similar systems enforce limits on fertilization, irrigation, crop maxima, winemaking practices etc., however, there is generally less vintage distinction in most AVA's. To be sure, there are some exceptions but, with all due respect to the naysayers, the comparative freedom

of U.S. commercial winegrowing renders a measure of stability among vintage years. In any case, we can be assured that any major variation in vintage quality anywhere in the world will be readily reported by the media.

Lastly, it is the vintner's name that may be the most important label statement of all. Enthusiasts who can afford the time and expense necessary to visit many of the more than 7,000 wineries operating in our country can gain detailed insights to their integrity. Tours and interactions with personnel and facilities, along with the all-important on-site tastings are golden inputs. Continuing relationships with newsletters, websites, social media and revisits can serve to either maintain, gain or lose confidence in each producer.

Dr. Vine has authored four wine books and is Purdue University's Professor of Enology Emeritus. He recently retired after 21 years as the Wine Consultant for American Airlines.



The preferred cracker
of Tasters Guild.

THE PREFERRED CRACKER OF WINE ENTHUSIASTS

**BRENNER
WAFERS**

Available in fine specialty stores and supermarkets. For information call
1-800-668-3273 or email consumerresponse@darefoods.com