

THE NAPA VALLEY: AN EMBLEMATIC CALIFORNIA COASTAL VALLEY VINEYARD LANDSCAPE (USA)

(NAPA VALLEY : UN PAYSAGE VITICOLE EMBLÉMATIQUE DE VALLÉE CÔTIÈRE
DE CALIFORNIE, ETATS-UNIS D'AMÉRIQUE)

Richard Mendelson, Esq., rpm@dpfnapa.com
Deborah Quick, Esq., DQuick@dpfnapa.com
Dickenson, Peatman & Fogarty, www.dpfnapa.com

INTRODUCTION

California's Napa Valley, situated at the northern end of the San Francisco Bay and 30 miles from the Pacific Ocean, is the most famous wine appellation in the United States. This small valley, 35 miles long and five miles wide at its broadest point, has produced some of North America's finest wine grapes from the 1850s to the present. Today it contains approximately 43,000 acres of vineyards along the valley floor, in the foothills and mountains flanking the main valley, and in the sub-valleys in the eastern part of Napa County.

The uniqueness of this vineyard landscape is determined, in large part, by the great richness and variety of its geology, soil types, micro-climates and topography. The recognition of the Napa Valley as an American viticultural area in 1981 and the subsequent establishment of 12 sub-appellations wholly within the Napa Valley³² are evidence of this diversity.

The Valley's long history as a North American wine producing region is reflected in the integration of wineries of all sizes and ages into the vineyard landscape. From the earliest days of winemaking in the Valley, European immigrants and European winemaking traditions have played a formative role in the Valley's development. The broad range of architectural styles of the Valley's wineries demonstrates the diverse, multicultural contributions made over many generations.

The Valley's vineyards and wineries have maintained a remarkable continuity in the face of cyclical market forces, recurrent threats from vine pests and diseases and the unique North American experience of Prohibition. The continued vitality of the Valley's wine economy and the contributions made by countless immigrants to the vineyard landscape that supports that economy represent an outstanding example of a North American vineyard landscape.

The Valley is directly impacted by its proximity to a major urban center, the San Francisco Bay metropolitan area. It is likely that only the highest quality grapes, capable of making wines of exceptional quality, had any chance of inspiring the political actions necessary to protect this irreplaceable vineyard resource from unchecked suburban development³³ and rampant tourism.

³² In 1978, the U.S. government began the process of recognizing American viticultural areas ("AVAs"), defined as delimited grape growing regions with geographical features (soil, climate, elevation, physical features, etc.) that distinguish the area viticulturally from surrounding areas. 27 CFR 4.25a(e)(1); 27 CFR 9.3, et seq. An AVA can be used on a wine label if, inter alia, at least 85% of the grapes in that wine were grown inside the AVA.

³³ California has lost many of its historically important coastal vineyard landscapes to urban and suburban expansion, among them the vineyards of Santa Clara, Alameda and Los Angeles counties. The central coast vineyards of Sonoma, Contra Costa, Santa Barbara, Monterey and San Benito counties are all threatened by urbanization.

The Valley's vineyard landscape benefits from some of the United States' earliest agricultural land protection laws and regulations.

A CENTURY AND A HALF OF GRAPE GROWING AND WINE MAKING

Vineyards were introduced to the Valley with the earliest European settlement and within a half century came to dominate the Valley's landscape, as they do to this day. The first vines were planted in the Napa Valley sometime between 1838 and 1845 by settler George Yount. (Heintz, 1990, 25, 29) The discovery of gold in the Sierra foothills in 1848 brought a vast number of immigrants to California, including many from the wine grape growing regions of Europe, particularly France and southern Germany, who had familiarity with, and direct knowledge of, wine grape growing and winemaking. Thirsty miners, packed into the new city of San Francisco, provided a ready market for domestic wines. By the mid-1850s, there were regular, commercial shipments of wine from Napa to San Francisco. (Heintz, 1990, 45). The completion of a railroad the length of the Valley, from the city of Napa to the town of Calistoga, in October, 1868, accentuated the easy accessibility of the Napa Valley to the growing city of San Francisco.

Vineyard and winery development increased during the 1870s and early 1880s until, in 1884, the relatively small County of Napa surpassed Los Angeles County as the state's leading producer of dry table wines. (Heintz, 1990, 176). By 1886 the Valley had an estimated 175 wineries. The vast majority of the early vineyards in the County were planted on the Valley floor, but as early as the 1870s, some vineyardists planted hillside vineyards, seeking higher grape quality. The Valley's reputation for fine wines spread around the country and the world. At the 1889 Paris World's Fair, the Valley's wines captured 20 of 34 medals awarded to California wines. (Heintz, 1999, 149).

Phylloxera ravaged the Valley's vineyards in the 1880s and 1890s. Although resistant rootstocks were identified and vineyards were replanted beginning around the turn of the century, the specter of Prohibition presented yet another threat to the wine economy. In 1919, the 18th Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed, forbidding the manufacture, sale or transportation of alcoholic beverages. Interestingly, viticulture continued during Prohibition, with grapes sold and shipped by rail to home winemakers (each family was allowed to make 200 gallons for its own use).

The 21st Amendment to the United States Constitution ended Prohibition in 1933. Yet the revival of the United States wine industry was slowed by World War II. Only three new wineries opened their doors in the Napa Valley between the end of Prohibition and 1966. Since that time, however, the Valley's wine economy has burgeoned. Today the Valley is home to more than 300 wineries.

GEOGRAPHIC SPECIFICITY AND VITICULTURAL UNIQUENESS

The complex geology of the Napa Valley is, in large part, determined by its location on the seismically unstable western edge of the North American continent. The Franciscan Formation, the Great Valley Sequence and the Napa Volcanics make up most of the bedrock elements that determine the chemical and mineral elements of the Valley's soils. Seismic forces along the San Andreas fault brought these three elements together and formed the Mayacamas and Vaca Mountains that border the main valley on, respectively, its western and eastern sides. The chemical and mineral content of the bedrock affects not only the nutrient status of soils, but also their ability to retain water and the chemical content of the groundwater upon which most of the Valley's vineyards depend for irrigation. (Swinchatt, 2002).

The extreme variety of the 33 distinct soils series which have evolved from these bedrock components are attributable to the complex interplay of the Valley's varied topography, climate and biological resources. (Skinner, *Soils*, 2003). The small size of the Valley accentuates the effect of its topography in relationship to the climate.

Climate in the Valley varies along a complex set of variables. These include the marine influences of the San Francisco Bay and Pacific Ocean to the southwest of the Valley, most marked in the Carneros region, and elevation variations from the Valley floor to the crests of its mountain ranges. In general, warm dry summer daytime conditions are regularly followed by the influx of a cooling marine fog layer at the close of each day. A dry season extending from April to November each year allows vineyardists to carefully calibrate the water stress of the vines, adding another tool to determine grape quality. (Skinner, *Weather*, 2003).

Because of the wide range of viticultural conditions and the lack of any governmental controls over grape varietal selection, the Valley is home to a wide array of grape varieties, including principally Cabernet Sauvignon (16,716 planted acres in 2002) and Chardonnay (7,778 planted acres in 2002).

LEGAL PROTECTIONS

A series of national, regional and local laws and regulations ensure the conservation of the Napa Valley vineyard landscape in the face of intense pressures from urbanization and tourism.

In 1965 a California law created a mechanism for individual counties to protect agricultural land through controls on local property taxation. In order to enact these protections, counties were required to establish "Agricultural Preserve" districts, which Napa County did in 1968. The Agricultural Preserve still covers most of the Valley floor, preventing individual parcels of less than 40 acres from being created and allowing property owners to pay taxes based upon the value of the land as farmland, rather than as land available for subdivision and urban development. In addition, most of the foothills and mountain lands of the county are zoned as Agricultural Watershed districts and are subject to a minimum parcel size of 160 acres, which further restricts residential development potential in the county.

In 1982 Napa County established urban growth boundaries which limit the development of urban infrastructure outside established municipal boundaries. In 1990 the voters of the county adopted, by initiative, restrictions on the conversion of agricultural land to urban uses, requiring until the year 2020 a county-wide vote on every proposal to convert an agricultural parcel to a non-agricultural use. In the same year, County government began to regulate more closely the establishment of new wineries and the expansion of existing wineries, restricting their commercial and industrial operations on agriculturally zoned lands, thus further protecting the Valley from encroaching urbanization and from the pressures of tourism.

In 1991 agriculturalists and environmentalists worked together to put in place regulations designed to minimize the environmental impacts of vineyard development. Inspired by the continuing development of hillside vineyards, these local regulations mandate the inclusion of erosion control measures, riparian and wildlife corridors and other environmental controls in vineyard development and operations.

In 2003, the Napa Valley Vintners Association, which includes 220 Valley wineries as members, commenced a groundbreaking, voluntary certification program whereby any winery can use a “100% Napa Valley” logo on wine produced and bottled in the Napa Valley from 100% Napa Valley grapes. This 100% standard for Napa Valley origin is stricter than applicable federal law and serves as a guarantee of authenticity for wine consumers.

CONCLUSION

Napa Valley supports a thriving, agriculturally based economy in close proximity to a major urban center. The Valley is at the forefront of the movement to preserve and protect vineyards from the pressures of urbanization and tourism. The Valley also is leading the way to ensuring that vineyard development and operations are environmentally sensitive.

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