

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Appellation Confusion

What is the real meaning, to wine lovers, of appellations that are so large they have many different climates and soils?

This dilemma has faced many wine-growing areas in the New World, although not in Europe, where regional growing areas were defined hundreds of years ago.

In most of the major wine areas of Europe, rules dictate which grapes can be planted where; other grapes are not permitted. In Europe, there's little controversy about viticultural borders, and laws go back eons and boundary changes are rare.

(Wine making rules, however, often change based on modern considerations.)

In the United States, many American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) have been drawn up haphazardly. Some are valid, but some are simply silly. Boundary compromises usually are made based social or political considerations and often have nothing to do with wine style.

Sonoma Coast is one of the silly AVAs.

Over the last two decades, Sonoma County has been trying to deal with the knotty problem relating to this vast and amorphous appellation.

Some people say it's a cool region. Others say it's too huge to even be an AVA with any true meaning for consumers.

It ranges from San Pablo Bay in the south all the way to the Pacific Ocean at Mendocino County and has about 25,000 planted acres— about a

third of all plantings in the county.

Because it is so large, its overall meaning is vague. The Lakeville area to the south is radically different from the True Sonoma Coast well to the north, point out locals.

It has been more than a decade since those in various areas of Sonoma Coast began talking about drawing up boundaries for numerous sub-AVAs. In theory, each would have more meaning than the larger AVA and would help consumers and the trade understand each much better.

Everyone agreed it would be best sub-divide Sonoma Coast into regions that have much clearer definitions than that region now does.

Four days ago, the first substantive effort to sub-divide Sonoma Coast was revealed when a proposal was announced that would create what we now already call the Petaluma Gap.

Petaluma Gap has less than a fifth of the total of Sonoma Coast. (Grape acreage figures for large areas are extremely hard to verify. Some vineyards are owned by independent growers, others are owned by wineries. Each group has different motivations for reporting acreages.)

The proposal is being sent to the U.S. Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB). It could be two years or more before formal approval is given.

As outlined in a San Francisco press briefing on Monday, the plan would give wineries using fruit from the new AVA a name to use on wine

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Alsace & Alto Adige

Two areas of the wine world that have been on the edge of controversy over what they are exist in north-east France and northern Italy.

For a time, the two regions were located respectively in western Germany and southern Austria.

Two world wars left both regions in disputed hands until 1945. To this day, the effective language in both regions is German, even though they have been inside of France and Italy, respectively, since the end of World War II.

If you visit the two regions, names that sound German appear on many businesses and restaurants in both.

Also, German names still populate the Olympic ski teams from both France and Italy.

This split personality has led both nations to depart, to a degree, from the styles of wine made in Germany each year.

Because of this divergence of style, even though the wines of both Alto Adige and Alsace are sensational, neither area has gotten the worldwide acclaim for its wines that Germany does for its sensational Rieslings. As a result, German Rieslings are a bit pricier.

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Appellation

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bottles that will aid consumers in their buying decisions. (A cynic would say that some wineries may well use the name to justify higher prices for some of the wines.)

The boundary in the proposal by the Petaluma Gap Winegrowers Alliance ranges from Highway 37 in the south (so it includes some vine acreage in Marin County) north to include Lakeville Highway and on to Rohnert Park. The boundary then runs west to the coast just a bit north of Bodega Bay, and then drops down the Pacific coast along Tomales Bay, in an area now so cool that few vines are planted there.

It is clearly a cold region with sea-wind influences. As such, there is no question Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are the major players, with the latter already making some of the most spectacular Pinots in California.

And Syrah can grow here with great style. One of these, a David Ramey Syrah designated Rogers Vineyard, is already one of the state's finest.

The fact that the name Petaluma Gap appears almost nowhere on wine labels is TTB's way of asserting its mindless veto power over the logic that drives growers and wine makers.

Locals have used the term for decades.

Petaluma Gap offers wineries a

chance for a Pinot Noir distinctiveness that will someday (if it isn't already here) command attention as simply sensational.

Petaluma Gap Chardonnays I have tasted over the last few years can be truly dramatic, although other areas of the state remain just a bit ahead of the Gap with that variety.

Members of the Petaluma Gap Winegrowers admit that portions of its proposed map may overlap other areas—as do many appellations in other areas of the state. As such, some negotiation may be necessary

Pinot: the large Gap's Crown vineyard of William Price III. Its fruit, in high demand, sells for a lot of money. The result: many of the wines are pricey.

I tasted through a small lineup of Petaluma Gap wines on Monday (see Tasting Notes) and noted that the cool climate and high acids call for most wineries to put Chardonnays through malolactic fermentation. As such they are fairly expansive wines with citrus (lemon peel and grapefruit) in aroma.

The Pinots are more complex than many other PN areas of



with wineries and growers Russian River Valley, West Sonoma Coast, True Sonoma Coast, and Freestone.

One Gap vineyard already has made a name for itself, notably with

California (depending on wine maker variations). They generally show leafy, soil-y aromas and classic richness with great acid.

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Wine of the Week

2012 **Bailiwick** Pinot Noir, Marin County, Kendrick-Chileno Valley Vineyard, "Borderline" (\$28): Bright red cherry and elegant raspberry fruit mark this youthful, pale-in-color red wine that has a classic aromas of a young Beaune, a silky entry, and a finish of pure grace. This shorter-term Pinot Noir with a slightly high pH (3.71) was made by wine makers Paul and Bryan Vais. It is off one of the Petaluma Gap's southernmost vineyards. Good value.

A Time for Ice Wine?

With the current cold weather in much of the East and Midwest, it might seem to be the perfect time to harvest grapes for ice wine.

But reports from those areas of the country are that temperatures fell so fast that many regions couldn't even pick fruit for table wines. We'll have a report soon on this topic.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open over the last three days.

Exceptional

2012 **LaFollette** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, Sangiacomo-Roberts Road Vineyard (\$40): Paler in color than many Pinots, but with a superb strawberry/rustic aroma that is already complex(!) and has superb potential. 300 cases produced. Excellent value.

2012 **Wind Gap** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, Sunchase Vineyard (\$60): Earthy/Burgundian aroma with a rich fruit (red cherry) entry, and a tart mid-palate and complex notes in the finish. Needs at least 2-4 more years before it will show its potential. From iconic wine maker Pax Mahle; 161 cases.

2013 **Pfendler** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, Estate (\$45): Wine maker Greg Bjornstad used slightly riper fruit (14.5% alcohol) to make a very fruit-driven cherry-scented wine that is still extremely young.

350 cases produced.

2012 **Couloir** Pinot Noir, Marin County, Chileno Valley Vineyard (\$44): Red cherry/fresh raspberry jam mark the aroma of this slightly lighter wine that has a trace of leafy-ness and a faint earthy note. Only 13.8% alcohol with excellent acid balance. 193 cases produced.

2012 **Fogline** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, Sunchase Vineyard (\$42): The reined-in nature of this wine makes it hard to compare to more florid versions, but the undeveloped flavors and slightly harder tannins do yield after some aeration, and the low 3.44 pH will give the wine some cellar length. Evan Pontoriero and Brent Bessire made 195 cases produced.

2013 **Keller** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, El Coro Vineyard (\$52): Black pepper precursors mark the aroma of this rustic, charming wine

that is still awkward and needs a bit of time. Alex Holman made 396 cases.

Highly Recommended

2013 **Sojourn** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, Gap's Crown Vineyard (\$54): The aroma of red and dark berries is impressive, but I can't determine if the mid-palate softness and slightly harder tannins will come around. 825 cases produced.

Notes:

All of the above wines could carry a Petaluma Gap appellation if the AVA proposal had already been approved. Also, note the scant quantities of each of the above wines. Few large vineyards exist in the Petaluma Gap. Though 75% of plantings are Pinot Noir, high prices limit production. Best bet: Find the winery websites to order wines direct.

Napa Valley's sub-AVAs

Napa Valley is a classic case of the complete loss of sub-regional identity, which appears to have been willful.

Anyone who has ever visited the area would suggest there is virtually no difference between a red wine from Rutherford and one from Oakville. These two famous regions are separated by an imaginary line on a topo map. You can have a foot in one appellation and a foot in another.

Taking it a step further, locals will tell you there is a huge difference between red wines from Oakville on the west and Oakville East. Yet wine labels say Oakville, and do not tell you which area of Oakville is referenced.

Up against the hills, the sun sets far earlier each day because of the high Mayacamas mountains. Oakville East,

far across the valley, daily faces the setting sun for a lot longer than it does on the western side.

The valley has many such anomalies regarding its Cabernets. Twenty-five ago, we debated such things. We said Stag's Leap made a Cab with a silkier structure; mountain fruit was denser; Howell Mountain was more tannic, Spring Mountain was more varietal than was Diamond Mountain, and so forth.

But we seemed to run up against a brick wall when we asked Napa wine people for particulars. They didn't want any sub-regional characteristics discussed that could divert attention from Napa's main message:

"We make great Cabernets that should be compared with Bordeaux

(preferably First Growths) and buyers should pay a lot of money to get our wines." I call it intentional obfuscation.

Then they went ahead and made red wines that were so ungainly that any regional differences were lost in the rush to get a high score, thus neatly solving regional identity issues.

Bargain of the Week

2013 **Lindemans** Shiraz-Cabernet Sauvignon, South Eastern Australia, "Bin 55" (\$6): Dark berry fruit, faintly rustic, with a touch of oak (!) and a rich fruit mid-palate. This old standby is a simply great value in an approachable red. Great value.

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Look at a few of the parameters of all appellations: altitude, wind, fog, the influence of a large body of water, soil type, or another natural phenomenon—or a combination of various elements.

The meaning of each large AVA varies within its own boundaries and the smaller the area, the easier it is to be definitive about it. It's a key reason that most vineyard designations are more meaningful in terms of identifying local characteristics.

Not all appellations have real meaning for consumers. It depends on what each region offers. (For instance, it's possible to make Pinot Noir in a warm region, but why try? Most make only ordinary wines.) And also, a region's reputation depends on wine quality. Appellations that never make excellent wine are unlikely to make headlines.

When it was first proposed, in 2006, that the large (and warm)

Paso Robles appellation be subdivided into many smaller appellations, a legitimate question arose: Will a Paso Robles sub-AVA mean anything substantive to consumers?

More specifically, does the El Pomar AVA mean more than San Juan Creek? If so, how? Doesn't "east of Highway 101" and "west of Highway 101" offer Paso Robles buyers just as much information?

Finally, does anyone, except locals, really care about this?

An additional monkey wrench: Climate change has an as-yet unreported affect on the meaning of many AVAs. Take the well-known Carneros appellation, which for me got off to a rocky start.

When a portion of Highway 121 was renamed "Carneros Highway" a quarter century ago, locals said it was ideal for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

I agreed, but was sad that the area's third great grape, Merlot, was excluded from the area's marketing

plans. Even though many wine makers knew I was right, Merlot wasn't to be mentioned. Carneros locals told me off the record they didn't want to hear the word. They said it could divert attention from the real message: Carneros was California's Burgundy.

In the last decade, Carneros has gotten warmer. A case could be made that Carneros is the state wine industry's worst climate-change victim. (Space limitations prevent explication here.)

As a result a strong case could be made that Carneros has now been bypassed in Pinot Noir quality by the Petaluma Gap. Carneros PNs seem to be made in a style that it never displayed in the 1970s.

Yet its Merlot continues to make great wine, although from small plantings.

That message has gained little traction over the years, even though it's part of the Carneros's AVA character.

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