
Chapter 33

California



Climate and Grape Growing

- Latitude (less of a factor) than **cooling influences** (esp. California Ocean Currents)
 - N of LA - mountains shield vineyards from cooling ocean effects
 - Cold air + fog = lower temp at night/takes a while to heat in the day (so dramatic = some years grapes struggle to ripen)
 - Valleys at right angles to ocean (Santa Barbera/Monterey) = funnels cold air
- Risk: Lack of rain in the ripening season
 - Solution: Drip irrigation widely used
- Lack of autumn rain = grapes remain on the vine 'hang time' = extra concentrated flavours/high sugar levels.

Grape Varieties and Wine Styles

Black grapes

Cabernet Sauvignon

- Full-body/ concentrated cassis flavours/ spice aromas (new oak)
- Some prod = less rich style - fresh blackcurrent

Zinfandel

- Bunches ripen unevenly (some grapes raisinated)
- Concentrated/ full-body/ high-alcohol/ some residual sugar/ red + black fruits/ dried berries/ liquorice
- White Zinfandel = early-picked grapes = fruity/ pale/ med-sweet/ low alcohol

Merlot

- Approachable = soft tannins/ ripe black fruit
- San Joaquin (Central Valley) = high volume, inexpensive
- (Cooler sites) = Monterey/ North Coast Wapa/ Sonoma = high quality/ deep colour/ soft tannin/ luscious body/ high alcohol/ plum/ blackberry

Pinot Noir

- Moderate regions - Russian River Valley/ Los Carneros/ Santa Maria Valley
- Light in colour/ gamey/ vegetal → rich ripe red fruit (strawberry/cherry)/ sweet spice (oak)

Syrah

- Full-body/rich → lean/peppery

White grapes

Chardonnay

- Most planted variety
- Inexpensive, high-vol (Central Valley) = fruity. Low-med acid/ toast (oak chips/staves)
- Traditionally high quality chard = full-body/ high alcohol/ low acid/ oak/ hazelnut/ butter/ peach/ banana
- The trend now for restrained oak use (Los Carneros/Russian River Valley)

Sauvignon Blanc

- Best = coastal regions - high acid/ripe citrus
- Affordable - warmer inland (Central Valley)
- Fumé Blanc (oaked style) - some prod use for unoaked

North Coast: Napa

N of San Francisco

Strong ocean influence - affects diurnal range

NAPA COUNTY

- **Napa Valley AVA** (N → S, 50km long, 5km wide)
 - W = Mayacamas Mountains/ E = Vaca Mountains
 - Cooling influences → San Pablo Bay Fog → South of valley
- **Los Carneros AVA**
 - S most vineyard area - overlaps with Sonoma
 - Cool - *Pinot Noir/Chardonnay*
 - Some sparkling prod
- **Stag's Leap District AVA/ Yountville AVA/ Oakville AVA/ Rutherford AVA**
 - *Cab Sauv* = warm enough to ripen
 - Rutherford = warmest - most powerful wines
 - *Merlot/ Chard/ SB* (ripe tropical fruit) - also planted
- **Saint Helena AVA/ Castiloga AVA**
 - Warm daytime = concentrated/full-body wines
 - Cool air through Chalk Hill gap (Mayacoma Mountains) - cooler night temp - some acid retained
 - *Cab Sauv/ Zin/ Syrah*

Some vineyards cooled at altitude above fog layer:

- **Howell Mountain AVA/ Atlas Peak AVA**
 - West-facing aspect, warmer, more sun. Wine higher alcohol, fuller body.
- **Diamond Mountain AVA/ Spring Mountain AVA/ Mount Veeder AVA**
 - East-facing aspect

Valley sides = greater tannin/less richness

Cab Sauv (main variety) - *Merlot/ Cab Franc/ Zin*

Chard = Stone fruit/citrus/high acid

North Coast: Sonoma and Mendocino Counties

SONOMA COUNTY (larger than Napa) - lots of climates

- **Russian River Valley AVA**
 - Cooled by Petaluma Gap (break in the coastal ranges) - cool/foggy
 - Elegant *Pinot Noir* and *Chardonnay* - also sparkling prod
- **Dry Creek Valley AVA**
 - Densely planted (hillside + valley floor)
 - Hillside (above fog) = *Old Vine Zinfandel*
 - Valley floor = *Sauv Blanc/Rhône V/Cab Sauv*
- **Alexander Valley AVA**
 - Warmer; wines full-bodied, softer texture - *Cab Sauv*, some international varieties
- **Sonoma Coast AVA**
 - Pacific Ocean influence - vines planted s-facing slopes to ripen grapes
- **Sonoma Valley AVA**
 - Ocean breezes/San Pablo fog
 - *Old Vine Zinfandel* + high quality *Chardonnay*

MENDOCINO COUNTY (large and diverse)

- **Anderson Valley AVA**
 - Cool climate, aromatic whites (*Riesling/Gewürztraminer* and sparkling)
- **Mendocino AVA**
 - Warm/dry (protected by coastal hills up to 900 metres)

Full body/soft tannins = *Cab Sauv/Zinfandel/Syrah*

Central Coast

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS AND MONTEREY

- **Santa Cruz Mountains AVA**
 - Diverse region (hillside location with infertile soils)
 - Moderate climate = elegant *Cab Sauv*, some *PN/Chard* too.
- **Monterey AVA**
 - Follows Salinas Valley - strong ocean influence
 - Close to coast = *PN/Chard* - cooling breeze
 - Further along = *Cab Sauv/Merlot/Syrah*
 - **Santa Lucia Highlands AVA**
 - (Slopes) High quality *Chard* = citrus/tropical fruit/balanced acid

SAN LUIS OBISPO AND SANTA BARBARA COUNTIES

Mountains E-W (not N-S) = cool ocean breezes onto mainland

- **Paso Robles AVA**
 - East: hot/sunny/fertile soil - high vol fruity wines
 - West: cooling marine air - high quality *Zinfandel* + *Rhône V* (*Cab Sauv*/*Merlot*/*Syrah* too)
 - **Santa Maria Valley AVA**
 - Cooler = premium *PN/Chard*
 - Fog = covers vineyards = concentrated fruit/high acid
 - **Santa Ynez Valley AVA**
 - Slightly warmer - *Bordeaux V/Syrah*
 - **Sta Rita Hills AVA**
 - W of Santa Ynez = cooler/ocean influence
 - *PN/Chard/aromatic varieties*
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Central Valley

Encompasses Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys

Produces majority of Cal wine = high vol/inexpensive

Climate: hot/dry (irrigation used)

New grapes: *Rubired* + *Ruby Cabernet* (bred in California for these conditions)

Cab Sauv/*Merlot*/*Chard*/*Colombard*/*Chenin Blanc*/*Barbera* planted

- **Lodi AVA**
 - Middle of Central Valley
 - E of Sacramento Delta = cooling breezes from San Francisco Bay

Oldest/best *Zinfandel* vineyards

Multiple Choice Practice Questions

1) In which county would you find the Russian River Valley AVA?

- a) Napa
- b) Sonoma
- c) Mendocino
- d) Central Valley

2) In which AVA would you find the oldest *Zinfandel* vines?

- a) Lodi AVA
- b) Santa Maria Valley AVA
- c) Paso Robles AVA
- d) Sta Rita Hills AVA

3) Which region, found on the slopes of Monterey AVA, produces high quality, balanced Chardonnay with citrus and tropical fruit characteristics?

- a) Sta Rita Hills AVA
- b) Santa Maria Valley AVA
- c) Santa Lucia Highlands AVA
- d) Santa Ynez Valley AVA

4) Which white grape is the most planted variety in California?

- a) Sauvignon Blanc
- b) Ugni Blanc
- c) Fiano
- d) Chardonnay

5) Which of these AVAs is situated at an altitude above the fog layer in Napa?

- a) Stag's Leap District AVA
- b) Howell Mountain AVA
- c) Los Carneros AVA
- d) Saint Helena AVA

Answers

1. b) Sonoma

2. a) Lodi AVA

3. c) Santa Lucia Highlands AVA

4. d) Chardonnay

5. b) Howell Mountain AVA