

DRY CREEK, SONOMA



HAVING DECIDED to include California in this series of articles, I would never be forgiven by my friends in Sonoma if I did not start with the vineyards of that county—and how could I go past an American Viticultural Area (AVA) named Dry Creek?

Sonoma may not not be as well-known internationally as its more glamorous neighbour, but its wines can be just as good as the Napa's. Furthermore there is a greater range of mesoclimates in Sonoma than Napa and thus the potential range of wine styles is larger.

Sonoma County currently has close to 20,000 ha of vineyards (making it 30% larger than the Napa). In 1998, 133,000 tons of winegrapes were produced (53% red varieties). The major varieties (expressed as per cent of total winegrape production) were Chardonnay (38%), Cabernet Sauvignon (18%), Merlot (13%), Zinfandel (9%), Pinot Noir (8%) and Sauvignon Blanc (5%).

The vineyards of the Dry Creek AVA are planted in a valley which runs north and west from Healdsburg, where Dry Creek flows into the Russian River. The valley is tightly enclosed by mountains on all sides: it is 25 kilometres long but only 3 kilometres wide at its widest point.

The climate of the Sonoma region is influenced by its close proximity to the Pacific Ocean, which is only 30 kilometres or so to the west. Cool air is said to come up the Russian River valley from the Pacific and through the Petaluma gap from the south. However, in this regard Dry Creek is less influenced than some other sub-regions, such as Russian River, because it is tightly enclosed by mountains. Nevertheless, Dry Creek is coolest at the southern end, where it adjoins the Russian River AVA, and temperatures increase from south to north.

With respect to temperature, the climate of Dry Creek

is similar to Australian regions

▲ Traditional head-trained, spur-pruned Zinfandel

such as the Barossa and McLaren Vale (the MJT for Healdsburg is 21.9°C). However, the annual rainfall of 1,090 mm is approximately double that of comparable Australian regions. Furthermore, precipitation is more winter-dominant; only 10% falls in the period from April to September. Like all regions in northern California, Sonoma has a higher ratio of sunshine hours to temperature than comparable Australian regions, due to the influence of the cold northern Pacific waters, and a very slow decline of temperature from summer to autumn, resulting in relatively warm autumns (Gladstones 1992).

The soils of the hillsides and bench lands are dominated by a gravelly material called Dry Creek conglomerate, unique to this part of Sonoma. The soils of the valley floor, largely alluvial in origin, are deep and well-drained with water-retentive subsoils. These characteristics combined with a high winter rainfall make dryland viticulture possible in this area.


Dry Creek has about 2,400 ha of vineyards. Italian immigrants planted the early vineyards, particularly from the 1880s onwards. This tradition would appear to be reflected in the names of some of the prominent wineries, e.g. Rafanelli, Ferrari-Canaro, Pezzi-King. Many of these, however, are owned by relative newcomers to the region. The early growers planted Zinfandel and other red varieties of Italian origin. The main varieties today are Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and Sauvignon Blanc in order of importance. Chardonnay is relatively unimportant in this AVA. There is increasing interest in varieties such as Viognier, Marsanne, Shiraz, Mourvèdre, Grenache and Barbera.

Historically, Zinfandel was the main variety of Dry Creek: it may have been favoured by early growers because it was

easy to grow as a head-trained vine with spur pruning. Also, it has the ability to recover well after an early-season frost by producing a large 'second crop'. Paradoxically, it is this characteristic together with its tendency to uneven ripening and berry splitting which makes Zinfandel one of the most challenging varieties to grow. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was an over-supply of Zinfandel and prices were low. Consequently, economic considerations favoured Cabernet Sauvignon over Zinfandel. From the mid 1990s, however, Zinfandel has been resurgent as the fruit from the old head-trained vines has been in demand—good quality fruit is currently undersupplied. In many ways, the recent history of Zinfandel in California parallels that of Shiraz in Australia. The average price (\$A) per tonne in 1998 was \$2,730, \$2,448 and \$2,414 for Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Zinfandel respectively (converted from US tons to tonnes, based on an exchange rate of \$A 0.65 = \$US1.00.) (Sonoma County Agricultural Crop Report, 1998).

Red varieties tend to be grown on hillsides and benchlands, presumably because of the thermal advantages and relatively low vine vigour of these locations. White varieties are more predominant on the fertile soils of the valley floor and at the cooler southern end of the valley.

A large proportion of the Zinfandel is still grown as head-trained vines on low stakes and is spur-pruned. When trellised, it is trained to a VSP trellis and spur-pruned to 40 nodes per vine. Many new vineyards have been trained to unilateral cordons. With the exception of old Zinfandel vineyards, irrigation is common and is almost exclusively by drip. Only a small proportion of the vineyard area is mechanically harvested, and mechanical pruning is almost unknown. Less than 10% of the vineyard area of Sonoma and Napa counties is mechanically harvested because hand harvest costs are still relatively low compared to Australia. Rootstocks for phylloxera resistance are essential: Zinfandel is traditionally grown on Rupestris St George with 110R and 1103P used in new vineyards; for other varieties, 5C, 101-14 and 3309 are popular.

Chardonnay is typically harvested in early September, Zinfandel in mid October and Cabernet Sauvignon in late October. Old head-trained Zinfandel vineyards usually yield around 5 t/ha, 10 t/ha or more if trellised. According to many authorities, Sonoma, Dry Creek in particular, is one of the best locations in California for high quality wines from Zinfandel (Halliday 1993). Also, the wines of Cabernet Sauvignon are as good as those from many other regions of California. 

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