

Grapes: What's in a Name? (2)

(An Opinionated Multi-part Series about the Names of Wine, Grapes, Grape Areas and Wineries, number 23 in the overall series)

The Nation's Appellations

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms maintains a rigid list of area names that are allowed to be placed on wine labels to describe where the grapes were grown, and up until July 2001, the idea of using the name Fair Play was kind of a theoretical one. Since then, it has started to become very real. The official term for such a name is "American Viticultural Area," or AVA, but the term we borrowed from the French, 'appellation,' is also used in ordinary conversation (and if you'd like to know more, a good source is the Wine Institute's web page at <http://www.wineinstitute.org/ava/index.html>).

When the Fair Play Winery Association was created in 1998, a committee was formed to complete the work that Brian Fitzpatrick had begun in the 1980's, and just this year all the paperwork was compiled and submitted to the ATF. It involves a description of the history, geography, geology, elevation, soil types and other factors which combine to establish a unique grape growing area, and the boundaries for the area. In July, the completed application was published in the Federal Register (for reasons known only to the Government, the actual listing is hard to access on the web, so we have posted the full text of the proposed rule on our website: www.oakstone-winery.com) for a sixty-day public comment period, and is expected to be approved very soon. When it is, we'll be able to finally use the term "Fair Play" on our labels to indicate exactly where the grapes were grown, and people who buy wine will know which bottles contain wine with the essence of Fair Play's rich historical heritage and unique grapes.

The State of the State

Quoting from the Federal wine label laws: "An American appellation of origin is: (i) The United States; (ii) a State; (iii) two or no more than three States which are all contiguous; (iv) a county (which must be identified with the word "county", in the same size of type, and in letters as conspicuous as the name of the county); (v) two or no more than three counties in the same States; or (vi) a viticultural area (as defined in paragraph (e) of this section)." (visit http://www.wineinstitute.org/fedlaw/table_of_contents.html, if you have a need to see more)

The general rule about wine growing areas is that the more confined the area, the more you will know about the grapes, and the better able you'll be able to predict the quality of the wine that comes from them. Wine made from grapes grown in any of the 50 states can be labeled "American," but that designation has generally been used for blended wines made in different states. For many years, wineries in New York and other Eastern states imported large amounts of California bulk wine to mellow out local wines that were overly tart, and those wines were commonly labeled as "American." This practice was curtailed somewhat after Walter S. Taylor of Bully Hill Winery in New York's Finger

Lakes area managed to capture a railroad tank car that was used to haul the wine and prominently displayed it in front of his winery as a protest against the use of such “foreign” wines in his neighbors’ blends.

Wines from anywhere in California can be labeled with the state name, and could be either blended from different regions of the state, or the name *might* be used to disguise the fact that the grapes came from a region not as highly thought of as our own. After all, “Fresno Chardonnay” has long been used as a euphemism for wine made from Thompson Seedless grapes, and doesn’t carry quite the same cachet as “California Chardonnay.” The next time you buy a bottle of low-priced wine labeled “Chardonnay” or “Merlot” see if it doesn’t say ‘California’ just above the name of the variety.

Smaller is Better

It’s even better, though, if the wine growing region can be further identified on the label, and some general regions have approved appellations like “Central Coast” or “Sierra Foothills,” which may cover several counties (the latter includes portions of Yuba, Nevada, Placer, El Dorado, Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne and Mariposa Counties). This designation allows us to make a blend, say, of El Dorado Zinfandel and Amador Barbera without having to use the broader “California” name.

But the best indicator of a grape growing area (note that all of these descriptions refer only to the area where the grapes are grown, and have nothing to do with where the wine is made), is the AVA. If the words El Dorado are listed on the label, it means that the grapes were grown in a prescribed area of the County (you need twenty-one USGS Topographic Quadrangle Maps and three pages of directions to find out exactly where) where the elevation, soils and topography reflect the special characteristics of the area. You should know, though, that like any county as indicated in the quotation above, if the label says “El Dorado County,” the grapes can be grown anywhere within the County borders. Slightly confusing?

A Sense of Fair Play

The reason we have sought a separate designation from the rest of the El Dorado AVA is that Fair Play has a long heritage of agriculture and grape growing, and very different soils from many areas of the County. When the appellation is approved, it will be only 33 square miles (less than a tenth of the El Dorado AVA) and be distinguished by the deep, decomposed granite soils that allowed this area to continue to prosper after much of the civilization of the Mother Lode disappeared when the gold panned out. Our soils are unrivalled in the nutrients, drainage and special taste characteristics they provide our grapes. If you add to this formula the scarcity of water that requires low rates of drip irrigation or dry farming (no added water during the summer), we have a local version of that now-overused French word “terroir.” While it literally means ‘earth’ (pronounced ‘tehr-wah’), this term has long been used to describe the indescribable in grape growing—the weather, soil, exposure, elevation, and other features that influence the grapes to make a wine taste the way it does. Hundreds of books have been written on the

subject, but it's unlikely that anyone will ever track down all the factors that influence grape and wine flavors, or exactly how they do it.

When all these factors come together as they do in our own little area, the wine that results has both a unique identity and unique flavor. Mountain grown grapes have long been respected as the best, and as the grape-growing region with the highest altitude of any appellation in California, the slogan of the Fair Play Winery association is apt, indeed: we truly have "Wines with an Altitude!"