



An Introduction to Anderson Valley

In the 40th anniversary year of our tiny but mighty region's appellation status, granted in 1983, we are delighted to create this introduction letter to our appellation. There is also abundant information in the media section of our website at AVWINES.com.

Similarities and Differences

Most wine regions strive to set themselves apart from others, and Anderson Valley can certainly do that authentically. We would rather start with what makes us similar to the world's greatest wine regions:

- multi-generational history, including founding families still in business;
- world-class conditions for winegrowing;
- time-tested alignment of grape varieties and terroir;
- a wide spectrum of producers, from *garagistes* to grand estates, all finding passionate fans; and
- scenery that stays in your memory forever.

As for the differences, the most prominent is our location, straddling the border of the northwestern rainforest and California's Mediterranean climate. In technical terms, that means we're a maritime inland desert climate, measured at Region II on the Winkler heat summation scale, with one of the widest diurnal ranges of any viticultural region anywhere. Let's break those down:

- A maritime inland desert region is rain-free except for a few months of winter – but is frequently bathed in cool ocean air and moist fog throughout the growing season.
- Region II means that the proximity to the ocean keeps our desert climate from overheating or drying out – that's why our majestic redwoods, which breathe in their water, can live alongside our stately oaks which drink from the ground.
- The wide diurnal range means warm afternoons are sandwiched between cold nights and mornings, which facilitate natural balance in wine-grape chemistry due to effective acid formation along with sugar development.

Geology provides another major distinguishing feature for Anderson Valley. Our "valley" is actually an intimate, curling watershed of rolling microclimates separated by scores of creeks and their riparian areas. So instead of the vast blanket of monoculture that you see in many new-world AVAs, our appellation consists of smaller, more distinct parcels where we can dial in site-specific farming choices and clonal selections everywhere, all the time.

Finally, Anderson Valley is far more distant from large cities and major highways than most well-known west coast wine regions. This isolation has profoundly shaped the valley's history, population, agriculture, and viticultural development. "Boontling," a local argot that has more fame than practitioners, arose from this isolation. Today, with a more mobile population that can find anything on the internet, Anderson Valley is no longer "too far" for those who love fine wine, gorgeous scenery, and a warm welcome from local farmers, vintners, and restaurateurs.

The Pioneers' Long Run

Anderson Valley's oldest continually producing commercial vineyards were established in the 1960s and 1970s, and many are still in the hands of the founding families. These include Husch Vineyards, Navarro Vineyards and Handley Cellars. If you hear people refer to "Zac," "Sarah," or "Lulu" (respectively) while you're visiting Anderson Valley, that's because they lead iconic wineries founded by their forebears – they're synonymous with our wine region and history.

The founding families and their fellow pioneers came for inexpensive land in a natural paradise, but they created an industry and a community that thrives today beyond their imagining. The fact is that when they arrived, the local economy was nearly moribund due to its isolation and terrain. Boom times from logging and railroading were long in the past; orcharding and sheep ranching were hanging on; visitors from outside the valley rolled through it on their way to the coast, because there was little to stop for. Today Anderson Valley is a destination on its own.

The committed spirit of the founding families lives on in many ways. Perhaps most notably, winemakers who come to work in the valley tend to stay on, or return as soon as they can. Vineyard owners are vertically integrating into winemaking. Sparkling wineries that were founded in the 1980s – and achieved international acclaim – have inspired many more winemakers in Anderson Valley to create their own sparkling wines in a delicious range of styles.

From White to Red

Anderson Valley's history includes one of the more dramatic regional transformations in American wine-growing: an appellation that initially established its reputation with white wine is now best known for its red wine. When Anderson Valley applied for AVA status in 1982, more than two-thirds of vineyard acreage was planted to white varieties, with Riesling and Gewürztraminer accounting for nearly 40%. The top red grape was Zinfandel. Pinot Noir was an afterthought at 8%.

So it's no surprise that an entire generation of wine writers and trade members came to know of Anderson Valley for its "Alsatian" varieties – particularly because Riesling and Gewürztraminer were being replaced almost everywhere else by Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Zinfandel. This was the story until nearly 2000 for many writers. It was only after the millennial turn that the wider world recognized what Anderson Valley insiders already knew: the story of the 21st century would be Pinot Noir – with a tasty sidebar on its cool-climate cousin, Chardonnay.

Historic Transformation

In 1997, three changes revolutionized Anderson Valley as a wine region. The first was the arrival of the “new clones” or “Dijon clones” as they were then known colloquially. These genetic clones of Pinot Noir, developed in France for Burgundian producers, were officially designed to resist disease in Burgundy’s moist climate. It was two other attractive qualities, however, that made them attractive for Anderson Valley, where disease pressure is extraordinarily low: the ability to express darker, plusher fruit flavors, and the ability to reach full maturity during a relatively short growing season. For Anderson Valley, this meant its’ Pinot Noir could reach full maturity more reliably in a region where September rains and October frosts are no surprise. It also meant the valley’s reds could shine more brightly at a time when fashion favored heavily extracted Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah.

This new vista helped convince the Duckhorn family, among Napa Valley’s top producers of big-bodied Merlot, to establish a winery in Anderson Valley that would make Pinot Noir and nothing else. This was a first for the region since its appellation approval in 1983. In a stunningly short time, Goldeneye’s new plantings, and conversion projects by other vineyard owners, lifted Pinot Noir high above all other grapes as measured by Anderson Valley vineyard acreage.

One of the most impressive examples was Ferrington Vineyard, whose new owners, Kurt and Heather Shoeneman, quickly made it one of the largest and best-farmed vineyards in the appellation. They added dozens of acres of Pinot Noir and replaced aging plots of white grapes with more Pinot (although still have Sauvignon Blanc from the late 1960s). When they looked to bring all that dark-flavored, fully ripe fruit to market at the century mark, they discovered a group of talented, ambitious, artisanal winemakers from Sonoma County and beyond who were delighted to bottle it and put Anderson Valley on the label.

Ex-appellation Producers Discover Anderson Valley

This was a transformation of its own. Anderson Valley’s history was one of local producers, many in their second careers as winemakers, figuring out how to make and sell wine in an isolated place with nearly no industrial infrastructure. Suddenly Anderson Valley was a place where well-funded, highly trained winemakers with long mailing lists came to buy fruit and process it in state-of-the-art facilities ... which happened to be somewhere else.

Some numbers help to tell the story. In a landmark, comprehensive tasting of Anderson Valley Pinot Noirs conducted in 2005 for the 2003 vintage, 19 of the 43 known bottlings of Anderson Valley Pinot Noir came from ex-AVA producers including Copain, Littorai, MacPhail, Radio Coteau and Williams Selyem. To take a producer view, 13 of the 32 producers in the tasting were located outside the appellation. Now jump ahead to today. The number of bonded wineries inside the appellation has hardly changed – but the number of ex-appellation producers has increased 500%. These labels now outnumber bonded in-AVA producers two to one.

We hasten to add that no one is complaining. The much larger cohort of talented winemakers has raised the bar for everyone. It’s a big reason Anderson Valley Pinot Noir is now a category to be reckoned with. And the fact is that the appellation’s resident winemakers today could produce

outstanding wine anywhere in the world. They have simply made the choice of Anderson Valley as the platform for their excellence and creativity.

The New Taste of AV Whites

Now for that tasty sidebar on Chardonnay! We begin it by reminding you that Anderson Valley Riesling and Gewürztraminer are still among the best of these varietals in North America. Pinot Noir's rise is, ironically enough, a big reason for that: when everything screams "plant Pinot Noir," only the very best plantings of other varieties survive. Thus Anderson Valley whites are grown where they should be, farmed for their best qualities, and raised in wineries equipped to make them splendidly.

Similarly, Chardonnay is now escaping the strong gravitational pull of sparkling wine. Most Chard in the valley has long gone into sparkling programs at Handley Cellars, Roederer Estate, and Scharffenberger Cellars, not to mention the growing number of sparkling programs at local Pinot Noir labels. (Look for them!) Now Chardonnay is coming back into its own as a still wine, particularly when it comes from ridgetops where Anderson Valley's signature growing conditions are magnified: rocky soils, strong solar radiation, abundant wind, wide temperature swings. The number of bottlings remains small for now but keep an eye on this story.

While you're at it, take note of the other whites that have established a deserved presence in Anderson Valley. The Bordelais whites made in Anderson Valley, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, typically sell out upon release. No less than Robert Parker once declared an Anderson Valley Pinot Gris the best he had ever tasted from North America.

Anderson Valley Means More Than Wine

Anderson Valley has another quality in common with the world's great wine regions: a sense of place developed and cherished by its home community. That community has created, and sustains, a vibrant foodshed movement, a diverse dining scene, one of America's original craft breweries, an artists guild, an environmental land trust, a strong watershed conservation movement, a state park featuring one of California's grandest redwood groves, and much more that complements the region's outstanding wine. We encourage you to experience these local gems on your visit, and to share them with your audiences.

Annual Events:

- Annual Pinot Noir Festival, every May
- Annual Harvest Tidrick Celebration, every Oct/Nov
- Annual White Wine Celebration, every February
- Coast Trade Industry Tasting, every March

Prepared by Thom Elkjer, March 2023