

wine
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DAVID W. SCHNEIDER

Sonoma's lovely valley produces stunning California wines

By Annette Alvarez-Peters

IN THE HEART of Sonoma County, California, lies one of my favorite wine appellations, the Russian River Valley. The area features stunning rolling hills, magnificent vineyards and a scenic winding two-lane road that showcases the beauty of this lovely wine country. Visitors have many opportunities to stop and explore wineries that excel in the production of chardonnay, pinot noir and other popular varieties.



ROBIN FIELD

Russian River Valley received its American Viticultural Area (AVA) designation in 1983. To become an AVA, an area or region must be identified as having distinct soils, climate and topography resulting in the wines produced there having identifiable regional characteristics. The Russian River Valley, lying mostly within the Northern Sonoma viticultural area, with the southern tip extending into Green Valley, definitely meets those requirements.

Warm days and cooling fog

The climate of Russian River Valley is perfectly suited for grape growing. The conditions

are unique, with a constant stream of cooling fog that comes directly off the Pacific Ocean, just a few miles to the west. Fog normally arrives in the evening, and it is not unusual for the temperatures to plummet 30 to 40 degrees below the daytime high. These cool conditions allow the grapes to develop their flavors and acids over the growing season.

A number of microclimates and soils within this region allow for diversity in vineyard plantings. The slightly warmer area of Middle Ranch, which butts up against the Chalk Hill region, produces lovely cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Santa Rosa Plains produces a nice cool-climate zinfandel, partly due to the fog, allowing for a longer hang time for grapes to achieve perfect ripeness.

In the southwest lies Green Valley, one of the coolest and smallest areas of the appellation. This is where the fog first enters the valley; chardonnay and pinot noir do extremely well here.

The grapes

Chardonnay and pinot noir are the king and queen of the Russian River Valley and make up the vast majority of plantings. The wines made here are wonderful, and many winemakers strive to achieve the greatness

exemplified in the Burgundy region of France. Burgundy has its history, but Russian River Valley has a unique quality of its own and a market expectation for a perceived value.

The chardonnay grape, in the hands of Russian River winemakers, produces a richness and purity of fruit flavors reminiscent of Meyer lemons and nectarines, with a touch of minerality and crisp acidity.

The fickle pinot noir can be fruity with elegance and finesse. However, the various soils within this appellation can produce varied styles, ranging from focused fruit notes of strawberries and raspberries to intense red or black cherries. You can also find a hint of spice, cola and earthiness in these velvety and rich wines.

Small amounts of rosé are also made from the pinot noir grape. Rosé is made by reducing the amount of contact between the juice and the grape skins. These dry-style bottlings are refreshing, with vibrant notes of strawberries.

While pinot noir and chardonnay steal the show, Russian River Valley's cool-climate zinfandels are simply delicious. The zinfandel vineyards are planted in the warmer northeast area of the valley. The long growing season results in claret-like zinfandels with flavors of blackberry and boysenberry.

Planted in much smaller numbers are medium- to full-bodied cabernet sauvignon and pleasing, soft-tannin merlot. In limited acreage, you can also find the high-acid sauvignon blanc, which exudes tropical notes and flavors of gooseberry.

This is truly a beautiful and amazing area. Next time you find yourself in Sonoma County, I encourage you to take a drive and visit one or two wineries in the valley. In the meantime, stop by the fine wine department at Costco, pick up a bottle of Russian River Valley wine, relax and enjoy. Cheers! 🍷

Annette Alvarez-Peters oversees Costco's beer, wine and spirits program.

Featured at Costco

You'll find these fine Russian River wines at select Costco locations:

- Kirkland Signature™ Signature Series Chardonnay**
Item #789895
- Rodney Strong Pinot Noir**
Item #70587
- Frei Brothers Russian River Chardonnay**
Item #11872
- DeLoach Pinot Noir**
Item #369836
- J Vineyards Cuvée 20 Brut**
Item #245535

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