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Special Sonoma

Think wine from the USA and California is first to come to mind. Think Californian wine regions and the Napa Valley is the obvious go-to name. However, one of the state's largest vineyard areas (easily out producing the Napa) is the largely underrated and often overlooked Sonoma County, situated in the San Francisco Bay area, that quietly goes about its business winning more and more devotees as each year passes.

Sonoma County stretches from the Pacific Coast in the west to the Mayacamas Mountains in the east and quietly boasts almost 60,000 acres of vineyards spread amongst more than 400 wineries. The county's vineyards are grouped into sixteen American Viticultural Areas (AVA's) a type of appellation system, each sporting their own distinctive characteristics.

Cloving the County in two is the mighty Russian River, which meanders lazily through the region. Here two of the largest AVA's, the Russian River Valley AVA and the Alexander Valley AVA dominate the considerable valley floor.

The variable Sonoma climate is ideal for growing grapes, with long, dry, sunny, warm, but rarely hot summer days interspersed by cool nights, ocean breezes and frequent fog.

The oceanic fog, which drifts through the Petaluma Gap into the interior valleys, works a peculiar magic, helping to preserve acidity and complexity in the wines, by creating daily temperature swings of around forty degrees or more, ideal for intensifying flavour development in a grape.

In the south Sonoma Valley enjoys a warm climate enough for richly perfumed zinfandels and structured cabernet sauvignons to flourish, whilst slightly inland, near neighbour Carneros has a cooler climate that allows the free expression of pinot noir and chardonnay grapes and of course the sparkling variant of these two important Champenois varieties.

As well as a favourable climate, Sonoma County is also blessed with a remarkably wide ranging palette of soil types, indeed more than all of the differing topographies found in France. From the Mayacamas Mountains, the rolling hills of the Carneros, the Russian River Valley, the coastal hills and many other geographical anomalies, Sonoma County has soils ranging from rich and loamy to volcanic and rocky, together with well-drained areas to boot.

This expansive regional topographical variety enables another distinguishing feature of Sonoma County's wine region: its great grape variety. More than 50 grape varieties are grown, from the cool weather of the Carneros and the Russian River Valley where exemplary Chardonnay and Pinot grapes are produced, to the warmer Dry Creek Valley and Rockpile areas where excellent Zinfandel reigns supreme. The Alexander Valley is also rightly famed for Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

Only six percent of Sonoma County is planted to vineyards, which share a varied landscape of beautiful redwood forests, crashing ocean surf, broad plains and sweeping grasslands, lush river valleys and mountains and rolling hills.

The Chardonnay grape is the most widely planted enjoying a significant 29% of Sonoma acreage, grown mostly in the Russian River Valley, Sonoma Coast, and Sonoma-Carneros AVAs. Cabernet Sauvignon follows closely behind at 22% in the Alexander Valley, Sonoma Valley and Sonoma Mountain areas.

Pinot Noir at 18% in the Russian River Valley, Carneros, and Sonoma Coast, Merlot with 14% throughout the Bennett Valley and Sonoma Valley, Zinfandel 9% at Dry Creek Valley and Rockpile and finally Sauvignon Blanc 4% in Dry Creek Valley and Russian River Valley are the most significant plantings. Lesser-known varieties grown in Sonoma are Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, and Viognier.

Visiting wineries in Sonoma County is a relaxed affair, possibly because, as already stated, nearby higher profile Napa Valley generally takes most of the international plaudits. This in essence is somewhat strange as the birth of California wine began in Sonoma.

Long before there were vineyards in virtually every valley north of San Francisco and before Napa and Sonoma became globally famous, before there was even a Californian wine industry at all, there was Buena Vista. Founded in 1857, the Buena Vista Winery was California's first premium winery, and its history is as colourful as it is proud.

Its founder, the self-proclaimed "Count of Buena Vista," Agoston Haraszthy, was a vivacious and eccentric pioneer with a veritable love and unending commitment to California wine. The Count arrived from Europe in 1840 in pursuit of opportunity and freedom in the burgeoning American West.

Whilst the forty-niners were in pursuit of gold in the Californian hills, Count Haraszthy sought the perfect terroir to make exceptional wine. He settled in Sonoma, the birthplace of California and capital of the short-lived California Republic, where he founded Buena Vista Winery in 1857.

Today, the Count is considered California's most acclaimed and flamboyant viticultural pioneer and evangelist. Sadly he died in 1869 in an alligator-infested river in the jungle of Nicaragua but following the challenges of the depression, prohibition, and phylloxera infestation, the Buena Vista Winery endured to become the spiritual hub of Californian wine.

Now in the ownership of a French Burgundian family, the legend is being re-born under the vision of Jean-Charles Boisset just outside the town of Sonoma. The original winery, now fully restored is now a California Historic Landmark.

Almost as flamboyant as Count Haraszthy's Buena Vista winery is that of film and movie mogul Francis Ford Coppola, who, not content with just producing enjoyable and well regarded wine, showcases it, complete with Hollywood magic, in the Alexander Valley.

Complete with film memorabilia, including the Godfather's desk, a Tucker car, movie scripts, and Oscars, the estate is not just a winery, it's a resort that includes cabins to rent for the day. Coppola's fine wine Rubicon is justly famous throughout the wine world.

There are many equally hospitable, if not so glitzy, wineries to visit when touring Sonoma County. Names to look out for would be Joseph Phelps (a particularly fine biodynamic winery) Verite, La Crema, and Benziga but there are many more.

Sonoma County revels quietly in its understated success, showing no desire to wrestle the premier mantle away from its neighbour Napa. I often think its wines reflect this level of self-confidence.