

Pour Decisions

By Brett Chappell

Sonoma and Napa, California's Northern jewels

California accounts for 81% of the United States wine production and is the fourth largest wine-producing region after Italy, France and Spain. Mention California wine, and often the two northern Californian wine areas of Sonoma and Napa leap to mind. Together, these two areas produce only 10% of California's wine. They are blessed with perfect climates for fine wine production. These two counties/areas sit next to each other north of the San Pablo Bay, and both areas enjoy a temperate, dry-summered Mediterranean macroclimate as defined by the Köppen climate classification, but they differ just slightly in summer temperatures that lead to great differences in their signature grapes and wine styles.

Sonoma County begins about 25 miles on the north side of the Golden Gate Bridge and hugs the coast. Its southern border is the San Pablo Bay, its western, the Pacific Ocean and Coastal Mountain Range. To the north are Mendocino and Lake counties, and on its east sit the Mayacamas Mountains. The air from the Pacific and the bay both cool the region. The shady, west-facing slopes of the Mayacamas create areas of the county that are a convolution of small mountains and hills with varied mesoclimates. The area also experiences dense fogs from all the surrounding waters that cool the vineyards by blocking sun before burning off in the late morning. Sonoma's Petaluma Gap sub-American Viticultural Area (AVA) is even particularly named for a cooling wind and fog that comes in from the Pacific through a break in Sonoma's coastal range.

All of these cooling trends lower the average temperature of Sonoma's growing period a few degrees below Napa's. Because of these slightly lower temperatures, Sonoma produces lighter-styled white wine. Chardonnay here is delicate and more European in style, sauvignon blanc, more herbal and fresh. As for cabernet sauvignon, expect a lighter-weight, higher-acid, less-extracted style. Zinfandels and merlots follow suit. Pinot noir shines here. This earlier ripening variety loves a long morning nap under the covers of a late morning fog.

Cross directly over the Mayacamas mountain range in eastern Sonoma to Napa and everything warms up a bit. Lake County is north; the Vacas Mountains form the eastern border; and as with Sonoma, the southern border is the San Pablo Bay. Napa lies 35-40 miles from the Pacific, with two intercepting mountain ranges, the Sonoma Coastal and the Mayacamas. The cooling of the Pacific is cut off by these ranges and distance. What fog it gets is drawn in from the San Pablo Bay. This cooling cloud does not cover Napa as much as it covers Sonoma. Add more direct morning sunlight and heat trapped by the high elevation Mayacamas range, and you have a bit of an oven. The Mayacamas and Vacas mountains heat up in the day and cool down precipitously at night. This diurnal temperature swing creates mountain grown wines that are age-worthy and often taut in youth. The valley floor produces more early, accessible wines. The overall warmer, longer growing season in Napa favors later ripening varieties like merlot, cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel and sauvignon blanc. Sonoma grows the same grapes, but Napa, on the whole, grows riper, richer, more powerful wines. Sonoma wines are more restrained, delicate and precise.

A few degrees difference in temperature creates a noticeable variation in wine varieties, flavors and bodies. This is witnessed all the wine world over. Merlot, a grape that does not mind being planted in wet dense soils, is happy in the damp,

cool clay soils of Bordeaux's Right Bank. Cabernet Sauvignon, a dry-soil-loving, late ripener prefers the well-drained stony, sandy soils of the Bordeaux's Left Bank. Northern Hemisphere vineyards that face the south and east and see the warmer morning sun are favored over western or northern facing aspects that catch only late afternoon light and warmth. Areas near large bodies of water are tempered by their waters' constant temperature.

Compared to French, German and northern Italian vineyards, Sonoma and Napa are much warmer and produce riper fruit with lower acids. California grows grapes on the cool edge of a warm climate. Expect more lush flavors and deeper colors when drinking California wine. There is no better here, not European wines over the new world wines, not Napa over Sonoma. There is, however, difference. How boring it would be if everything tasted the same.

At MF Chappell Wine Merchant, our guided wine class in March centers on California wines. Each month we will pair a six pack of wines, an overview article, and a virtual meeting to a chapter or two of Karen MacNeil's The Wine Bible. Brett Chappell is a French Wine Scholar, Certified Sommelier and Wine Educator. He and his wife Jen, a Wine and Spirits Education Trust Level Two, own MF Chappell Wine Merchant in Atlantic Beach. Their website is MFChappellWine.com, and the phone number is 252-773-4016.

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