



STAFF TRAINING MODULE

Napa Valley

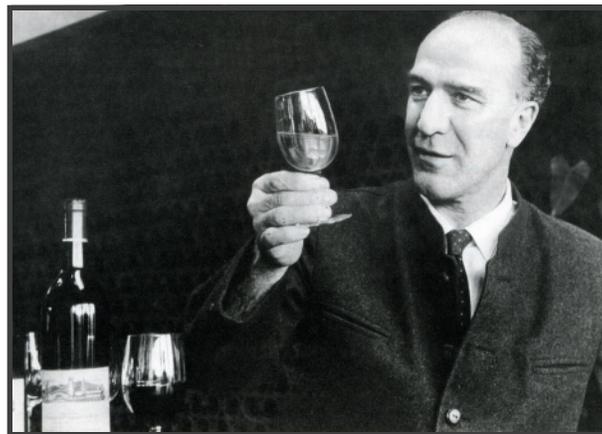
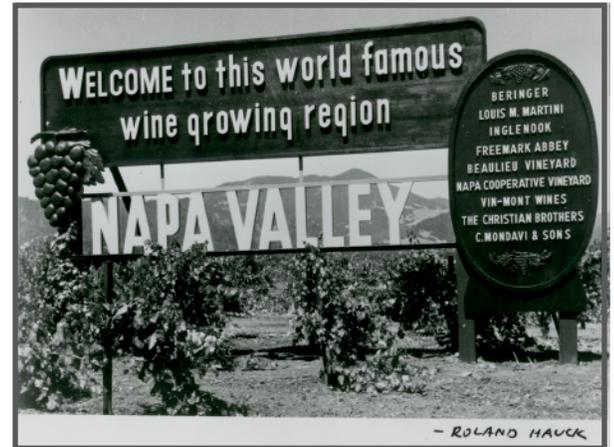
Napa Valley, America's most iconic wine region, appears saturated with the vine, yet it only accounts for a mere 4% of California wine. 45,000 acres of vineyards carpet the valley floor and dot surrounding hillsides and mountains. With an emphasis on luxury wines, this small region on California's North Coast has cemented its image as a destination for wine tourists from around the globe, and as a world-class producer of Cabernet Sauvignon. Every third vine in Napa is Cabernet, yet the valley's complex soil patterns, coupled with changing degrees of altitude, sunlight, and temperature, provide a diversity of source material for the winemaker to sculpt into wine. Nor is Cabernet the whole story; hundreds of varieties, from Sauvignon Blanc to Charbono to Zinfandel, thrive somewhere in the valley's gentle, Mediterranean climate.





History

As the second region nationally designated as an “American Viticultural Area”, Napa Valley AVA dates to 1981, but the valley’s rich history of viticulture began in the late 1830s. Spurred along by the booming days of the 1849 California Gold Rush, Napa wines achieved occasional international notice in the latter half of the 19th century, and some of today’s houses, such as Charles Krug, Schramsberg, and Beringer, date to the 1860s and ‘70s. In 1880 Scottish poet Robert Louis Stevenson famously pronounced Napa’s wines as “bottled poetry” during a honeymoon sojourn in the valley.



Robert Mondavi



The end of Prohibition

The specter of temperance and Prohibition loomed large, and the valley’s industry was crippled with passage of the 18th Amendment. Repeal in 1933 led to a renewal; visionaries like André Tchelistcheff (legendary winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyard), Robert Mondavi, and Joe Heitz forged ahead in the midcentury, raising winemaking acumen, improving technology, and looking toward the wines of France—then the undisputed king—as a model. The modern Napa Valley is built on the successes of Mondavi and his contemporaries, and through fanatical attention to quality and winemaking the valley has earned its spot as one of the world’s top areas for the grape.



The Region

30 miles long, the Napa Valley runs parallel to the California coastline, narrowing as it trails northward from a wide base near the San Pablo Bay. The Mayacamas Mountains and the drier Vaca Mountains frame its western and eastern boundaries, respectively. Napa Valley AVA includes both the valley itself and the mountainsides surrounding it, encompassing nearly half of the total land in Napa County. Sonoma County divides Napa from the ocean, yet cool Pacific breezes and fog funnel into the valley from the San Pablo Bay in the south and breaks in the mountains near Calistoga in the north. The fog, which settles on the valley floor in the late evening and may not burn off until mid-morning, impacts nighttime temperatures and sunshine hours on the valley floor.

Climate

Napa's climate is classified as Mediterranean, characterized by warm, dry summers and cool, rainy winters. In the summertime, afternoon temperatures in the warmest central parts of the valley may reach the mid-90s, whereas they remain in the mid- to high-70s nearer to the San Pablo Bay. Aided by the onset of fog and cool maritime air, nighttime temperatures on the valley floor may plummet by as much as 40 degrees, preserving acidity in ripening grapes. Above a certain elevation—the fog line—sunshine hours are greater and temperatures remain more constant from day to night. Overall, Napa's climate is not dissimilar from that of Tuscany, Sicily, or parts of Southern Spain.



Photo courtesy of Jason Tinacci



The Appellations

Within the Napa Valley AVA, there are 16 separate sub-AVAs. Each smaller appellation offers unique characteristics of soil, elevation, and/or temperature that create distinctive grape-growing conditions and styles of wine. Some producers choose to produce wines from a single sub-AVA, whereas others compose blends from fruit harvested throughout the valley.

The sub-, or “nested”, AVAs of Napa Valley may be broadly divided into mountain, valley floor, and outlying appellations. The range of elevation for mountain AVAs typically spans from 600 feet above sea level to 2000 feet and more, whereas the lowest valley floor vineyards are near sea level, and they rarely climb higher than 500 feet above it. The outlying AVAs are separated from the main growing regions by Napa Valley’s foothills, and two span into neighboring counties.

In the valley floor AVAs, the best sites for winegrowing are usually on the alluvial fans, or “benchlands”—deep, fertile, sloping soil deposits composed of run-off from mountain streams. In these alluvial fans, vines can develop deep root systems. On the other hand, mountain growers cherish their shallow, low-nutrient soils, which promote the vines’ struggle and produce a small yield of concentrated fruit. Berry size tends to be smaller on the mountains, influencing color and tannin. In the mountains, daytime temperatures are cooler than on the valley floor, but nights are warmer.



Photo courtesy of Jason Tinacci



Valley Floor AVAs

Coombsville: The newest AVA in Napa Valley, Coombsville debuted in late 2011.

Oak Knoll of Napa Valley: Cooler than the upper valley, Oak Knoll can produce a wide variety of red and white wines. The Dry Creek alluvial fan, the valley's largest, dominates Oak Knoll's soil composition.

Yountville: Perhaps better known as Napa's dining capital, Yountville is named after George Yount, who planted the valley's first vines in the late 1830s.

Stags Leap District: Located directly east of Yountville in the foothills of the Vaca Mountains, this is one of the warmest AVAs in the valley. 80% of the district is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

Oakville: Home to famous sites like To-Kalon and Screaming Eagle's vineyards, Oakville AVA is one of the valley's top areas for winegrowing.

Rutherford: André Tchelistcheff once proclaimed that it takes "Rutherford Dust" to make great Cabernet in Napa. The Rutherford Bench—which actually extends through both the Rutherford and Oakville AVAs—is a prized series of alluvial soils (loam, sand, gravel) and home to some of the priciest land in the valley. Tasters suggest dusty, spicy, brambly aromas arise from those Cabernets produced along the Rutherford Bench.

St. Helena: St. Helena is one of narrowest parts of the Napa Valley, and a warmer appellation. In 1861, Charles Krug opened his eponymous winery here.

Calistoga: After a lengthy legal and political battle over potential misuse of its name, Calistoga became Napa's 15th AVA in 2009. Calistoga is Napa's northernmost town, and its vineyards are almost entirely planted with red grapes.

Oakville



Yountville



Photos courtesy of Jason Tinacci



Mountain AVAs

Mount Veeder (Mayacamas): Mount Veeder, adjacent to Carneros, is the coolest mountain AVA, with Napa's longest growing season. Unlike Diamond Mountain and the AVAs of the Vaca Mountains, Mount Veeder is composed entirely of sedimentary, rather than volcanic, soils.

Spring Mountain District (Mayacamas): "Spring Mountain" does not refer to an actual peak, but rather an entire mountainous area characterized by several springs and crisscrossed by streams. Its western boundary is the Sonoma County border.

Diamond Mountain District (Mayacamas): In this warmer mountain AVA, red wines develop a more approachable tannic structure. In the late 1970s, Diamond Creek, one of the appellation's most famous names, became the first producer in Napa Valley to release single vineyard wines, and crack the \$100 mark.

Atlas Peak (Vaca Mountains): At 2,663 feet, Atlas Peak is the tallest point in the Vaca Mountains.

Howell Mountain (Vaca Mountains): The oldest of Napa's sub-AVAs and the first to be truly defined by elevation, Howell Mountain Cabernets are among the valley's most regal, tannic, powerful, and ageworthy. The mountain receives warm afternoon sun, leading to ripe flavors, but it stays cooler overall than valley floor vineyards, preserving good acidity and herbal notes. Historically, Howell Mountain focused on Zinfandel, but this is Cabernet country today.



Photo courtesy of Jason Tinacci

Atlas Peak



Other AVAs

Chiles Valley District: Named after Joseph Ballinger Chiles, an early pioneer from Missouri, this is the valley's most isolated growing region.

Wild Horse Valley: Divided between Napa and Solano Counties, Wild Horse Valley is Napa's most sparsely planted AVA.

Los Carneros (Carneros): Due to its close proximity to the San Pablo Bay, Carneros is Napa's coolest growing region. It is equally suitable for the production of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Syrah and Merlot. The AVA extends into Sonoma County.



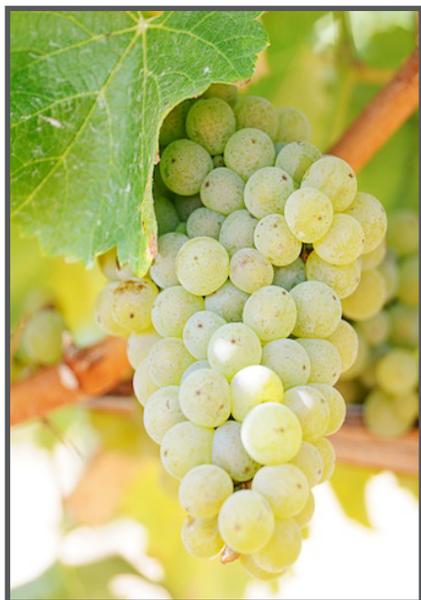
Los Carneros



Major Grape Varieties

White Varieties

Chardonnay: Chardonnay is Napa's most important white grape. The classic style of the wine is full-bodied and lush, with generous flavors of oak and cream, but winemaking styles are diversifying and one can find regularly find leaner, citrusy examples today. Producers today approach techniques like malolactic fermentation, new oak aging, and bâtonnage with new sophistication, and some opt to avoid them all together.



Sauvignon Blanc: As in Bordeaux, Cabernet's genetic parent Sauvignon Blanc shares the vineyard with its offspring in Napa Valley. Napa Sauvignon Blanc is typically aromatic, yet it may lean in style toward Bordeaux and incorporate oak in the winemaking process, or it may be produced in a fresher, cleaner style. Napa Sauvignon Blanc exhibits bright, tart acidity, translating as citrus flavors on the palate. Grassy and melon notes are frequently found.

Other White Grapes: In Napa Valley, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc account for more than 90% of the total white grape plantings. Here and there, however, one can spot a few acres of Viognier, Pinot Gris, Riesling, Muscat, Chenin Blanc, and many others.



Major Grape Varieties

Red Varieties

Cabernet Sauvignon: Napa's most important grape and its signature contribution to the world of fine wines, Cabernet Sauvignon thrives in Napa's Mediterranean climate. It provides nearly 40% of the annual harvest. On the valley floor, it produces a more elegant and supple style of wine, with more approachable tannins; on the mountainsides the wines are typically fuller in body, rich in color and tannin, and driven by powerful black fruit. Sophisticated yet prominent new oak is a nearly universal feature during aging, and many winemakers in Napa Valley try to curtail

Cabernet's inherent vegetative notes, preferring aromas of cocoa, fruit, violets and cedar to those of green bell pepper and herb. At its best, Napa Valley Cabernet is dense, mouth-coating, and opulent, yet it remains firmly structured and long-lived.



Merlot: Merlot is often blended with Cabernet Sauvignon to soften and plump its gritty, austere frame, but it produces a high quality varietal wine in its own right. Napa Merlot is more generous and less tannic than Cabernet Sauvignon on the palate, and shows a range of flavors from chocolate to red plums to mint.

Pinot Noir: Pinot Noir is actually Napa's third most planted red variety, behind Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. It produces sparkling and still wines in the cool Carneros AVA, and grows elsewhere in the cooler mesoclimates of the valley. Carneros and Napa Pinot Noir styles often showcase red fruits and jam, framed by sweet spices and oak.

Zinfandel: Zinfandel is especially popular in the warmer northern sections of the valley, such as Howell Mountain, Calistoga and St. Helena. Napa styles are usually fuller in body, with high levels of alcohol and spice.

Syrah: Napa Syrah is generally big and bold, evoking dark berry fruits and smoke. Unlike Cabernet, Syrah tends to exhibit savory undertones of grilled meat and black pepper.



Review Questions

1. Which two mountain ranges frame the Napa Valley?
2. What is the most planted white grape in Napa Valley?
3. Which AVA is located in both Napa and Sonoma Counties?
4. Name three "mountain" AVAs in Napa Valley.
5. Define the term "benchlands".
6. In which AVA is the To-Kalon vineyard located?





NAPA VALLEY

GUILD OF SOMMELIERS

29

Lake County
Napa County

Yolo County
Napa County

Calistoga

Mayacamas Mountains

St Helena

Vaca Mountains

Lake Berryessa

Yolo County
Solano County

Yountville

Sonoma County

Napa

Napa County
Solano County

- Napa Valley AVA
- Calistoga
- Diamond Mountain District
- Chiles Valley District
- Spring Mountain District
- Howell Mountain
- St. Helena
- Rutherford
- Oakville
- Yountville
- Mount Veeder
- Stags Leap District
- Atlas Peak
- Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley
- Los Carneros
- Coombsville
- Wild Horse Valley

29

San Pablo Bay

Grizzly Bay