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Report #44: The Wines of Sonoma County

Double Issue

Introduction



Sonoma County is one of California’s leading wine regions. It is also a spectacular place to grow and make wine. It boasts a beautiful coastline, majestic mountain ranges, towering redwood trees and beautiful inland valleys with rolling hills. Few places can rival it for its geographic diversity and amazing variety of high quality premium wines.

Sonoma County’s wine industry is flourishing. In 2013 it boasted a record number of plantings (64 thousand acres, of which 60 thousand are bearing) and over 700 bonded wineries. The grapes it produces annually are valued at half a billion dollars, but the total economic impact of the wine industry is estimated at \$13.4 billion, including wine-related tourism and the \$3 billion in wages paid to workers¹. Wine’s impact on Sonoma’s economy has almost doubled in the past eight years while vineyard acreage has increased only slightly, reflecting the improvements in wine quality and price and, equally important, enhanced consumer perceptions of Sonoma wine. This is thanks in part to the marketing efforts of the Sonoma County Vintners and Winegrowers.

Although Sonoma County² lay in Napa Valley’s shadow for many years, it is today increasingly recognized as Cali-

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fornia’s preeminent county for wine production. It is twice the size of Napa and a significantly more diverse wine-producing region. While Napa is best known for its highly polished Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County stands out for its rich variety of Chardonnays, elegant Pinot Noirs, and complex, old vine Zinfandels. Its Cabernets and Bordeaux blends grown on volcanic soils are also winning growing acclaim.

The large number of AVAs in Sonoma County makes it especially challenging for the consumer and even the wine professional to understand. This report attempts to: explain Sonoma wine and its diversity of terroir; identify the wine pioneers in its history, its outstanding vineyards, and its world-class winemakers; and, of course, evaluate its wines. We identify the top producers of each of the principal

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¹ Data come from a 2014 study done by the Stonebridge Group for The Sonoma County Winegrowers and Vintners.

² In the interest of brevity, this report uses Sonoma and Sonoma County interchangeably, recognizing there are also a Sonoma City and Sonoma Valley.

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varieties based on our tastings of over 700 wines.

Sonoma County is a land of small growers and family wineries, many of them dating back to the 19th century. It has a large number of artisanal wineries producing mostly vineyard designated wines that express their terroir. But Sonoma is also changing. A few companies—Jackson Family Estates, Gallo, Silverado, Sangiacomo, Ferrari Carano, Sonoma Cutrer, etc.—account for a large share of vineyard acreage. And medium sized, family wineries and vineyards are increasingly being bought out. At the same time, premium producers are increasingly attracted to the very cool, far western edge of the county. And young winemakers continue to start up new wineries in the county's custom crush facilities. These trends, plus the prolonged drought and political opposition to vineyard development, augur a quite different industry in ten years' time. One response to these challenges is to improve environmental sustainability, an initiative of the Sonoma County Winegrowers that we examine in this report.

The geography, climate and soils of Sonoma County create many distinct growing areas. Sonoma's 60 miles of coastline and considerable fog and wind intrusion directly impact viticulture in the western



Vineyard on Pine Mountain

and southern part of the county, providing ideal growing conditions for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Likewise, the rugged Mayacamas and its extinct volcanoes and other mountain ranges create multiple microclimates. Volcanic soils and warmer temperatures in the eastern and northern part of the county create the conditions for growing Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel.

The centerpiece of this report is the discussion of Sonoma's AVAs where we discuss the unique features of each region, their outstanding vineyards and wineries, and the wines they produce. We include our assessments of many of the 700 wines we tasted; ones not included here can be found on our website. Finally, we discuss the future prospects for Sonoma wine, including options for addressing some of its challenges.

Sonoma is an amazing wine region. There is simply no place like it when it comes to sheer beauty and fine-wine diversity. We hope this report captures the richness of Sonoma and its accomplishments and enormous potential for producing fine wines of distinction.

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