

## The Importance of Being an Estate



By George Parkinson

In my last article, I wrote about the significance of the American Viticultural Area. The importance of an AVA is that it gives a wine consumer a geographic reference. It has everything to do with a certain expectation of quality and highlights the theory of terroir. Economic advantages aside, the wine produced from an AVA allows the consumer to reference specific flavors for the wines made in those places.

The word “estate” narrows down that experience to a smaller area where the exact vineyard may be located. According to the rules under the TTB, the governmental arm that approves label content and AVA status, listing a wine as “estate grown” means that 95% and in some places 100% of the fruit used in the wine came from the land surrounding or owned by the winery. These wines are more concentrated, as an estate that truly produces its own fruit within an AVA has greater oversight than it would of the fruit that is purchased from another region or grower. In viticulture, consistency of care from bud break to harvest ensures quality. It is this level of careful growing that produced the phrase “fine wine begins in the vineyard”.

Famed California winemaker August Sebastiani is quoted

as saying, “I could make more wine if I didn’t have to grow the grapes.” This speaks to volume but in my opinion not always quality. The work to create a truly great wine begins in the vineyard with oversight on a daily basis. A winery can ensure quality with daily vineyard management more than simply buying fruit from a place without any control over how the vines were tended.

There is a reason why, more than any other term, “estate produced” means as much as it does on a wine label. Almost all of the wine-consuming populace not engaged in the industry finds excitement in the harvest season when grapes are crushed and wine is being fermented; however, the calendar for a wine grower is longer than the months of September and October. A winery that is an estate producer works around the clock to ensure the vines growing on the estate are managed correctly. A winery that simply buys its fruit doesn’t have this workload. That quote by Mr. Sebastiani speaks to this point.

Beginning in the winter, a vineyard, while asleep, is pruned from the past year’s growth, and that alone is hard work. When spring comes around and bud break happens, there is an hourly monitoring of temperatures. Should frost occur, a vineyard can lose a large percentage of vines and fruit yield. The action taken either by overhead water spraying or by lighting kerosene heaters and turning on wind turbines to artificially warm the air around the vines can happen in the dark of night.

A tale told to me by the late vintner Jess Jackson went like this: On a cold spring morning, the pond that was used to spray water in his vineyard wasn’t spraying because the pump used to overhead spray was clogged. As the frost alarm sounded, Jess donned his wetsuit and went in the water to unclog the pump which took several attempts and almost caused him to suffer hypothermia. This kind of passion

is why estate owners should be praised for their dedication.

After the fear of frost passes, the vineyard is watched for “nature’s” infestation. Wildlife of every variety, mold, mildew, and more can set out to feast in the vineyard, preventing a vine from producing. A story told to me by a mentor Sommelier who was visiting a winery in India had asked the grower about difficult issues in growing his grapes. The estate owner remarked, “Well, the dogs ran off two Cheetahs that were in the vineyard this morning.” Think about that for a moment. An estate grower is invested when issues like this arise and they “plow” ahead

(pun intended), rather than quit and buy their fruit from elsewhere, leaving the headache and heartbreak of grape growing to someone else.

When visiting your next winery or buying your next bottle, ask the question and read the label closely. Is the wine estate grown and produced? There will always be a higher investment toward quality when the wine is estate produced, and you will be a happier consumer because of that commitment.



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