

American Rhône - A New AVA



By George Parkinson

American wines are varied across this nation. Today we produce wine in every state in the union—something not achieved in our past. What you may find from coast to coast are vast differences in flavor, texture and quality of the same grape being grown in different places. This is “Terroir,” loosely translated as “the flavor of the land”. Those who live in a particular place may find it’s easy to identify local nuances of a wine’s personality.

The beauty is the vast differences that can exist from place to place. The artisan winemaker, garagiste or vigneron has some input with use or non-use of oak, yeast culture, and vinification techniques; however, nature sets the table.

These traits defined by location, soil type, altitude, moisture, degree days, length of growing season and more place an indelible signature on a vine and its fruit that make certain places special, unique and celebrated.

This year, the Alisos Canyon AVA (American Viticultural Area) was granted and is now the seventh AVA in the Santa Barbara region. It was borne out by nature and identified by the men and women who worked the land as being that unique place on the planet for grapes once only known to the Côtes du Rhône region of France. It can take years for the governmental agency, (TTB), to approve an area as an AVA. Once awarded the economic benefit, the demand for the fruit grown in such a place may place a producer on the world stage of wine. Stags Leap, Russian River, Anderson Valley, Willamette Valley, Columbia River Valley, Carneros and others are such places and are now joined by Alisos Canyon.

Located within Santa Barbara County just north of Los Angeles, Alisos Canyon is influenced by the cooling Pacific Ocean air brought into the canyon by three water channels of the Santa Ynez River, Santa Maria



Thompson Vineyard at Dovecote Ranch_Courtesy of Dovecote Estate



Windswept Coastal Hills of Alisos Canyon_Courtesy of Dovecote Estate

River and San Antonio creek. All three flow into or around the canyon to create extreme diurnal temperature shifts on an average day. Beginning at sunrise, cooling fog and air may wake you with 60- to 70-degree mornings. By midday, it can get up to 85 or 90 degrees and by sunset cool again to the low 70s. The soil types—sand, shale and limestone—offer drainage and minerality, while the temperatures (a bit warmer than Santa Maria Valley) are perfect for Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre, Cinsaut, and Piquepoul as well as other Rhone Region wine grapes.

The surrounding AVAs of the Santa Maria Valley—Santa Ynez and Bien Nacido—are best known for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The 2004 movie “Sideways” brought almost instant prominence to the region and American Pinot

Noir at a time when Pinot Noir struggled to stay in the top 10 fighting varietal category. Alisos Canyon is a place now identified as the “Goldilocks Rhône Zone”. There, you will find vineyards 15 to 30 years old from producers such as Andrew Murray, Casa Dumetz, Jaffurs, Dovecote and Martian Ranch, among others. The noted vineyards of Thompson, Black Oak, Watch Hill and Alisos will be found designated on a vintner’s label further identifying a place within the AVA that again is unique to the whole for the quality of fruit from a specific place.

For myself, these wine grapes offer wonderful and varied aromatics, depth of extract and richness of flavor like no other. Châteauneuf-du-Pape is celebrated for a reason. It is these same wine grapes that attract many like myself for the elegance

and power they offer. It is well known that, in leaner years of the past, many Bordeaux estates would seek out Côte du Rhône Syrah for color and structure to blend into the Cabernet and Merlot. In recent years, many vintners worldwide, from Tuscany to Washington State, are blending Rhône varieties for the benefit of color, aromatics, acidity and depth of structure.

The Alisos Canyon AVA has landed on the world stage, and, if you have the opportunity, I would suggest a visit and addition of these wines to your private cellar. Here are some suggestions to try with a great many thanks to winemaker Wesley Hagen of the Miller Family Wine Company who was very generous in providing me with all the educational information for this article. You may reach Wesley at whagen@jwilkes.com.

George Parkinson is a member of the Court of Master Sommeliers Americas, studying for his Masters Certification. He is also a member of the WSET & Masters of Wine program based in the UK. George is a home wine maker and brewer with over 30 years experience in the hospitality and wine industries. He lives in Hilltown, PA with his wife and family.

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2018 Martian Ranch Wanderstar Reserve Grenache Blanc
 93pts Wine Enthusiast

2017 Dovecote Grenache Blanc
 91pts Wine Enthusiast

2015 Casa Dumetz Grenache Thompson Vineyard 93pts Wine Enthusiast

2018 Tensley Syrah Thompson Vineyard 94pts Vinous

2016 Andrew Murray Syrah, Alisos Vineyard 94pts Vinous

2017 Epiphany GSM, Thompson Vineyard 93pts Wine Enthusiast



Misty Winter Morning on Thompson Vineyard_Courtesy of Dovecote Estate