



Napa Valley's Newest AVA: Years of Effort Pay Off for Calistoga

After a six-year debate with the federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), Calistoga was granted its own American Viticultural Area (AVA), making it the 15th official AVA within the Napa Valley. Calistoga vintners anticipate the AVA will add value to their brand, and in the words of Rex Stults, Industry Relations Director for Napa Valley Vintners, will "concrete Calistoga's place in the world of wine." Additionally, the AVA will aid consumers in distinguishing one wine from another, during a sometimes confusing decision-making process, in which the label is often a consumer's only source of information beyond the price tag.

Chateau Montelena Winery winemaker Bo Barrett wrote and filed the petition for the new AVA in September, 2003. He then made three lobbying trips to Washington, DC. "Of course Calistoga deserves to show up on AVA maps of the Napa Valley. We thought we were simply fixing a technical flaw that was keeping the name 'Calistoga' off those maps," he says of the drawn-out process. "It should have been a slam dunk."

An AVA is a designated wine grape-growing region with distinct geographic features and growing conditions, such as climate, soil and elevation that contribute to a wine's identifiable features, such as taste and aroma. Effective with the newly mandated AVA, labels claiming Calistoga in their name or as their AVA must contain a minimum of 85% Calistoga grapes. Brands that currently have Calistoga in their name have three years to meet the 85% requirement or alternatively drop the word "Calistoga" from their name. Resistance from two wineries using the name "Calistoga" contributed to the delay in the new AVA.

Congressman Mike Thompson (D-St. Helena), who has a family background in the wine industry, was instrumental in getting the AVA approved. Barrett credits him for the successful outcome. "Mike Thompson did all the heavy lifting," he says.

For vintners such as Jerry Seps of Storybook Mountain Vineyards, the formal Calistoga AVA is a welcome tool in further branding Calistoga as a renowned wine region. "Anything that gives consumers a better idea about where their dollar is going is helpful," says Seps. "It conveys more truth in advertising for people buying the wines."

Stults agrees that meaningful and accurate labeling will give consumers confidence in their purchasing decisions - a necessary element for the typical consumer who believes that the name on the label is in fact where the wine comes from. "Wine is a product of place, and the only method a consumer has in choosing and trusting their purchase is the label."

Calistoga's Chateau Montelena was largely credited with putting Napa Valley's wine prowess on the international map in 1976 when its 1973 Chardonnay prevailed over French wines in a blind tasting in Paris, France. Calistoga boasts a unique terroir (special characteristics created by geography, climate, soil, etc.) that has an intensity all its own. Ranging from volcanic soil with cooler hillside climates to flat and warmer pockets, Calistoga varies in its overall flavor profile. Diverse as the Calistoga region may be, Seps believes it will be known particularly for its intensity and "minerality" as it becomes a more cohesive brand distinct from other Napa Valley AVAs.

Some of the same geologic factors that provide Calistoga its trademark mud baths and spas, such as pure volcanic soil and geothermal waters boiling deep underground, also contribute to the area's terroir. As Seps puts it: "People come here for the unique experience, and they can take some of it home with them in the wine."

Rex Albright, former Calistoga Chamber of Commerce Director, views the AVA approval as a huge win for Calistoga as a community. "Among other things, it was a pride issue," he says. "Calistoga has been producing world-class wines since the seventies, yet has never been recognized as a formal AVA."

Albright says the AVA is an opportunity to market Calistoga more cohesively. Many wineries have already updated their labels to indicate Calistoga as their AVA designate - approved to print legally as of January 7, 2010. Although it may be several harvests before the Calistoga name is more widely recognized by consumers, Albright believes the AVA is "already a huge shot in the arm for morale, and the people of this community are proud to have the Calistoga name on the bottle."

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