



Discovering wines of Dry Creek Valley with Ann Petersen

By Marisa D'Vari

Do you like Zinfandel? This variety can be considered a “California Classic” and grows well in many parts of the state. The Dry Creek AVA within the larger Sonoma AVA specializes in Zinfandel, its historical grape. Today I had a chance to lunch with Ann Peterson, Executive Director of Dry Creek’s wine tourism organization, to get a better sense of what is going on in the region.

Despite its descriptive name that suggests extreme scorching heat, Dry Creek is not a terribly hot region. Dry Creek is classified as a Region II climate for grape growing. Long warm days of abundant sunshine are tempered by cool breezes and fog provided by the nearby Pacific Ocean. This cooling effect allows the grapes to retain acidity from the cool nights as well as supporting the production of white grapes that need cooler temperatures such as Sauvignon Blanc.

Dry Creek Valley is one of the oldest wine growing regions in California, with vines grown here since the 1880s. In fact, one article in the local paper in 1878 praised the region for producing some of the best wine in the state. It is located in Northern Sonoma and anchored by the town of Healdsburg. It measures 16 miles long by 2 miles, with 9,000 acres planted to grapes. Dry Creek is the third largest designated American Viticultural Area (AVA) in Sonoma County, comprised of 70 wineries and 150 growers.

The soils of Dry Creek Valley are quite varied, resulting in wines with different flavor profiles. For example, metamorphic soils result from rocks first formed by volcanos and are found in the Western benchlands. These soils are red and rocky with a high iron content. They result in wines that show cherry and raspberry fruit with a dried floral character. Igneous soils are formed from rocks that originate from the Earth’s crust and also come to the surface during volcanic activity. They are light brown and more gravelly, perfect for Bordeaux grapes as well as Zinfandel. Sedimentary soils are found along the valley floor. Dusty, brown, and well drained, these soils are idea for Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay.

We began the lunch with a glass of a crisp refreshing white 2015 Fiano from the Lago di Merlo vineyards, to demonstrate the diversity of the region in terms of grape varietals. As the lunched progressed we tried the 2015 Nalle Zinfandel, full bodied and delicious, a wine that spends 11 months in 25% new French oak, as well as the delicious 2015 Rafanelli Zinfandel. Many of the growers here sell most of their wine directly to consumers, yet you can find the wines in many cities in the USA market.

Ann and the region’s marketing arm are very active in bringing awareness of the Dry Creek appellation to the world. Since the larger Sonoma AVA has more global recognition, many producers choose to label

their wine with both the local Dry Creek and Sonoma AVA designations. Dry Creek also has an initiative to be 100% sustainable by 2019.

Most of the vineyards and vines are old, and in some vineyards you can find both Zinfandel and Carignan (a traditional blending partner) planted side by side, along with Petite Sirah (another traditional blender). According to Ann many of the children of the winegrowers and winemakers are taking their parents' place and bringing in the enthusiasm of the new generation.

In other developments, the region is working hard to create a great workplace for grape pickers, going as far as to build structures for them and arrange buses to bring them to the valley from Mexico on a temporary work permit during the harvest. That said, the region is also moving more towards mechanization in the vineyard that may help address the labor shortage.

Wine Clubs are a very big deal in Dry Creek, with the various wineries offering very exciting incentives for people to sign up. These include "pick-up parties" where consumers pick up their allotment of wine at the winery, as well as other parties and events held throughout the year. Ann explained that the region has also created luxury cruise experiences for consumers, featuring the wines of the region (including top winemakers) and celebrity chefs. The upcoming cruise to Provence, France in 2018 is already sold out.

Passport to Dry Creek Valley is coming up, an exciting annual event since 1990 that celebrates the region's viticultural and epicurean bounty and the farmers, vintners, and families that are part of the region.

Other exciting projects Ann is orchestrating include an Oral History project to capture the stories of growers in an audio format. It was a great conversation with a woman doing a fabulous job of bringing the Dry Creek AVA and its wines to the world stage.

<https://awinestory.com/2017/09/dry-creek-valley-ava.html>