

# Mid-Thirties

## THE DRY CREEK VALLEY AVA TURNS 35

by Christopher Sawyer

**TO STAY AHEAD** in the wine game, it's important to follow the progression of appellations. That's especially true in Sonoma County, where a wide range of new varieties, clones, and modern farming techniques have yielded more world-class wines than ever before. One case in point is the Dry Creek Valley appellation, which celebrated its 35th anniversary this year.

When Dry Creek Valley officially became an AVA on August 4, 1983, it already had very distinctive conditions and a rich history that set it apart from other American winegrowing regions. Framed by rugged mountains to the east and west, this scenic rural valley is 16 miles long and 2 miles wide. With its mixture of warm days, cool nights, and complex soils, the region encompasses 9,300 acres of planted vines and is home to half of the Zinfandel vines in Sonoma County.

The AVA also possesses a large concentration of old vineyard plantings with direct links between the past and present, a legacy that began when Swedish immigrant S.B. Hallengren planted the first vines there in 1868. By the late 1880s, the valley had nine wineries and 883 acres of vineyards. Many of the fledglings of old Zinfandel and Petite Sirah vines still in existence today were planted by Italian families who settled in the region starting at the turn of the 20th century.

Among those pioneers was Giovanni Pedroncelli, who in 1927 purchased 90 acres of hillside land, including 25 acres of Zinfandel vines, west of Geyserville. After selling fruit to local winemakers, Pedroncelli planted new vineyards with budwood from the mother clone vines on his property; today, his flagship Mother Clone Zinfandel is distributed throughout the U.S. and in export markets around the globe.

After the repeal of Prohibition, a group of Italian farming families began developing classic field blends by interplanting Zinfandel with varieties like Petite Sirah, Carignane, and Mourvèdre. When the modern wine boom hit in the 1970s, a new breed of wine mavericks moved to the area and helped establish the Dry Creek Valley Association in 1974. By the time the AVA was granted just under a decade later, the valley had developed a true sense of identity that has only strengthened over the past 35 years.

This shared passion for crafting bold, complex, and spicy wines from high-quality grapes has resulted in new plantings of Bordeaux, Rhône, and Italian varieties. The dominant white grape is currently Sauvignon Blanc, while Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot lead the reds. "Balancing the sweet fruit, retaining acidity, and capturing the unique character of the vineyard are our keys to working with Cabernet Sauvignon," says Winemaker Tim Bell of Dry Creek Vineyard, a quintessential winery founded by David Stare in 1972.

Among the proponents of Merlot is Ed Sbragia of Sbragia Family Vineyards, who, along with his son Adam, produces a fruit-forward style from his family's Home Ranch that balances wild berries, roasted plums, and cinnamon with plush texture and soft tannins. "Right now, I would argue that [Dry Creek Valley has] the highest amount of quality Merlots in the marketplace at all times," Sbragia says. "Since our family's first vintage, we've been striving to make sure our brand is one of them." ❧

*An old Lytton Springs Road sign in the Dry Creek Valley AVA.*

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