

The USA's official wine regions are called American Viticultural Areas (AVAs). Wine labels can include an AVA name if at least 85% of the wine comes from that particular area. However, the usage of AVA names is not a strict appellation system. It should not be considered as comparable to the French AOC or Italian DOCG classifications, although the systems might appear to be similar.

THE AVA SYSTEM

The original system of wine appellations in the USA was based simply on political boundaries such as county or state. For example, "Napa" meant Napa County. In 1978, however, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) published its first laws and regulations for a system of Viticultural Areas (AVAs) based on geographical and climatic conditions.

By 2006 there were more than 160 AVAs in the US, mostly in California. In many cases winegrowers themselves petition for AVA status. Some AVAs embrace entire counties; others may encompass fewer than 100 acres. Sub-AVAs exist within larger ones, and their boundaries can overlap. Green Valley AVA, for example, is an enclave within the Russian River Valley AVA, which in turn is within Sonoma AVA, which itself is within the North Coast California AVA.

LIMITATIONS OF AVAs

AVAs differ fundamentally from the European appellation system because they are simply geographical. There is no qualitative criteria attached. The example used here to illustrate this point is found in France. In France, an appellation such as "Grand Cru" can be used only for wines sourced from a handful of venerable old vineyards and made in a highly specialized way. In the USA, by contrast, there are no AVA rules governing the varieties grown, methods of training employed, yield allowed, or the style of wines produced.

On the one hand, the AVA system may be a positive force, for it allows enterprising wine

producers to experiment in ways that the old world does not allow. On the other hand, consumers have no indication of style and quality even when the label includes a famous name like Oakville, Napa Valley, or Alexander Valley. Furthermore, there are several semi-generic appellations, such as American Burgundy or American Chianti, which are allowed by US Federal Law but have little in common with their European forebears.

Let's see if I can sum all of this up in accordance with the very latest changes. The Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms is now known as the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB). This is now the governing jurisdiction for wine in America. I also went to my trusty Wine Bible for some additional updates for America and here is what I found:

- If a wine is labelled with an AVA, at least 85% of the grapes in the wine must come from that AVA.
- In place of an AVA, a wine may be labeled by a county. If that is the case 75% of the grapes in the wine must come from that county.
- Wines labeled by state have two exceptions: California requires 100% of the grapes to be in the wine and Washington requires 95%.
- When a grape variety is named on the label, the wine must be composed of at least 75% of that grape.

So, there we have it. What I have attempted to accomplish, with this article and the two previous ones, was to leave with you the understanding that each country has in place rules, regulations, and standards that govern their winemaking practices . . . and that these rules, regulations, and standards are comprehensive all the way from the vine to the bottle to protect the wine industry and the consumer.

I would like to include here a short list of words found on American Wine Labels that

were presented in an article by the DK COMPANION WINES OF THE WORLD. The words have no legal definition when used on American Wine Labels but are allowed under US Federal Law when qualified with their true place of origin such as Burgundy or Champagne. The words are generic in that they suggest, for example, how we use the words Aspirin or Band-Aid.

- **BURGUNDY:** Used loosely in USA for basic red wines. Such wine bears no resemblance to wine from Burgundy, France.

- **CHABLIS:** A blended white table wine bearing no resemblance to wine from the Chablis

region in France.

- **CHAMPAGNE:** Sparkling Wine. Probably the most abused term in the entire world of wine.

- **CLARET:** A basic light red wine.

- **PORT:** Fortified wines made from various grape varieties. Ports are made all over the globe, however the Portuguese are the clear winners when we speak of Port wine.

WINESPEAK

When I was doing my due diligence for this article I found an endless supply of material on standards, rules, and regulations. I was also able to determine that the Laws that exist today are the result of hundreds of years of writing and rewriting laws that adjusted to conditions as they evolved in winemaking practices. The best examples are found in technology, winemaking practices, education, the uncompromising passion of dedicated people, and of course the neverending search for quality. Also remember that we are dealing with a product that is reborn every year. Lots to think about!

