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The Okanagan Valley Heats Up

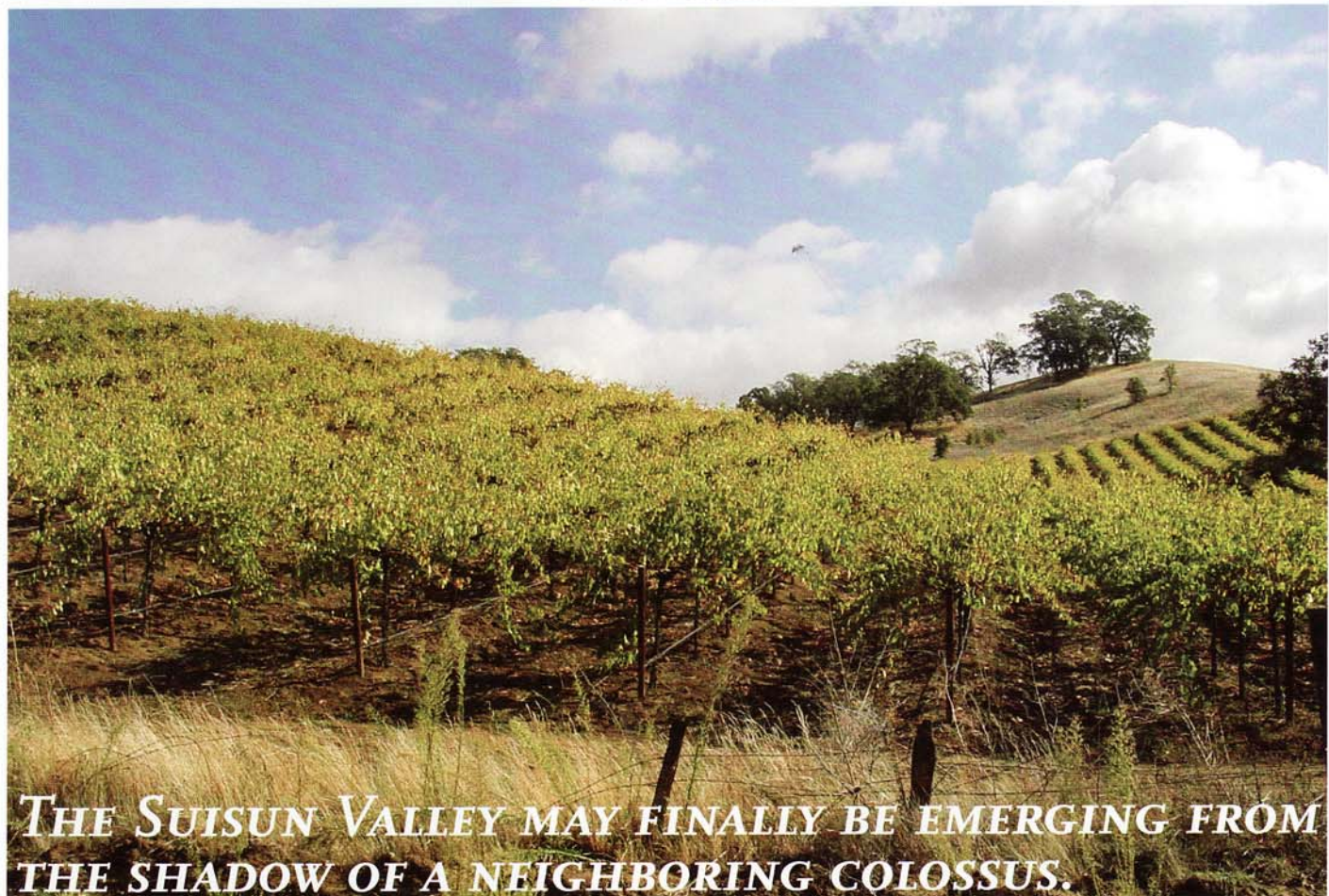
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August 2009

Suisun Valley

California



THE SUISUN VALLEY MAY FINALLY BE EMERGING FROM THE SHADOW OF A NEIGHBORING COLOSSUS.

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BENJAMIN T. WEINBERG

Stepping out of the car after the short drive from Napa's Silverado Trail to the Suisun Valley, I quickly homed in on Jo Diaz, the valley's wine publicist, waving at me from across the parking lot. She spread her arms wide, as if to encompass the hundreds of acres of vineyards that surrounded us. Then she grinned. I understood her point immediately.

"You're right," I said as I crossed the distance between us. "Who knew?"

During more than 75 years of wine production, the Suisun Valley (pronounced sue-SOON), near Fairfield, Calif., in Solano County, has been overshadowed by the Napa Valley, just across the Vaca Mountains to the northwest. Most Suisun juice has historically gone into large winery

programs—typically as bulk wine under a generic California designation—but a determined group of vintners and winery owners are aiming to change that. If they have their way, Suisun will be the next big thing on the North Coast.

Diaz led me into the Suisun Valley Wine Cooperative's tasting room, just off Suisun Valley Road. Inside were several winery representatives, including Martha Rueca-Gustafsson and Elizabeth Vargas of Winterhawk Winery and Roger King of King Andrews Vineyards. King, who is also president of the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association, led off with, "I'll bet you didn't know that Suisun is the 12th-oldest American Viticultural Area in the California system, approved Dec. 27, 1982. But we're still totally

Photo by Jo Diaz



Several of Suisun Valley's 2,200 acres of planted vineyards (left); Wooden Valley Winery (above left) and vineyards (above right); Roger King of King Andrews Vineyards (below).

unknown to the average wine drinker because of a long-time relationship between some local families and August Sebastiani."

In fact, for a significant period, the Lanza family at Wooden Valley Winery was Sebastiani's largest single grower. "Sebastiani understood our high-quality fruit and didn't want to run up prices," King said, "so whenever a new vineyard popped up, they just took it immediately. But this scheme totally unraveled with Constellation's purchase of Turner Road in 2000, because suddenly, if the grapes weren't \$600 a ton, they didn't want them. And since the original agreement with Sebastiani was only a handshake, Constellation had no problem getting out of it."

Provisionally, at about the same time, a unique funding arrangement arose under the joint auspices of the city of Fairfield and the Solano Irrigation District. This Suisun Valley Fund, whose mission involves both supporting agriculture and limiting development, has motivated the valley's grape growers to dream of what their AVA might soon become.

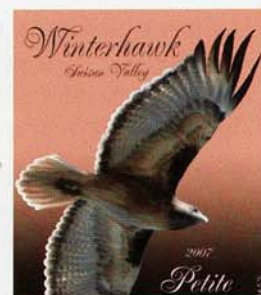
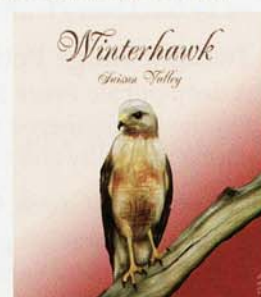
"We used to export 96% of our fruit to Sebastiani and other Napa and Sonoma wineries," King said. "But when oversupply brought it all to a standstill, we suddenly had a reason to coalesce. From here on out, the majority of our wines will be in the range of \$15-25 per bottle at retail, and certain small labels will cost significantly more."

Some well-known vintners from other appellations are already using Suisun fruit. Pretense, a Suisun Petite Sirah, is being marketed nationally as the second label of Carl Doumani's Quixote brand, although it says "Solano" rather than "Suisun" on the label. Abe Schoener's

Scholium Project sources Petite Sirah for its Babylon bottling from Tenbrink Family Vineyards in the valley.

Rhône varietals may be the appellation's ticket to success, thanks to its Rhône-style terroir. "The climate here is marine without fog, maritime with sun," said King. "Heck, we've got a 14° difference on most days between the upper and lower parts of the valley, and 40-50° diurnal swings. Cold morning sunlight, not diluted by fog, differentiates our fruit from that found in most other places, including the Napa Valley."

Confirming King's observations, famed climatologist Paul W. Skinner, in a 2009 report on "Climate, Topography, and Wine Grapes in the



OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Winterhawk Merlot Rouge 2007 \$18

This delightfully floral rosé starts with broad orange and cranberry aromas and finishes lean and lithe, overflowing with rose petals and violets. A delicious quaff for a hot summer day.

Winterhawk Petite Sirah 2007 \$20

A nose of smoky, wet wood and blackberry leads into a vanilla-cherry palate with just a hint of violets. Full and rich, this wine would match perfectly with any sort of wild game.

Sunset Cellars Zinfandel King Vineyards 2005 \$16

Overwhelming aromas of *garrigue* are followed by broad strokes of mint-cherry and cough drop. With a medium-length finish dominated by blackberry fruit, this wine was my favorite of the visit.

Twilight Ridge Petite Sirah 2003 \$30

A deep-purple Petite Sirah, dominated by soothing raspberry licorice. On the finish, there's a sensation of gravel and slate, moderated by excellent acidity and freshness.

Ledgewood Creek Chardonnay Three Clone 2007 \$18

Butterscotch and ginger aromas lead into light pear and peach flavors and a comforting Creamsicle finish. Moderately tannic, this wine exudes class and elegance.

Ledgewood Creek GSM 2006 \$18

63% Syrah, 22% Mourvèdre, 15% Grenache. Cereal and strawberries dominate the nose of this juicy blend, followed by notes of raspberry, cherry and black licorice, lime peel, and white pepper.

Wooden Valley Chardonnay Lanza Family 2006 \$18

Green melon and mown grass start the attack, and thirst-quenching lemonade brings up the rear. A slight bitterness works to the wine's advantage; the finish is light and smooth.

Wooden Valley Pinot Noir Lanza Family 2007 \$23

I can still smell the horsey aroma of this Pinot. But there's much more in store on the palate, including brown sugar, strawberry, and raspberry licorice. Moderate acidity and a long finish round out this impressive offering.

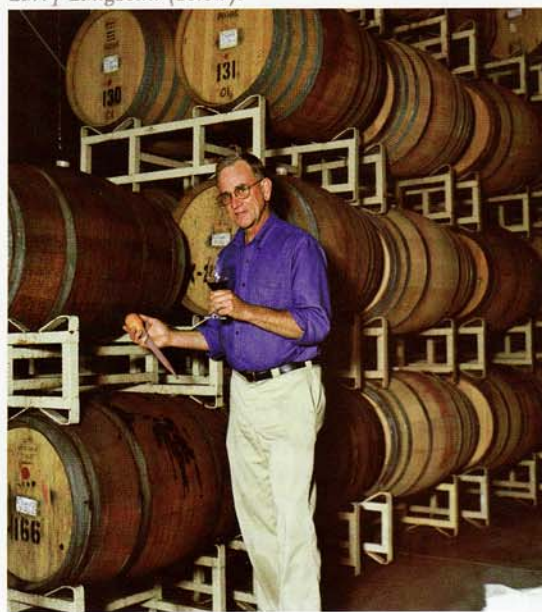
Prices are estimated retail.

Suisun Valley AVA," summarized the area's distinguishing features as a relative absence of late-spring rain, allowing undisturbed budbreak; a lack of precipitation during the summer, ensuring early ripening and avoiding disease; a Winkler heat-summation classification somewhere between regions III and V; and a topographical opening toward San Francisco Bay, producing higher maximum and lower minimum temperatures in the northern parts of the valley than on the southern end, along with a northwesterly flow of marine air during the spring.

The east side of the Suisun Valley has clay and schist soils, whereas the western foothills of the Vacas are mostly volcanic dirt—good for dark-fruit varieties with assertive tannins, such as Cabernet Sauvignon. From initial results, it appears that Petit Verdot and Petite Sirah will also be winners. Expect more varietally typical white wines, mostly Chardonnay and Rhône grapes, as well as small quantities of Albariño and Verdelho, to emerge as terroir-driven alternatives to other North Coast offerings.

"We want to be who we are, not someone else," King said—"mineral yet fleshy whites; quickly approachable reds. But also understand that Carneros and the lower part of this valley have exactly the same indices. Oakville matches our mid-valley, and Calistoga is identical to the upper portion." In other words, Suisun's climate is closely aligned with that of the Napa Valley's 30-mile length, but condensed into a scant 8 miles.

Ledgewood Creek tasting room (left) and winemaker Larry Langbehn (below).





Bunny and Dean Frisbie with sons James and Tom (left); Ledgewood Creek bottling line (right).

After my visit to the tasting room, Diaz took me to two of the valley's iconic family-owned producers, Ledgewood Creek and Wooden Valley wineries. "Good tanks, good barrels, good environment, good grapes—that's what we do around here," drawled Ledgewood winemaker Larry Langbehn as we sat down at the tasting table. "Oh, yeah, and good ownership." Langbehn's employers, Dean and Bunny Frisbie, are second-generation growers; their sons, James and Tom, are also in the business full-time.

Ledgewood produces a wide range of grapes, including five different clones of Chardonnay, Mourvèdre, Petite Sirah, and many others. Langbehn echoed King in comparing the valley's terroir to that of the Rhône: "Sunshine without fog, relatively cool, very deep, rich soil. Of course, that can create other problems, including high vigor potential. We want the grapes to have long hang time to fully develop flavor, but then we end up with high sugars, sometimes too high. We don't regularly green-harvest, but if we don't manage vegetative growth carefully, it could happen. We do drop fruit, but the vines around here can support a big crop load because of the rich soil."

Wooden Valley was founded in 1933 by two bachelor brothers, Salvador and Manuel Brea. Mario and Lena Lanza became partners with the brothers in 1944 and bought them out in 1955, though they didn't start self-labeling their wines until 1989. Third-generation farmer-winemaker Rick Lanza, asked what makes his wines stand out, theorized that "it gets a bit warmer faster here than else-

where on the North Coast. Otherwise, we're just like every other nearby appellation."

Just like everybody else? The Suisun Valley's long history of bulk-wine production may indeed still linger in the wine industry's perception of Solano County and, to be fair, perhaps in some of the wines themselves. After all, Suisun and Green Valley are the only two recognized AVAs in the county; the remaining, undesignated vineyards stretch north up to and past Sacramento, Calif.

But at their best, Suisun Valley wines have a distinctive purity of fruit, combined with amazingly soft and silky tannins in even the stoutest of varietals. Although still clearly hand-sells, these bottlings should be included on most restaurant wine lists—particularly when it comes to Rhône varietals, both red and white. I think we'll all be hearing more from the Suisun Valley very soon. 🍷



KEY PRODUCERS

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Suisun Valley Wine Cooperative

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