

SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION.



As Seen On...



— FEATURE ARTICLE —

Suisun Valley: The California North Coast's Forgotten Gem

With its wide-ranging climate and grape-growing know-how, Suisun Valley was bound for wine making stardom. It has just taken awhile. The wait is over.

by Clark Smith
August 18, 2008



At the southeast corner of California's North Coast AVA, Suisun Valley is the little AVA that could.

First the basics. It's "Suh-SOON." This underappreciated enclave tucked into the Fairfield Gap, east of Jamieson Canyon and south of Wooden Valley, home to a handful of Don Quixote winegrowers and an experimental hotbed which has already resulted in a smattering of world class wines and more than a few of the best bargains in the North Coast, has been the secret weapon of several Napa producers for decades.

The current bottom line is this. Today smart shoppers would go to Suisun to buy Sauvignon Blanc and Petite Sirah. They would buy A LOT of these two varietals because they are not only often terrific values but among the most distinctive and enjoyable in the State.

But for wine geeks like me, the real adventure lies ahead. Kept barefoot and pregnant by major wineries throughout the 20th Century, Suisun is only now beginning to explore its potential and to find its identity. We are in the midst of a Forrest Gump moment when the future is unfolding before our eyes, and for my money, the great wines this region is capable of haven't been made yet.

There's another reason to visit Suisun, which is that these guys are the real deal – salt-of-the-earth growers.

The Geography This eight mile long bifurcate Valley possesses all of the climatic diversity of Napa. It can't be thought of as one terroir, but is separated into four distinct climatic zones. Ongoing studies by vineyard climatologist Dr. Paul Skinner show that despite its proximity to Suisun Bay, the cooling influences of prevailing winds do not come from there but from easterly breezes from Jamieson Canyon.

This means that the shielding effect of west-lying hills is as important to microclimate as the proximity to the Bay. This seasonal wind blows principally from April to mid July, 9AM to 4 PM, and vanishes in July, August and September. Since it is gone during harvest, the region is not prone to the high pH / high TA problems we see in Monterey. A third factor in grape maturation and varietal suitability is the depth and heaviness of soil, which unlike Carneros tends to be deep clays on the valley floor, more reminiscent of valley floor soils in Coombsville and Stag's Leap.

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The coolest zone is the exposed southern flats above and below Interstate 80, which are chilled by cooling easterlies, and the heavy alluvial soils permit only the most cold-loving varieties such as pinot noir to mature. The mid Valley is partially shielded by its 400-foot western escarpment, and can bring in cool climate Rhône varieties and Sauvignon Blanc.

Up valley sites in the Upper Suisun Valley (west fork) and Gordon Valley (east fork) resemble Calistoga's Region 3 climate, and are more suitable for Bordeaux varieties. But our tasting indicates that the fourth terroir shows the most promise, the elevated terrain above the valley floor which is just beginning to be explored for intense, mineraly Cabernet, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah. In all these zones, fog is not an issue. Full sunshine all the time suppresses rot and mildew, suggesting great potential for organic practices, but also can lead to elevated sugar levels at ripeness.

History Savvy consumers who taste Suisun's great wines will ask, "Where have you been all my life?" Well, right there in your glass. For decades this obscure region has invisibly provided the combination of quality and economy which has made the blends and price point formulas of North Coast brands work.

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Suisun has been home to growers
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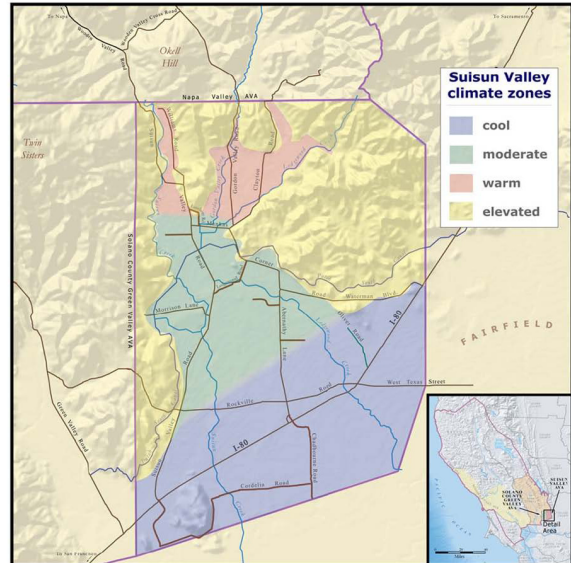
Its life's blood has been grape sales to prestigious wineries over the hill who possessed no wish to establish its reputation, but rather to benefit from the combination of high quality fruit and low per-ton pricing by keeping the local farmers under the radar. Since this is the way all other crops are grown in this country, it's not surprising that these earnest growers were caught flatfooted by hiccups in the supply chain. Because of their dependency on outside grape sales, twice the valley has suffered cycles of boom and bust.

When California began in the late 1950's to move away from port and sherry production and into a table wine focus, a planting expansion led by Chic Lanza and Al Abruzzini (son of Beringer winemaker Fred Abruzzini) supplied Napa wineries, especially Christian Brothers, with Chenin Blanc, Zinfandel and Grey Riesling which were bottled as Napa Valley wines. Although Suisun is not in the Napa Creek watershed, neither is most of eastern Napa County, including Pope Valley, Chiles Valley and Wooden Valley, itself merely a northern extension of Suisun Valley.

By 1970, lower Suisun, mostly near Cordelia Junction, was solid grapes, planted there because the ground was too marginal for orchard crops such as pears and prunes, for which the upper Valley was reserved. As in the vineyards of Europe, grapes were a way to exploit cheap land with no other use.

Perplexingly, BATF in 1982 clamped down on the use of the Napa Valley appellation for Suisun fruit, but failed

The Complex Microclimates of the Suisun Valley AVA



Within the Suisun Valley appellation exists a wide range of growing conditions, making the region suitable for a host of varietal choices ranging from cold-loving varieties like Pinot Noir, to warm climate ones like Cabernet, Zin and Petite Sirah.

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to extend this logic to the non-Napa Valley portions of Napa County. Caught in the crossfire, Suisun growers had to grin and bear it as grape orders plummeted in preference to growers across the County Line.

Suisun's next patron was Sebastiani, and by the late 1980's, the whole region was planted, driven by contracts for thousands of tons of Napa Gamay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel ("unique bramble flavor") as well as Chenin Blanc and Green Hungarian which disappeared into the Sonoma giant's huge vats of North Coast fighting varieties. In the year 2001, the region was again devastated when Sebastiani shrank itself from 2 million cases to a tenth that size, and its Central Valley brands, picked up by Constellation, dropped the Suisun contracts. The simultaneous grape glut doomed perhaps 4,000 tons to be left hanging, while Gallo scooped up fruit for \$150 a ton.

Even today, 96 percent of Suisun's fruit is exported. But now the movement is away from the big boys and more and more geared to relationships with small, quality-oriented wineries, especially those interested in featuring the appellation on their labels. A growing percentage of these are outside California, including the prestigious Biltmore Estate, Napa maverick genius Matthew Rorick of Forlorn Hope, and the dynamic Sauvignon Blanc mega-boutique Manifesto.

Local production is building, too. A decade ago, there were three local wineries. Now there are ten. Approaches run the gamut from the Lanza Family's home-grown, self-taught, tasting room-oriented Wooden

Valley Winery to the sophisticated (and pricier) LedgeWood Creek Winery, where veteran winemaker Larry Langbehn draws on Davis training and three decades at the helm of prestigious Napa labels. Despite its smallness, we found good wines for every palate in a wide variety of price ranges and styles.



One of the pioneer wineries in Suisun Valley, Wooden Valley Winery had one of the first tasting rooms for visitors in the area.

What happened to Suisun's appellation rights just ain't right. Suisun is separated by nothing but a county line from growers selling fruit for five times the price a few hundred yards up the valley. Is Suisun in the Napa River watershed? Heck no. But neither is much of the land in Napa County which sports the Napa Valley appellation. Pope Valley, Chiles Valley and Wooden Valley are by no stretch actually in the Napa Valley, and by any logical

standard should be using their own valley names or Napa County appellation.

When you visit Suisun, expect wines with excellent fruit and round tannins. In general the style of the wines show an artful understated intent when it comes to wood and alcohol, and in general the wines show surprising balance and appealing restraint in contrast to the typical impact wines of recent vogue with its Napa neighbor. Tasting Suisun is a little like stepping into a time machine. Like Napa 40 years ago, it's likely that the tasting room guy is a grower or winemaker.

THE BEST-OF-APPELLATION TAKE-AWAY: REGIONAL VARIETAL TYPICITY

Let's explore what our BOA evaluation panel gleaned from our tasting for each grape type, with an eye to distinctive characteristics which a flight had in common, particularly those which distinguish the region from others. First the whites.

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At a recent tasting of Suisun Valley wines Appellation America discovered numerous wines which advanced to Best-of Appellation for their notable appellation distinctiveness and quality.

clay soils) suggested to me the presence of healthy cover crops. Interestingly, this varietal is grown all over the valley, and at least one producer successfully blends fruit from the cool mid Valley's deep clays with a portion from the a warmer climate and shallower soils well up LedgeWood Creek to produce a wine which combines the gooseberry and grapefruit which typify this varietal in Bordeaux.

These wines were, however, distinguished from Graves, from Sancerre and from New Zealand SB by a fragrant lychee nut aromatic element and a rich coconut aspect on the palate, both of which may owe to the preponderance of the Sauvignon Musqué clone in the region's plantings. It is not unknown to encounter the aromatic varietal Verdelho blended into SB here to enhance these traits.

Chardonnay: This varietal is largely restricted to the sheltered fertile loams of the mid Valley's perimeter. Although rendered in a variety of styles, the group consistently delivered a ripe apple aroma rather than the citrus or lemon oil aromas of neighboring Carneros. Call it Golden Delicious or Pink Lady, it really put us in mind of Macon, but generally kissed with at least a little oaky toast.

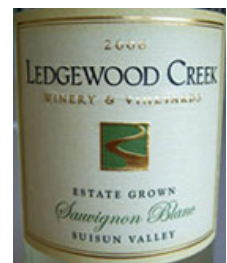
For vineyards which venture into the deep heavy clay of the central mid-Valley, a second common element was an evergreen mintiness reminiscent of green pineapple. In general we found these wines round and lush on the palate with good balance and well integrated wood which lead us to believe that the local aesthetic is to put the grape flavors first, even in this wine type so commonly overblown elsewhere in the State.

Pinot Grigio: This newcomer is planted in several microclimates, and currently produces wines of standard quality which deliver peach and clove aromas, mild fennel and stone fruit flavors with enough minerality to provide pleasurable drinking at affordable prices.

Riesling: This varietal has a tough time ripening in Suisun, particularly in the lower valley locations where it is currently located. Mild jasmine and prickly pear / citrus elements weren't driven enough to capture our interest, and even low brix wines lacked acid.

Sauvignon Blanc: We were treated to a broad enough cross section to get us excited about Suisun SB as a rising superstar. The understated, fresh winemaking practices typical here seem the perfect vehicle for the fresh, frank aromatics, usually presented simply without oak or malolactic. If California's simple, peachy style is increasingly out of step with the global marketplace, these wines can carry our flag with style. The influence of Denis Duboudieu's viticultural ideas, which have revolutionized the making of this varietal from Graves to Marlborough, shows to wonderful advantage in this region.

The wines are uniformly very pale, with driving grapefruit aromas, and always with a sauvage basil or tarragon undertone which elevates these wines to serious global status. Surprising minerality in the finish (given the heavy



This wine and the ones pictured below were among those that advanced to Best-of-Appellation in APPELLATION AMERICA's recent Suisun Valley tasting.



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Viognier: Our single example showed the expected peach aromas and oily mouthfeel typical of low altitude Viognier. For those who believe in a Rhone wine future for Suisun, we are sure to be seeing small percentages for this varietal in red blends, and its lush and generous nature seems aligned with the lush Chardonnays and Sauvignon Blancs of the region.

The rosés: First it must be admitted that Suisun is not France, and those seeking out the dry vin gris of Bordeaux will have to look elsewhere for now. Today, they are sweet. But the tourists will love them, and they offered a window on the potential for several varietals here for vinification in either style. Merlot displays classic tea and cherries. Our only Napa Gamay, a grape for which the Valley is historically well known, suffered like so many good rosés, from too early release, being somewhat reduced but still giving us a glimpse of the cinnamon and dried cherry elements typical of the grape in this region.

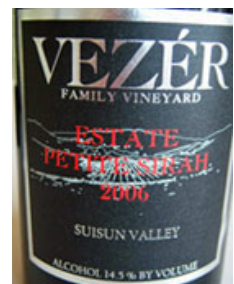


Best of all was Darryl Sattui's Gamay Rouge (from Gamay Noir, the true Valdeguie) Rosé, for which I refer the reader to our Gold Medal notes.

Many of Suisun's current reds harken back in style to the rounder, more varietally expressive wines of the late 1970's in Napa and Sonoma, and aficionados of that era will find endless delight in their friendly prices and styles. There are, however, harbingers of bigger things to come.

Napa Gamay: A legacy grape for which Suisun has long been revered if not famous. Mid valley plantings offer a plum base note accentuated by exotic sandalwood and cinnamon notes laced with a mild earthiness. Forced by our Federal bureaucracy to sell under the name Valdeguie, its market has all but vanished.

Zinfandel / Primitivo: Here we found a terroir enthusiast's delight, teasing out that which is cultural from what Nature gives us. Suisun Zinfandels possess a uniformity of characteristics which are unlike anywhere else. The puzzle is nature vs nurture: the degree to which these characteristics are driven uniquely and inexorably by climate and soil, and how much is human practice.



The Suisun time machine transports us to before the hang time craze, before Parker, before the Big Wine was the goal, and to be sure, Suisun Zinfandel resembles the wines of that era, particularly Sebastiani's, for which August coined the phrase "unique bramble flavor." But that was Suisun fruit, so maybe those wines even then owed their character to the region more than the winemaking.



These wines are more floral than fruity. Medium bodied and garnet colored, they exhibit the seductive bouquet found in a tea of hibiscus and rose hips – the mustardy herbaceousness of marigold together with the red fruit of dried cranberries. This seems to nail the old Sebastiani wines more descriptively than the standard "raspberry" note in the books. The fine, resolved tannins also harken back to before Zin was a size contest, but one wonders if it is even possible to make blockbusters here. Its elegance doesn't owe to deep, heavy soils, because Zinfandel is always planted in warmer microclimates with lighter, rockier, better drained conditions.

Petite Sirah: The mold-suppressing powers of the constant sunlight which characterizes this valley is greatly beneficial for this thin skinned, rot-prone varietal. Another trait of

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the region is harder to explain – the dense, sweet, fine tannins which occur both in the deep heavy mid valley soils and the new rocky elevated plantings in the warmer climes up valley. The combination is dynamite, as evidenced in the shower of Gold and Silver medals awarded for these uniformly rich, generous offerings packed with blueberry aromas and refined soft tannins which are seldom encountered so heavily extracted yet so drinkable.

Syrah: In contrast to Petite Sirah, these wines are not particularly dense. Generally grown on the deep heavy mid Valley soils, they offer a distinctive characteristic mocha aroma along with plums and cola notes with soft, plush, feminine tannins drinkable young and not destined for ageing. Plantings further up the western fork repeat this pattern, showing that warmer conditions aren't a strong factor. Some of this femininity may be related to clonal choices in early plantings, for new experiments with clones 97 and 383 have produced a richer, denser class of wine.

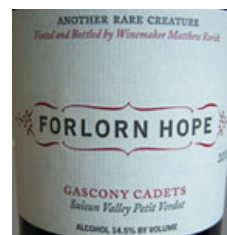
Pinot Noir: Suisun Valley offers perhaps the right climate but the wrong soil for Pinot Noir. The wines we looked at, while they displayed some spice and violet notes, needed propping up from Petite Sirah. We should however reserve judgment until we see the results of Francis Mahoney's western valley floor clonal trials. Attempts to exploit the low valley near Interstate 80 haven't paid off as yet.

Cabernet Sauvignon: The valley floor does not ripen clone 7 (the workhorse of central Napa) very well, prompting extended hang time to coax maturity. The result is wines of advanced development, already in youth showing complex bottle bouquet, forward raspberry aromas and chocolate flavors carried by plush, feminine tannins. New plantings in the western hills show a different picture. Getting up off the valley floor with clone 337 (which is showing such success in cool Coombsville) produces angular, age-worthy wines with greater aromatic depth and angular, masculine tannins, considerably more mineral in the finish. Despite these differences, raspberry aromas run through both styles.

Merlot: As in St. Emilion, the heavier clays which suppress ripening of Cabernet Sauvignon promote a fat, round wine from Merlot. Classic tea and cherries run through these wines without the bell pepper aromas common elsewhere. These wines are simple and likeable, but don't invite cellaring.

Barbera: The one pure-varietal example we looked at, while it suffered some winemaking flaws, displayed great promise for the Nylan clone, which produced terrific color and dense raspberry aromas. The high malic acid this variety displays in cool climates will be the challenge Barbera faces in Suisun, but the potential in the upper valley's elevated sites is intriguing.

Petit Verdot: Without a doubt, there is use for more PV in Suisun. Even when it displays the simple naive fruitiness to which it is prone, the Cabernets and Merlots here could use some color and the structure this blender reliably provides. On the other hand, the spectacular achievement of Forlorn Hope's 2005 Gascony Cadets simply blew us all away with its blackberry and cassis aroma fest and sweet dense tannins, grown right in the heart of the mid valley floor. It's too much to hope that these are typical characteristics for this varietal here, but it's worth finding out.



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EXPERIMENTS IN THE HOPPER

Suisun Valley is in many ways a work in progress. The upside of such a region is that it is now a hotbed of experimentation. The cyclic nature of its economic fortunes has provided myriad opportunities to learn from past mistakes. New experimental plantings include Spanish varieties such as Albarino and Tempranillo. Rumors of early success with Grenache and Grenache Blanc make sense in the region. We look forward to the next decade's exploration of new clones and elevated sites off the valley floor.

To make their costs, Suisun Valley growers need to get their prices up over \$1,000 per ton and stabilize their market through diversification into small producers. Meanwhile the burgeoning local business seems capable of supporting serious price levels and promises to continue to showcase the region. We can rely on the region to continue to provide affordable, drinkable quaff for Napa and Sonoma producers who can think outside the box while we observe the fruits of experimentation slowly emerge as the great future classics of Suisun.