

SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION.



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Suisun Valley's time – and temperature - is right now

A recently completed climate and topography report has officially set the stage for Suisun Valley's potential as a premium-grape growing region.

By ALAN GOLDFARB
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There has been much written about tiny Suisun Valley in these pages over the last several years. While APPELLATION AMERICA's Best-of-Appellation™ evaluation of Suisun last summer went a long way toward validating the region's growers and producers, a recently completed climate and topography report has officially set the stage for Suisun Valley's potential.

At least as far as Ron Lanza is concerned. Lanza's grandfather started the tiny Wooden Valley Winery in the Suisun Valley in the 1940s and his family has been selling grapes since the '60s. Paul Skinner's report on how the area's climate affects Suisun's vineyards seems to be precisely what Lanza and his colleagues need to finally bring sanctioned recognition for their efforts.

"It gives the idea that we're not what some people think we are – too cold or too hot," Lanza said, referring to the report by Skinner's vineyard investigation company, Terra Spase, which was commissioned by The Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association.

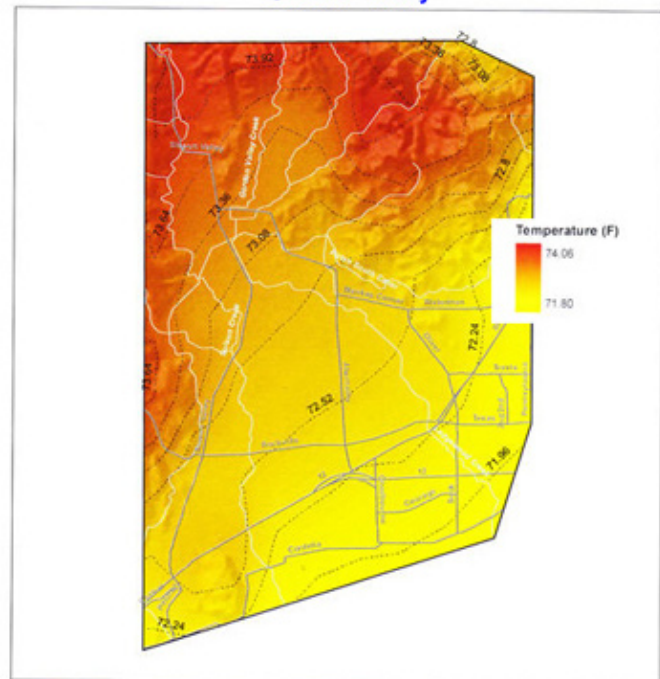
Further, Lanza said, the 68-page report made it clear that, "We're not in the Napa Valley. We're in the North Coast and the report connected us to that." Lanza also concluded from the account, "It's something we've always known, but until you put facts in front of people ..."

The facts are: The 29-square-mile region, southeast of Napa, CA., and east of Berkeley, has about a dozen wine brands and approximately 3,000 planted acres. It's with those acres, and assuredly more to come in the next couple of years, that the Suisun Valley is beginning to sort itself out, and with it, there's a coming of age.

Ninety-six percent of its grapes – most of which are not yet considered to be among the pantheon of California's world-class fruit sources – are used for wines elsewhere, including the East Coast. More significantly, most are still going to commodity-wine producers, mainly because Suisun's growers have not built up the cachet that higher-priced grapes command.

(It's interesting to note that it costs from \$30,000 to \$50,000 to purchase an acre of ground in Suisun (pronounced suh SOON), compared to approximately \$250,000, which is what its neighbors directly over the hills to the east command.)

Springtime (Mar.-May) Mean Maximum Temperature (2001-2007)
Suisun Valley



A just released report on Suisun Valley's climate reveals the harvest months in Suisun are "not as warm as Napa or not as cool."

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But now, Terra Spase's report may change the paradigm. The investigation's last paragraph states: "The potential climatic effects ... appear to be well suited for suisun-valley-mapthe production of many premium quality wine grape varieties ... This is a rather unique situation for a viticultural area of this size and should be recognized as an important distinguishing characteristic of the Suisun Valley AVA in the wine and grape-growing world of today."



The words may be precisely what Suisun's vintners and its forty to forty-five growers wanted to read. Now, of course, they have to take that information and manifest it in the bottle.

They also need to build up confidence in the qualitative efficacy of its fruit in order to raise prices, even in this terrible economic climate, and to give the impression that the Suisun's product is a player. Further, it's crucial for Suisun's producers to hold onto their grapes for their own production; or at least, to sell the fruit to small, independent, or artisan winemakers who will cherish it for its quality and scarcity.

As a result, they will be able to elevate the price of their wines that currently fetch between \$15-25 a bottle. It's a category that may fit well into the sweet-spot of today's cash-challenged consumer, but will raise nary an eyebrow among the elite crowd that fancies itself amongst wine's connoisseurship.

According to Paul Skinner, who told APPELLATION AMERICA that Suisun is "An area that should produce medium- to full-bodied wines in a fairly high-quality package because it does have soils (with which) you can wind up with balanced production."

While Skinner has not yet officially been commissioned to study Suisun's soil profile, he believes that it's Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Zinfandel upon which Suisun should stake its claim. That's because he likens the climatic conditions there to the nearby Napa Valley and to that of the Barossa Valley of Australia. The report points out that September-October temperatures – the harvest months in Suisun are "not as warm as Napa or not as cool.

"It's not as warm as Calistoga (northern Napa Valley), and a little warmer than Carneros (in Napa's south). Adelaide (also in Australia) and Barossa are closer (in profile) to Suisun."

He also stresses that mildew pressure on the vines (caused by humidity) "is a telltale characteristic of vineyards we see in Carneros, Rutherford, and Calistoga."

Which was sweet-sounding to the ears of Ron Lanza. "I know when I wake up on a summer morning and it's 53 degrees out and it warms up to 100 and drops back down to the 60s, I know that's a great climate for growing grapes," he concluded. "Napa brags about warm days and cool nights (but) to have an independent party put the data together, you can't argue with that. We've been an appellation for 25 years (27 actually) and nobody knows about us. When you think you have a certain ability and nobody believes you; now we can go out and prove it."

So, Lanza and his colleagues have begun working with the county of Solano to push for the Suisun Valley to become a wine destination. There are big plans for more plantings, more wineries, motels, bed & breakfasts, and restaurants.

Most important though, the winemakers of Suisun have now got to go out and put it in the bottle. This is their be-careful-what-you-wish-for moment. Lanza believes his colleagues are up to the task. "If you had to sum up (Terra Spase's report), "the science proved that the growers here were right."