



As Seen on steveheimoff.com

A little appellation tries harder

STEVE HEIMOFF

June 15, 2009

Spent a day in Suisun Valley and learned a bunch of stuff I didn't know before. Also unlearned some wrong stuff, which is half the battle in understanding anything.

Having never visited the valley (which was declared an American Viticultural Area surprisingly early, in 1982, just a year later than Napa Valley), I had only a general conception of where it is. In my stereotype, I lumped it in with "those hot AVAs over by the Delta," like Lodi and Clarksburg. It wasn't until someone showed me a proper map that the scales fell from my eyes and I saw that, had county boundary lines been drawn slightly differently, Suisun Valley would have been in Napa County, and maybe even in Napa Valley.

I mean, the fact that it's tucked into a dog-leg in Solano County seems completely arbitrary; someone told me it has to do with water, which always has caused for crazy politics in California. Actually, Suisun (pronounced "suh-SOON") is directly east of the city of Napa, and slightly northeast of Carneros. It's nestled in a low-lying part of the Vaca Mountains, which form Napa Valley's eastern wall. True, if you go a little further inland from Suisun Valley, you're in the baking hot Central Valley. Suisun benefits from the same maritime influence that sweeps in from San Pablo Bay to Carneros. But it does balance it with that inland heat. The summertime degree day average is just a tad higher than Rutherford's, but the south is cooler than the northern part.

The winemakers I met during my visit all conveyed the same message: they're ready to take their appellation public. They want writers to get to know their wines, and they want the public to see Suisun Valley as a wine country to visit that's close to the I-80 Freeway, but without the jam-packed crowds of Napa-Sonoma.

I tasted some pretty good wines and some not so good ones. The two problems I saw with quality were, one, the soils in the lowlands (where the vast majority of grapes are) are deep and fertile, and make for overly-vigorous vines. But the soils along the Napa River from Calistoga down through Yountville are similarly vigorous, proving that fertile dirt in itself can be dealt with, given proper viticultural practices. (And there are some tempting hillsides to be developed.)

The other problem I saw, and it's one I've written about extensively, is when a winemaker doesn't know that his wines have flaws. This "cellar palate" is the biggest obstacle to making great wine. Because if you don't know something's broken, you're not going to fix it.

But the good wines far outnumbered the mediocre ones. I didn't take formal notes during my visit, but I had a few Sauvignon Blancs that were as good as anything out of Lake County, a GSM that really turned me on, a lovely Chardonnay, and one or two others. A few were too old, but seemed like they would have been fine a year ago. This reflects more on the winery's inability to move product, which is a management problem, than a winemaking issue.

On the vino-tourism side, the countryside around Suisun Valley is old-timey California. It hasn't changed much in 100 years despite being right off the Freeway between the Bay Area and Sacramento. It has plenty of physical beauty and rural charm. The vintners there (and other interests, I suppose) are talking about developing a little visitor-friendly area, where restaurants, inns, antique shops, art galleries and other amenities would cluster, while visitors could go and taste wine at the local wineries.

Oh, did I mention prices? Pretty much under \$18, and lots of good values under \$14. The reason for that is because it's Solano County, not Napa (although you have only to cross two-lane Wooden Valley Road to get from one to the other). In fact, I asked some winemakers to come up with a ten-word headline that would telegraph what they're trying to convey. After some head-scratching, one of them said "coastal valley cool, with value." I couldn't have said it better myself.

California has dozens of lesser-known AVAs that want to be famous. The odds are against any one of them making it, like in Hollywood where many are called but few are chosen. Suisun Valley has its work cut out for it, but their smarter people know what has to be done, and Mother Nature seems to be giving them permission to do it.

Here's wishing Suisun Valley luck!