

SONOMA COUNTY'S

RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY IS COMING INTO ITS OWN

*Grapes from this district are
some of the best in the world for fine
wine production*

In the past twenty years, Sonoma County's Russian River Valley has acquired a reputation for producing some of the world's best Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays, Zinfandels, and sparkling wines. We pay it a visit, in this special report.

SPECIAL REPORT

Where is the Russian River Valley (RRV)?

In Sonoma County, 50 miles north of San Francisco and 10 miles east of the Pacific Ocean. The district loosely follows the circuitous path of the Russian River, as it flows around Healdsburg and turns south and west, to flow through Guerneville. It is bordered on the south by the Sebastopol Hills. It is about 150 square miles in size, of which about 15,000 acres—12% of the total surface area—is planted to wine grapes. The Russian River Valley has about 25% of Sonoma County's total wine grape acreage.



How many grape growers and wineries are there in the Russian River?

The best Russian River wines display two winning characteristics: refined varietal character and remarkable vintage-to-vintage consistency.

More than 90 wineries and 250+ growers. Wines designating the Russian River Valley AVA are produced by more than 250 wineries.



When did it become an approved viticultural area (AVA)?

In 1983. The size of the AVA's boundary was extended in October 2005 to add sections within the district's fog zone that had previously been excluded (notably the Sebastopol Hills). The first wine to carry

the Russian River geographical designation was a Pinot Noir produced from the 1973 vintage, by Davis Bynum winery.



When were wine grapes first cultivated in the Russian River area? Pinot Noir?

Probably in the 1830s, by Russian traders who moved south and inland from their coastal settlement at Fort Ross (established 1812), seeking more temperate agricultural sites. They established farms near Graton and

Freestone, and very possibly made wine. (The Russians had grown wine grapes at Fort Ross; it is not known if they made wine.)

After the Gold Rush, European settlers helped develop a thriving wine industry in the RRV; by the 1890s there were approximately 7,000 acres of grapes under cultivation. Pinot Noir was probably one of the cultivars grown, although this has not been proven.

Pinot Noir was certainly cultivated in the RRV soon after the repeal of Prohibition. However, its rise to superstar status arrived only after a group of pioneering growers and vintners—including Joseph Rochioli, Joe Swan, Charles Bacigalupi, Davis Bynum, among others—demonstrated that Pinot Noir in the Russian River held considerable promise as a varietal table wine.

Generally, what are some of the defining characteristics of (the better) Russian River Valley wines?

That depends on the wine (and vineyard), producer's style, vintage, and so on. But the better wines, regardless of type (including sparkling wines) tend to display two winning characteristics:

- **Elegant varietal character.** Meaning both aromatic fineness and flavor quality, together with somewhat lighter structure (higher perceived acidity, less fleshiness) than those from similar varieties grown in warmer districts. They are also generally "brisker", racier, and somewhat more refreshing. At their best, they are also among the most refined versions of their respective types produced on the planet.
- **Remarkable vintage-to-vintage consistency.** In terms of quality, wines from the Russian River are surprisingly consistent from year to year—more so than possibly any other top district worldwide that specializes in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir (which together account for 2/3 of the total vineyard acreage in the appellation) . There are definite variations from one year to the next, but those differences are less qualitative than they are stylistic, when compared with wine differences found in other districts.

What distinguishes the climate and soils of the Russian River Valley (AVA)?

- **Climate.** The RRV has a temperate climate, with a strong dose of summer fog. Bordered on the west by coastal hills, its year round climate is moderated by the proximity of the cool Pacific Ocean. During the growing season, the area receives daily fog intrusions that burn off during late morning or early afternoon hours, only to return (primarily through the Petaluma Wind Gap) the same evening.

The fog's impact on the quality and flavor of winegrapes grown within this zone is pronounced. It slows ripening, preserves grape acidity, and retains "cool climate" varietal aromas/flavors, yet also is not so severe that grapes will not fully ripen—and consistently (which they do).

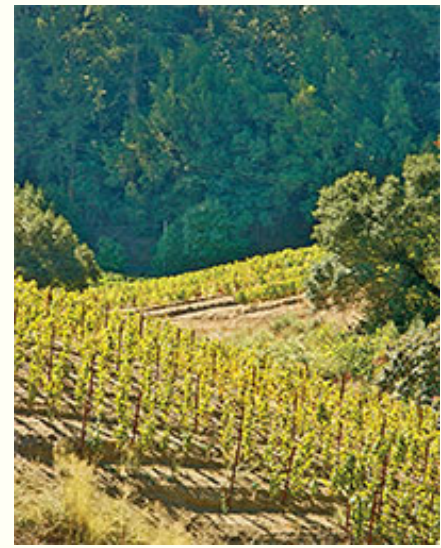
- **Soils.** More soil types (60+) have been identified in Sonoma County than in the country of France. The Russian River Valley generally has well-drained soils, an essential condition for fine wine production in the zone. Budbreak is early, and the vines have an extended growing season in which to ripen their grapes. This permits mid-to-late



season varieties like Zinfandel and Merlot to ripen consistently in warmer sites or areas of the zone.



The soil types are also extremely complex and diverse, due to the area's tumultuous geological past, as summarized by Joseph Swan's winemaker, Rod Burgland: "Millions of years ago, at the coast, the collision of the Pacific and North American tectonic plates caused a great deal of uplifting, that resulted in the surfacing of Franciscan formation shales (old soils from



oceanic trenches) and marine sandstone. Active volcanoes spewed ash and lava ("Sonoma volcanics") here, and rivers and other streams deposited alluvial materials, with higher clay content, from eroded Sonoma volcanics. They also created gravel terraces. The Russian River also has mixtures of all of the above, creating an incredible diversity of soil types, most of which are very well drained, which is critically important to grape growing."

So-called "Goldridge" soils (sandy loam) are especially prized for fine wine production because they drain well and are not very fertile. Thus, conscientious, quality-driven viticultural practices ("precision farming") can be applied to vineyards, with great success.

What are the Russian River Valley's best varietals and wine types?

The area is a work-in-progress, so many more varieties will be added in the years ahead. Nevertheless, these four varietals, in particular, are currently producing superior RRV-designated wines. (The recommended producers list is not exhaustive, but those reviewed in *Restaurant Wine*.)

1. **Pinot Noir** – Easily, some of the finest versions of this demanding varietal produced anywhere, ranging in style from aromatic, crisp, and medium weight to voluptuous and very full bodied. About 4,600 acres planted. **Some recommended producers:** Arista, Castle Rock, Dutton Estate, Dutton-Goldfield, Frei Brothers, Fritz, Hanna, Hartford Family, Iron Horse, Kenwood, La Crema, Lynmar, MacMurray Ranch, MacPhail, Merry Edwards, Oriel, Orogeny, Patz & Hall, Paul Hobbs, Pellegrini, Rochioli, Rodney Strong, Roessler, Russian Hill, Scherrer, Sebastiani, Sebastopol Vineyards, Siduri, Williams Selyem, Woodenhead
2. **Chardonnay** – Russian River Chardonnays range from crisp and Chablis-like to fleshy and tropical, nevertheless displaying a remarkable "transparency" of character (we define as: "refined

varietal aromas/flavors, combined with ripe acidity and textural delicacy”—even the richer versions). Quality has improved dramatically in the past decade, and will for decades ahead. About 6,600 acres planted.

Some recommended producers: Buehler, Castle Rock, Dry Creek Vineyard, Dutton Estate, Dutton-Goldfield, Fritz, Gallo of Sonoma, Hartford Family, Iron Horse, Kenwood, La Crema, Lynmar, Marimar Torres, Nickel & Nickel, Orogeny, Patz & Hall, Paul Hobbs, Pellegrini, Ramey, Rudd, Rochioli, Sebastiani, Simi, Sonoma-Cutrer

3. **Zinfandel** – One of the greatest districts of all for Zinfandel, capable of producing wines with considerable refinement as well as extraordinary depth and length—all without the heaviness associated with Zins from warmer regions. About 1,200 acres planted.

Some recommended producers: Carol Shelton, De Loach, Dutton-Goldfield, Fanucchi, Harvest Moon, Hartford Family, Kenwood, La Crema, Limerick Lane, Pellegrini, Ravenswood, Robert Rue, Rodney Strong, Spann Vineyards, Williams Selyem

4. **Syrah** – In time, we expect Russian River Syrah to equal the quality of its Pinot Noirs (this prediction does not mean that growers will switch to Syrah; those decisions depend on consumer demand)—and, it is not far off the pace even now, although there is so little of it planted (about 400 acres).

Some recommended producers: Arrowood, Dutton Estate, Dutton-Goldfield, Frei Brothers, Pax, Russian Hill, Sebastopol Vineyards



Not to be ignored

- **Sparkling wine** – As Iron Horse (in Green Valley) has proven for years, what makes the Russian River suitable for refined table wines—cool climate and well-drained, low vigor soils —translates well into sparkling wines. **Producers:** Iron Horse, J Vineyards & Winery
- **Sauvignon Blanc** –Already well established in reputation, but quality is in the midst of a serious upgrade. About 500 acres planted. **Producers:** Chateau St. Jean, Dutton Estate, Hanna, Kenwood, Rancho Zabaco, Rochioli, Rodney Strong, White Oak
- **Pinot Gris** – Extremely promising (remember, it is simply “white Pinot Noir”); yields elegant, refreshing versions in the Russian River (richer in Chalk Hill). About 150 acres. **Producers:** Chalk Hill, Inman Family, J Vineyards & Winery, MacMurray Ranch
- **Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot** – About 500 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon and 1,000 of Merlot are planted, about 1/3 of it in Chalk Hill, where the wines display fuller, riper character than elsewhere in the AVA.
- **Other excellent RRV varieties:** Dolcetto, Gewurztraminer, Petite Sirah, Sangiovese, Viognier

What are the RRV’s sub-districts?

There are seven that generally are referred to, two of them AVAs, which may be used as stand-alone AVAs or in conjunction with Russian River Valley.

1. **The Middle Reach** – The stretch of land from Healdsburg south, along the Russian River, to the point that it turns and heads west. Vineyards are on benchland and on western hills. The climate is not as cool as areas south and west, but not as warm as Chalk Hill, to the east.
2. **Chalk Hill (AVA)** – In the northeastern section of the district, is named for the white volcanic ash in its soils. It is slightly warmer

Chardonnay	6,600
Sauvignon Blanc	500
Pinot Gris	150
Viognier	60
Gewurztraminer	50
Other white	100
Total White:	7,460
Pinot Noir	4,600
Zinfandel	1,150
Merlot	1,000
Cabernet Sauvignon	800
Syrah	400
Petite Sirah	100
Other red	200
Total red:	8,225
Grand Total:	15,710

* RESTAURANT WINE® estimate.

than other RRV areas because it is higher and less fog impacts it; thus the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards found here. It is known also for its Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blancs.

3. **Green Valley (AVA)** – In the southwestern edge of the RRV. It is the coolest part of the region, and yields quite fine, well-structured wines, notably Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Laguna Ridge – The low hill area where the Russian River turns west toward the ocean; not as cool as Green Valley, and home to many important Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vineyards.
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5. **Santa Rosa Plain** – The relatively flat plain, which includes prime benchland, lies west of Santa Rosa. It has a wide variety of grape varieties cultivated on it, and some century old Zinfandel vines. The soils vary, but are somewhat richer here, with more clay deposits. Yet a remarkable range of quality wines is produced from its grapes.
6. **Sebastopol Hills** – Newly added area to the AVA, this is an area south and west of Sebastopol. Vineyards are planted primarily to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Its wines tend to be aromatic and elegant in character, due to the regular presence of ocean fog and wind flowing through it.
7. **Western Sonoma** – The far western edge of the Russian River AVA, running north from Freestone to Guerneville. Until recently, hardly planted, as it is generally very cool; but it is an extremely promising area.



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