

EXCERPTS FROM CONTRIBUTING EDITOR **STEVE HEIMOFF'S**

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WHAT A DIFFERENCE A COUNTY LINE MAKES... OR DOESN'T

Back in the 1990s, a young couple, Casidy Ward and Lynn Hofacket, purchased a parcel of land high up on the slopes of the Mayacamas Mountains. They planted four clones of Cabernet Sauvignon at elevations ranging from 900 feet to 1,700 feet, on a steep slope whose soils consisted of sandy clay loam and degraded volcanic basalt, which is more or less **perfect for Cabernet**. Later, they hired the veteran **winemaker, Marco DiGiulio**, to make the wine, which is called **HIDDEN RIDGE**.



**[Hidden Ridge] is a very good Cabernet,
as fine as just about anything from Napa Valley.
I gave the 2005 "55% Slope" 95 POINTS.**

Backtrack: The couple's original plan wasn't to make wine; it was to sell their fruit to other wineries. But they soon found out they had a problem. Their vineyard was technically in Sonoma County. ***The only appellation it was entitled to was "Sonoma County" because it was on the wrong side of all the AVA lines in Napa Valley. Despite being on the same range as Spring Mountain and Diamond Mountain, they couldn't use those AVAs because the appellation boundaries end at the Napa-Sonoma county line.***



And because the resulting wine could bear only a Sonoma County origin, the grapes were not considered prestigious. Certain Sonoma winemakers couldn't see putting yet another Sonoma County Cabernet on the market for \$75, nor were Napa vintners interested in turning to Sonoma

County for fruit when there were grapes available from Napa's tony sub-AVAs. The only solution, as it turned out, was for Ward and Hofacket to make their own wine, with DiGiulio help.

HIDDEN RIDGE



You can get a better sense of the predicament the couple faced by looking at the numbers, which prove that the mere fact of a Cabernet grape's origin - not necessarily its quality, just where it was grown - has absolute influence on its price. Consider the following statistics for the year 2008:

Cabernet Sauvignon Grapes

- * Average price per ton statewide: \$1,111.93
- * Average price per ton District 3 (Sonoma/Marin): \$2,321.51 (Marin Cabernet acreage is negligible.)
- * Average price per ton District 4 (Napa): \$4,779.55
- * Highest recorded price per ton District 3: \$6,454.47
- * Highest recorded price per ton District 4: \$15,000.00

Clearly there's something wrong with this picture. Terroir supposedly is God-given and unchangeable, a basic fact of Nature. What are county lines? Man-made artificialities, political conveniences derived often from economic calculations. So what is an AVA - an expression of terroir, or an expression of economics?

I'm not saying there are not differences between the eastern and western slopes of the Mayacamas... there are differences, but they're not strong enough to justify a difference in grape pricing exceeding 100%.

This is why in the past I've argued that appellation in itself is not a reliable indicator of wine quality. I know people will write in to say the opposite, but the case of Ward and Hofacket illustrates very clearly the inadequacies of our current system of AVAs. Nor is this a slam against Napa Valley, whose Cabernets and Bordeaux blends continue to delight and astonish me. But it is to suggest that we need to be more broad-minded and less chauvinistic when we think about California Cabernet Sauvignon.



Very fine Cabs and blends come from Sonoma County, from Paso Robles and other regions, not just from Napa Valley....



So I've said it before and I'll say it again: **When it comes to deciding what wine to buy, the winery's reputation is your best bet. After that come a range of variables: price, wine type, the food you're pairing it with, and perhaps even if you have a personal connection with the winery.** Appellation also counts, but not as much as some interests would have you believe.

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