



## Wine 101: Napa Valley

Welcome back to Wine 101. In this week's episode, VinePair tastings director Keith Beavers takes listeners all across the Napa Valley and the 16 additional American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) that are responsible for some of the United States's finest wines.

The area first gained international fame in the 1976 Judgement of Paris, when an American wine won big in a blind tasting. Since then, Napa Valley's wines have grown to even greater heights and secured a place for decades in the White House. Beavers takes listeners back to the beginning and traces the links between California missions and the first vineyards. This history is loaded with a surprising amount of fur trapping and mountain men, and somehow gave way to the creation of the Valencia orange.

While many producers had to concede to the frustrations of Prohibition, a few of the Napa vintners who survived continue to grow today. By breaking down each region into its most famous producers, and the ties between different climates and grapes, this episode truly celebrates Napa Valley and all it has to offer.

And this is really cool. Their goal was, well, during Prohibition, bulk wine was sort of the thing that was part of the loopholes and everything. Their goal was to bring fine wine back to this area. And it began to work. And by the late 1960s, mid-to-late 1960s, America was getting really, the drinking culture was getting back into dry red wine because during Prohibition, it was all sweet red wine. That sweet tooth never really went away. But winemakers like Robert Mondavi, wineries like Trefethen, Freemark Abbey, Chateau Montelena, Sterling Vineyard, Stag's Leap Cellars, Mayacamas, Stony Hill were showing that this area could make fine wine again. Actually, Robert Mondavi was the first, he was the guy that started doing the tasting rooms. The tasting rooms basically began with him.

And all this led up to 1976 with the Judgment of Paris, when American wine in a blind tasting won out over French wine. And these wines came from the Napa Valley. That kind of excitement led the United States to start creating and forming our own appellation system called the American Viticultural Areas. This is in 1978, and in 1980, the first AVA was awarded — not to Napa Valley, but to a wine region in Missouri called Augusta. So the Augusta AVA is awarded in 1980. Then eight months later in 1981, Napa Valley is the first AVA to be awarded to California. And this is where things go crazy. From the late '70s until the 1980s, the wineries went from around 20 to about 200 or more.

North of St. Helena, now we're up here, we're away from the influence of San Pablo Bay. And this is where the Calistoga AVA is. And it's one of the oldest areas in Napa for winemaking, but also, the AVA was only created in 2009, but here is the home of Chateau Montelena.

This is the winery that made the white wine that won the Judgment of Paris in 1976. It was a Chardonnay. So you have a Cabernet Sauvignon being made in the cooler region that won. And then you have a Chardonnay made in a warmer region that won. But the thing about Calistoga is it can be 95 degrees during the day, but at night because of a nearby valley, you can get down to 50 degrees. So it's a perfect place for Chardonnay, and man, it's a beautiful Chardonnay. And those are the nine AVAs that live on the valley floor. Now up in the mountains in the two ranges bordering the valley, there are six AVAs over on the eastern range, the Vaca Mountain Range, just east of that Stags Leap district up in the mountains is an AVA called Atlas Peak. It's known for pretty amazing Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. You're up there. It's got a good elevation, got great acidity and these wines are beautiful, elegant, structured wines. At one time, an Italian winemaker tried to grow Sangiovese here and it didn't really work, but they realized Chardonnay and Cab did, so of course, this is Napa, they work. They're beautiful. Just northeast of that in this mountain range is the Chiles Valley, it's a small AVA. It's about 1,200 feet above sea level. And this is again mountains. Great Zinfandel comes from here, great Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc.