



European, West Coast vintners vow to protect naming rights

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NAPA, Calif. (AP) - In a meeting of the new and old worlds of wine, European and West Coast vintners signed a pact Tuesday, vowing to protect naming rights from Champagne to Napa.

"When it comes to wine, place matters," said Joel Aiken, president of the Napa Valley Vintners' board.

The pact, a "joint statement of principles," was signed by representatives of Napa and vintners in Oregon and Washington as well the European wine-growing regions of Champagne, Port and Sherry.

Vintners, who toasted their agreement at Copia, the Napa wine museum -- with French champagne, naturally -- said they are taking action because of concern about mislabeling and the lack of legal protection for geographically based names in the United States.

Champagne, for instance, is a style of sparkling wine made in the Champagne region of France, while sherry stems from the Spanish city of Jerez.

However, in the United States, sherry is generic for a number of sweet, fortified wines and champagne may apply to any light, sparkling wine, although the label has to specify where the wine was made, for example, "California Champagne." In Oregon, however, state law prohibits labeling domestic products as champagne.

In contrast with Europe, U.S. wines are generally named after grape varieties. So, consumers here drink cabernet sauvignon rather than a red Bordeaux, chardonnay rather than white Burgundy.

But in the last decade or so, U.S. vintners, particularly in the Napa Valley region of Northern California, have been staking a claim to regional naming rights. A 5-year-old California law requires that wines with "Napa" on the label be made from grapes grown in that region.

That law has been vigorously challenged by Central California vintner Fred Franzia, maker of the popular Two Buck Chuck. But so far, courts have sided with the Napa winemakers.

Vintners signing the agreement Tuesday said the pact was the beginning of a larger effort that includes recruiting winemakers into their alliance from other regions and, eventually, running educational campaigns for consumers.

"We are happy to see that the most prestigious wine-producing regions in America are also wanting the integrity of their names to be recognized and protected," said Bruno Paillard, founder of Champagne Bruno Paillard and representing vintners in that French region.