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## Recognizing Wine's Taste of Place

By Linda Murphy

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One of wine's finest attributes is that it can taste of the place where the grapes were grown.

This taste is found in the minerality of a lean, lemony Chablis made from Chardonnay grapes grown in limestone soils in northern Burgundy. It's in the smoky, meaty notes of a Syrah from the Cote Rotie ("roasted slopes") in France's Rhone Valley. It's in the pungently herbal character of a Sauvignon Blanc made in New Zealand's cool, marine-influenced Marlborough region. It's in the dark berry, pepper and spice in an old-vine Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel made in sun-baked Sonoma County.

Climate, soils, drainage, elevation, slope, sun exposure, availability of water -- even air pollution -- affect how a vine grows and thus the wine it produces. Although winemakers can influence the aroma, flavor and texture of their wines by their choices of barrels, yeasts, fermentation techniques and aging regimes, few argue that the environment in which the grapes are grown -- the French call this *terroir* -- is key in determining how distinctive a wine will turn out, how it will separate itself from the pack of like varietals. It does this by expressing a sense of place, or as my colleague W. Blake Gray wrote last week about old-vine Zinfandel, a taste of history and distinct personalities in a glass.

Unfortunately, too many California wines are generic blends of grapes that have no stated origin, other than that they were grown somewhere in California. Wines like Carlo Rossi California Burgundy, Tott's California Champagne and Inglenook California Chablis suggest that they were made in prestigious European wine regions. They're not, and despite the "California" disclaimer on the label -- and despite the bottom-basement prices of these simple jug wines -- Burgundy, Champagne and Chablis shouldn't be on these labels. Give me a flute of Tott's, but call it sparkling wine and not Champagne. I want total truth in labeling, not just partial.

So do wine industry representatives from Napa Valley, Oregon, Washington state, France, Spain and Portugal. After meeting in Napa on July 26, they signed a declaration (see Page F6) supporting the protection and promotion of wine place names.

Without a firm plan in place and with few funds, the supporters voiced their commitment to spreading the word -- at tastings, on Web sites, in communications to consumers and the industry, and in the recruitment of like-minded vintners -- that it does matter where grapes are grown and what the label says.

Tom Shelton, president of Joseph Phelps Vineyard and a representative of the Napa Valley Vintners (NVV); Bruno Paillard of Champagne Bruno Paillard, representing Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC); and Port producer George Sandeman of the House of Sandeman are among the players in this grassroots campaign to promote the authenticity of their winemaking regions. They are targeting wines they believe to be falsely labeled Champagne, "Burgundy," "Sherry" and "Port" when the grapes used are not grown in Champagne, Burgundy, Spain's Jerez-Xerez-Sherry and Portugal's Douro Valley, respectively.

Though they weren't identified by the "place is important" group, the targets are most certainly producers like E. & J. Gallo Winery of Modesto, the most aggressive marketer of wines labeled as "California Champagne" (Andre, Tott's), "California Sherry" (Fairbanks) and "California Burgundy" (Gallo Hearty Burgundy, Carlo Rossi Burgundy).

Gallo is not the only culprit -- store shelves are lined with wines like Almaden California Chablis, Inglenook California Chianti (both brands are from Canandaigua Wine) and Port-style fortified wines from throughout California, Australia and elsewhere.

And it's all legal, at least in the United States. Winemakers here can use what the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) calls semi-generic place names like "Champagne," "Burgundy," "Port," "Sherry," "Chablis" and "Chianti" (Italy), on their labels, as long as these words are accompanied by a U.S. geographic location, like "California" or "America."

It galls European vintners, and me, to see these wines, which are prohibited in the 25-member European Union. The EU finds "California Champagne" and similar terms to be misleading and confusing to consumers, as well as harmful to the image and value of wines produced in the regions that rightfully claim the origin name.

"Just as it doesn't make sense for Florida oranges to come from New Mexico or Idaho potatoes from Georgia, a wine bearing the name of Napa Valley or Champagne should not come from China," Paillard says. "We are committed to educating consumers about the importance of place and ending the use of misleading labels. (The United States) is the only place in the world where this exists."

Even in the United States, the topic sparks disputes, such as the NVV's legal skirmish with Fred Franzia and his Bronco Wine Co., producer of the \$1.99 Charles Shaw "Two Buck Chuck" wines sold at Trader Joe's stores.

In May, the California Court of Appeal upheld a state law passed in 2000 that requires any wine with the word "Napa" on the label to be made from at least 75 percent Napa County grapes. Bronco owns three brands -- Napa Creek, Napa Ridge and Rutherford Vintners (Rutherford is a Napa Valley sub-appellation) -- that were not made from Napa County fruit.

In response, Bronco is now selling Napa Creek wines made from Napa grapes and with a Napa Valley appellation on the label for \$3.99 at Trader Joe's. Whether they're well-made

wines or not, Four-Buck Fred just thumbed his nose at the very people who met last week to begin their efforts to protect their wines' origins.

Expect Franzia to appeal the court decision, and expect NVV to pull out all stops to protect its image as one of the world's most prestigious wine regions.

"Winemakers worldwide know that when it comes to wine, location matters," says Joel Aiken, president of the NVV board of directors and vice president of winemaking for Beaulieu Vineyard. "Our goal for this initiative is simple -- in Europe most people are familiar with the concept of terroir, but in the U.S. this concept is not part of the vernacular. We have joined together as winemakers to help promote a broader public awareness of why place is important to wine, and why the names of the places where great wines are produced need to be used accurately."

The state of Oregon has some of the toughest labeling standards in the U. S. wine industry; "Oregon Champagne" or "Oregon Burgundy" won't appear on a label. Harry Peterson-Nedry, founder of Chehalem winery, represented the Oregon Wine Board at the declaration signing.

"Since 1977, Oregon wine labels have not allowed unauthentic place names or semi-generic geographical indicators to be used," Peterson-Nedry says. "We heartily support worldwide recognition of accurate place identity as a basic tool for the consumer in purchasing wine and other products whose quality depends on where it is grown or made. Unless we want commonplace wines, we should honor unique places where great wines are made."

Quality, tradition and image are also at stake. There is a vast difference in quality between a \$5.99 bottle of Cook's California Champagne and a \$40 bottle of Champagne from France. The first is made through a bulk process, the second by a labor-intensive methode champenoise technique, in which still wine goes through a second fermentation in the bottle and spends years in the cellar, developing fine bubbles, complexity and refinement. When the market runs out of Cook's, the winemakers just make another batch.

"The name of a wine's origin is very important," says Etienne Bizot, managing director of Champagne Bollinger. "Americans are starting to really understand the fact that wine is not a matter of brand, it's a matter of origin."

Yet brand is a force when it comes to American wine-buying habits. Australian brands like Yellow Tail and the Little Penguin, created and packaged for American tastes, have been tremendous successes here. Where the grapes are grown is not important, just what's in the bottle -- easy-going, fruity, inexpensive wines that have a consistency of quality.

California vintners also are heavily into branding; just look at the plethora of under-\$10 wines with the "California" appellation on their labels. Sense of place is sacrificed for value, attractive packaging and wide availability for the consumer.

When Jack and Jamie Davies launched Schramsberg Vineyards in Calistoga in 1965, they put "Champagne" on their labels of sparkling wine, to show consumers that they were serious

about making fine sparkling wine from Napa Valley fruit, and that they used the same methode champenoise as in Champagne.

"In 1965, it was a difficult time in the marketplace," says Schramsberg winemaker and general manager Hugh Davies, son of Jamie and the late Jack. "Back then, I don't think anyone cared what you did or didn't do (on the label.) We gained some notice when the label said Champagne. People took us a little more seriously.

"But as time went along, in the mid-1990s, we made the move away from 'Champagne' to 'sparkling wine.' We felt that we no longer needed the term, that Schramsberg had established itself as a brand."

Yet Gary Heck, owner and president of Korbel Champagne Cellars in Guerneville, clings fiercely to the use of California Champagne on the labels of Korbel sparkling wines, which were first produced in 1882.

"It is unfortunate that they (the declaration signers) took such a position when we have been legally producing California champagne in this country for over 123 years," Heck said via e-mail. "Excellent methode champenoise quality and solid marketing, including the trademark 'Korbel California Champagne' and trademarked slogans like 'For People Who Know Champagne' and 'The Wine Lover's Champagne,' have propelled Korbel to annual sales of more than 1.2 million cases.

"In all likelihood, we (Korbel) have done more to promote the term 'champagne' in the United States than any producer from the Champagne region of France. Because our labels bear the appellation of origin -- primarily California but occasionally Russian River Valley or Sonoma County -- in direct conjunction with the word 'champagne' as prescribed by regulation and have done so since 1937, consumers know Korbel is made in the United States.

Heck says that the CIVC, EU and NVV were all formed after 1940. "Where were these people back in 1882?" he wrote.

Pressure from the EU prompted Australia, Spain and South Africa to abandon the use of semi-generic place names for wine. Even Australian producer Penfolds had to drop the word "Hermitage" from its famous Grange red wine, in deference to the Hermitage and Crozes-Hermitage regions of the Rhone Valley. The Spaniards also caved in, replacing "Spanish Champagne" with "cava," which means cellar in Catalan.

The issue, however, is far more complex than protecting place names, according to the San Francisco-based Wine Institute, a lobbying association for California wineries. In fact, it's one big ol' can of worms, worthy of a book on the subject. It involves U.S. foreign policy and trade agreements with the EU and other countries. It includes ongoing negotiations with the World Trade Organization, and is affected by policies in place with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and TTB. Tinkering is under way with international trade-related intellectual property agreements.

Why don't California winemakers simply relinquish their holds on semi- generic terms and end the debate? For one, wine-related trade negotiations also affect the names used for beer, cheese, vinegar and other products; decisions made on behalf of wine could have a domino effect on other goods. Also, vintners like Korbel's Heck have a tradition of their own to maintain and a customer base that knows his products by how they're packaged. They may not even know that there is a difference between true Champagne and sparkling wine; change won't come cheap.

The complications also include the fact that American wineries' collective focus has been varietally labeled wines rather than geographically based labels, which are used in most of Europe. The U.S. wine industry is young and Europeans have been making wine for centuries; we're still figuring out where to grow which grapes. Especially in California, Oregon and Washington state, vintners are creating federally recognized American Viticultural Areas, or appellations, that drill down to the distinctive growing sites within larger regions and the reasons for labeling the wines from them to shout their sense of place.

I wholeheartedly embrace protecting wine's origin names. The NVV- initiated declaration of last week that place is important to wine -- and to consumers -- is just a baby step, but it's a start. I want my Champagne to be from Champagne and my Burgundy to be from Montrachet, not Modesto. I'll also happily drink a chilled glass of a generic white blend from a jug, as long as it doesn't try to convince me it's from Chablis.

That's what's so wonderful about wine: there's something for everyone. Please, just tell us on the label what it is we're getting.

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#### The declaration

Representatives from seven vintner associations signed a declaration on July 26 advocating the protection of winegrowing place names. The declaration states:

"Whereas, it is acknowledged that there are extraordinary places on earth from which great wine is consistently produced.

Whereas, the names of these places are printed on labels side-by-side with the names of the producers to identify the origin of the wine.

Whereas, wine, more than any other beverage, is valued based on its association to its place of origin.

Whereas, even before modern technology allowed us to tie specific definitions to the soils, terrain, and climates of noted wine regions, winemakers were drawn to these special places.

Whereas, the names of these places are familiar, and synonymous with quality.

Whereas, we respectfully submit that the place where wine is grown plays a very important role in a consumer's selection process.

Whereas, we are furthermore united in our belief that the geographic place names of wine regions are the sole birthright of the grapes that are grown there, and when these names appear on wines that do not contain grapes from the region, they lose their integrity and their relevance to consumers.

Therefore, be it resolved that we, as representatives of some of the world's leading wine regions, join together in supporting efforts to maintain and respect the integrity of these place names, which are fundamental tools for consumer identification of great winegrowing regions and the wines they produce."

Signed,

Joel Aiken, president of the Napa Valley Vintners board of directors and vice president of winemaking at Beaulieu Vineyard

Krista McCorkle Davis, executive director, Walla Walla Wine Alliance

Jorge Monteiro, president, Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e Porto (IVDP)

Bruno Paillard, Champagne Bruno Paillard, representing the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC)

Jamie Peha, marketing director, Washington Wine Commission

Harry Peterson-Nedry, representing the Oregon Wine Board and founder of Chehalem winery

Bosco Torremocha, vice president, Consejo Regulador de las DD.OO Jerez- Xeres-Sherry