



With wine, location is everything

By Holly Howell

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

Amen. This is the first line of the Joint Declaration to Protect Wine Place and Origin, a document that was written six years ago by an organization called the Center for Wine Origins. Founded by the wine-growing regions of Champagne (France) and Porto (Portugal), this group is making great progress to ensure that wine-place names are protected and not abused.

"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."

Huzzah! Although this seems like a no-brainer, you'd be surprised at how often this seemingly simple task is not executed properly. Genoa salami is not made in Virginia. Parmigiana is not cheese powder in a green tin. And the word Champagne should never appear on a wine made anywhere in America.

"Whereas, wine, more than any other beverage, is valued based on its association to its place of origin — and with good reason."

Very simply, location matters. It matters so much that certain products (like wine) will actually take on the name of the region or village in which they are made. This is what distinguishes them from all other wines out there. Barolo, Priorat, Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape, Madeira, Champagne and Sauternes are all wines that are named for the "place" in which they are made. And they take that pretty seriously.

"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."

Absolutely. We see this all the time in the foods that we purchase. Hawaiian pineapples. New York cheesecake. Idaho potatoes. Kansas City barbecue. Maine lobster. Gilroy Garlic. Florida grapefruit. These American products not only speak of quality, but they also carry a sense of pride from the land and the people that produce them.

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

Yes, it does. One could easily assume that this movement is being driven by the wine regions themselves, but the force behind it is actually the consumer. The more savvy we get about our consumables, the more we demand that our labels stay honest.

The Center for Wine Origins recently did a poll of American consumers, and a whopping 79 percent consider a wine region to be an important factor in purchasing wine.

More than 80 percent think that a wine region is extremely important in determining quality; 96 percent say they deserve to know that the location where the wine grapes are grown is accurately stated on the wine label. And 98 percent support the establishment of worldwide standards for all winemakers that require the accurate statement of where the wine grapes are grown.

We are no dummies.

"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 fruit from that region, they lose their integrity and their relevance, becoming merely words."

Let's face it. We blew it. As a result of some bad American habits in the 1960s, words like Chablis, Burgundy, Rhine, Champagne and Sherry have lost their true meaning. And what a shame, because these are some of the most wonderful and exquisite wines in the world. The real ones, that is.

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

I couldn't agree more. And that is why I signed the petition to fully support this movement.

You can sign it, too, at protectplace.com, and join the likes of Jancis Robinson, Thomas Keller, Wolfgang Puck, Daniel Boulud and countless other wine and food professionals in the fight to protect wine labels.

There are now 15 world regions that have joined the coalition, including Chianti (Italy), Napa and Sonoma (California), Jerez (Spain), Walla Walla (Washington), Western Australia and most recently — Long Island (New York).

Maybe the Finger Lakes will be next.