

Two Changes in Sonoma's Wine Landscape

The Pine Mountain-Cloverdale Peak appellation is approved, Russian River expands to include Gallo vineyard

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Sonoma County has a new American Viticultural Area (AVA) and one of its long-established AVAs has been expanded. The federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) approved the Pine Mountain-Cloverdale Peak appellation. Effective Nov. 28, it is Sonoma's 14th AVA. In another decision last month, the TTB approved a controversial plan to expand the Russian River Valley AVA by more than 14,000 acres.

Located in northeastern Sonoma County and portions of Mendocino County, Pine Mountain-Cloverdale Peak includes about 4,600 acres, of which only 230 are planted and another 150 are under development. As the name suggests, the AVA is mountainous, with its lowest point at 1,600 feet and highest reaching 3,000. It rises over northern Alexander Valley and runs north into Mendocino.

Wineries that currently harvest grapes from the region include Capture, Seghesio, Benziger and Francis Ford Coppola. While there are older Zinfandel vineyards in the region, most of the recent vineyards have been planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, as well as some Chardonnay.

Benjamin Sharp, CEO of Capture, said the region is distinguished by its diverse soil composition and unique microclimates. "Pine Mountain is basically fog-free year round which allows for three to four more hours of sunlight exposure during the day, though it's cooler than [Alexander] Valley by 3 to 10 degrees and it gets 30 to 60 percent more rainfall than the valley," said Sharp.

The Russian River expansion shifts the appellation's border several miles to the south and east. Wine giant E&J Gallo petitioned the TTB for the change in 2006. At the heart of the proposed expansion is Gallo's Two Rock Vineyard, which is located along Highway 101 near Cotati. About 350 acres of the 550 acres of existing vineyards in the area are planted in that vineyard.

"The expansion area shares with the original AVA the same coastal fog intrusion, climate, topography, soil and growing conditions," said Jim Collins, Gallo's senior director of coastal wine growing.

While Gallo argued the change had broad support, many winemakers and growers said they hesitated to openly challenge Gallo, a company that has deep pockets and has been one of the biggest players in the Sonoma County grape industry for decades. The Russian River Valley Winegrowers initially opposed the expansion but later took a neutral position, while prominent winemakers such as Merry Edwards and Rod Berglund of Joseph Swan argued that it diluted the integrity of the region.

First approved in 1983, Russian River is one of Sonoma County's largest AVAs and has been previously expanded twice. The new boundaries are effective Dec. 16.