

AMERICAN VITICULTURAL AREAS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Abstract

American viticultural areas (AVAs) entered the wine lexicon in 1978, when the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) of the United States Treasury Department began to accept petitions for the establishment of official names and boundaries for these "delimited grape growing regions distinguished by geographical features, the boundaries of which have been recognized and defined" by ATF. Since that time, 196 AVAs have been established in 32 states.

Recently, ATF's successor, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), has proposed changes to the AVA regulations, due in part to continuing controversies over AVA names that conflict with established brand names and also to the increased number of nested AVAs (AVAs that are located in whole or in part inside other AVAs).

Separate and apart from the proposed regulatory changes, AVAs are evolving in new directions through combined vintner and grapegrower efforts, often in the form of a non-profit appellation association. This "privatization" of AVAs takes various forms, including logos (certification marks) attesting that the wine meets specific criteria (e.g., 100% grape origin from within the AVA or a particular period of barrel aging), distinctive packaging (e.g., custom bottles for Amador County wines), and promotional efforts tied to particular varieties (e.g., Russian River Pinot Noir, Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon).

These and other issues related to the past, present and future of AVAs will be examined in this article.

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