

THE CHALONE VITICULTURAL AREA:

Its Unique Characteristics and Their Effect on Wine

The area known today as the Chalone Viticultural Area or AVA started life in the eruption of an undersea volcano known today as Mount Chalone,



the highest mountain in the Gabilan (or Gavilan) Mountain Range. The eruption occurred near the Pacific Rift at the western edge of the Pacific Plate. As the plate migrates Eastward it is subducted under the continental plate in the region of the San Andreas fault zone. This created an approximately 10 mile diameter area of decomposed granite with limestone deposits from decaying marine animals. A very rare soil combination that is very low in organic material and nitrogen in which grapevines work hard to survive having a natural limiting effect on their growth. Wine grown here has a very pronounced mineral character, like crushed rock.

Further limiting growth, is the high desert climate of the region which is in the rain shadow of the Ventana Wilderness, which can receive 75" of annual rainfall, while Chalone receives only 10". Eighteen inches per year is the minimum requirement for grape vines. As the subduction of the Pacific Plate continued, the Gavilan Mountain range was formed and the Chalone AVA now sits at 1400' - 1800' above sea level. This altitude allows bright sunlight which produces concentrated flavors and tannins which result in long aging wines.

The topography is that of rolling hilltops



providing a variety of exposures, north east south and west. More delicate grape varieties such as Chardonnay or Pinot noir, might be planted with a more east or north exposure, whereas more sturdy varieties like Syrah or Grenache could receive a boost from a southern or western facing hillside. Daily temperature fluctuations of 40°F- 60°F are common and annual temperatures vary by as much as 100°F. Cool night time temperatures help preserve the acidity in the grapes. The subduction process is responsible for the creation of the Pinnacles



This formation of re-melted rock was broken in half by the San Andreas fault with the western half travelling north at the rate of 1 ½" per year; leaving the other half 300 miles south at this time.

The warm daytime temperatures are moderated by coastal fog and cool winds flowing from Monterey Bay



So far every variety planted here seems to grow well and produce complex, elegant long aging wine that reflects the unique place that they come from. While there are only eight vineyards and one winery in the appellation there are at least 19 varieties planted: Aligote, Chardonnay, Chenin blanc, Grenache blanc, July Muscat, Melon, Marsanne, Pinot blanc, Rousanne, and Vionier fill out the roster of white varieties. The red grapes include: Barbera, Cabernet franc, Cabernet sauvignon, Grenache, Mourvedre, Pinot noir, Syrah, Tempranillo.

Then predominant varieties are Chardonnay and Pinot noir which ripen in late August and early September are the earliest to ripen. Mourvedre and Cabernet sauvignon are ready to harvest in November.

The wine coming from the Chalone Viticultural Area is complex, vividly colored, has a mouthfilling weight and supple texture on the palate, vivid fruit flavors and aromas are accompanied by a characteristic minerality. Young Chalone wines benefit from decanting, which allows the tannins to soften and the aromas to open up. White wines from this place can age beautifully for 10 or more years with exceptional vintages and magnums lasting 20 years. The red wines may be a bit tight in their youth and often drink better the next day or two after opening. Both white and red wines develop and change over the years and it is enjoyable to see how they change their expression.



Rediscover an incredible place, the Chalone Viticultural Area.

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