

## **Carmel Valley American Viticultural Area**

The Carmel Valley American Viticultural Area, or AVA, isn't as well known as some of California's more famous ones. Tucked away in western Monterey County's hills, far from any big cities, it's also off the beaten path. But it's California's 13th oldest AVA (of more than 100), tracing its recognition by the Federal government back to January, 1983. That predates Carneros, Alexander Valley, and even Monterey itself.

Carmel Valley is a relatively small place, as far as California AVAs go. Just about one-tenth the size of Russian River Valley, its 19,200 acres contain only about 300 acres under vine, about the size of a large vineyard.

If you've ever driven along scenic Carmel Valley Road, which winds from Highway 1 on the Coast past the little village of Carmel Valley inland to King City in the Salinas Valley, you've traversed the northern edge of Carmel Valley, one of 9 AVAs within Monterey County. There are some vineyards along the road, but most of them are located above 1,000 feet in the Santa Lucia Mountains, to the south and west.

The most interesting section of the AVA, from a wine quality point of view, is the Cachagua Valley, a high valley that doesn't yet have its own AVA status. The name (pronounced "ca-SHAU-wah") is said to be derived from a Native Indian transmutation of the French "cacher" (to hide) and the Spanish "agua" (water), referring to the underground springs that allow many vintners to dry-farm their grapes.

You have to travel up winding, narrow Cachagua Road, with its dazzling views, to reach the Cachagua, which is set in a kind of bowl. Although the Carmel Valley AVA is recognized by the Federal Tax and Trade Bureau (which governs wine law) as a cool coastal region, the Cachagua is so high, and so protected by its wall of mountains, that it is usually well above the maritime influence that brings in chilly Pacific breezes and fog further below. That makes the Cachagua a warmish to hot place, similar in climate to central Napa Valley -- ideal for Bordeaux-style red grapes and wines.

Most grapevines in the Cachagua are planted on steep, hilly slopes or undulating ridges. Soils on the highest peaks are primarily decomposed granites that were under the sea millions of years ago, and have been uplifted by tectonic plate activity. Lower down, the soils consist of sandstone and river rocks deposited eons ago when the Carmel and the Cachagua rivers ranged through the area. But regardless of the exact composition of the soils, the Cachagua's are very well-drained. This combination of mountain vineyards, well-drained soils, and a warm, dry climate (rainfall before harvest is complete is almost unheard of) results in grapes of enormous fruity concentration. Yet diurnal, or 24-hour, temperature swings can vary during the growing season by up to 50 degrees, resulting in cool nights that preserve vital acidity, an important factor in wines of balance and harmony.

The Cachagua style of Bordeaux reds is well illustrated by such wineries as Alhona, Galante, Heller, Joullian, and Bernardus. These are Cabernet Sauvignons, Merlots and Meritage blends that resemble a fine Bordeaux in their tannic structure and depth of flavor. The best are ageworthy, and will improve in a climate-controlled cellar for a decade or longer.