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Arroyo Seco: good wine, but nobody knows where it is

Met up the other day with **Mark Dirickson** and **Mike Kohne** here in Oaktown. You probably don't know their names but you're most likely familiar with some of the wines they've been behind. Mike was winemaker at **Rosenblum** for a long time, while Mark was at **Rancho Santa Rosa**, down in the Sta. Rita Hills. Now, they have a small new project, [Mercy Wines](#), and I have to say the wines are quite good. (My reviews will appear in upcoming issues of [Wine Enthusiast](#).)

One thing Mark and Mike wanted to talk about was how to promote the little American Viticultural Area where they've decided to get their grapes: the **Arroyo Seco**, which is in Monterey County. Of California's 104 (and counting) AVAs, Arroyo Seco is one of the smaller ones: only 18,240 acres, which makes it vastly smaller than, say, Russian River Valley, Napa Valley or Paso Robles. It's also one of the older AVAs in California, having been recognized by the Feds in 1983 (a flagship year for California AVAs, with 16 created, the most of any year, before or since, in that early-Eighties era of appellation-mania).



I've always had a good respect for Arroyo Seco. I've been there, walked through it, and every time I'm on the 101 driving along the Salinas Valley I look for it, nestled there to the west, between the valley floor and the Santa Lucia Highlands, on its own little sort of bench. It's a very rocky place, with big piles of stones left behind after thousands of years of Salinas River flooding. It's also a cold place. Winds from Monterey Bay — whose waters never get much above 58 degrees — sweep fiercely down the Valley; not for nothing are they known as the Howlers. They make Arroyo Seco a Region 1 growing area on the old U.C. Davis system. In other words, cold!

Arroyo Seco's problem has been the same as that of many California regions in the Central/South coast, all the way

down to Santa Barbara County: for many years, growers sold their grapes to big, outside companies — Gallo, Constellation, Diageo and others — who blended them into California- or Central Coast-appellated wines. The public consequently never got to hear about Arroyo Seco, which meant producers didn't want to put the name on a label, which meant none of the wines became well known, which limited price, which meant the grapes continued to be blended into bulk bottlings, etc. etc. The same old vicious circle.

In my mind, one of the first pioneers to break the cycle were the Meadors, Doug and LuAnn, at their Meador and Ventana wineries. Jerry Lohr also broke through and bottled some fine wines. But a few good wines here and there are not enough to put the name of a smallish AVA on the lips of tastemakers, like sommeliers, wine critics and merchants. Arroyo Seco still means nothing to the average consumer.

Mark and Mike want to change that, but they've been around the business long enough to know it'll be hard. For one thing, making a region famous depends only partly on wine quality. It's also a function of tourism infrastructure. One reason Napa/Sonoma and Santa Barbara are so famous is because they're so hospitable to visitors, with their inns, hotels, golf courses, restaurants, towns, tasting rooms, etc. The Arroyo Seco has none of that. In fact, Monterey County has none of that in the Salinas Valley. The last time I stayed there to report, I took a room in a Motel 6. (At least the towels were clean.)

It's a pity, because the Arroyo Seco really does have that "placeness" that a good wine region needs. It has *terroir*. As chilly as the area is, the grapes take a long time to get ripe, but there's almost no threat of Autumn rains because this is far south enough to avoid rains, usually until at least late November. (Coastal California precipitation decreases rapidly, on average, south of San Francisco Bay.) The result of the climate and the stony soils gives wines of character: great fruitiness and high natural acidity and minerality, which are wonderful traits for a wine to possess. The Arroyo Seco isn't the place for Bordeaux red grapes: way too cold (although I did once really like a 2006 Merlot from Wente). But Pinot Noir does great, as do Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, and what little Syrah there is (usually from Meador or Ventana) has a smoky, meaty Northern Rhône-style thing going on.

Over the years, the best Arroyo Seco Pinots have been from K-J (Seco Highlands), La Rochelle, J. Lohr and Carmel Road. The best Chards are from K-J, Wente, J. Lohr, Mount Eden, Jouillan and Scott Family. I've liked the Sauvignon Blancs from Pessagno, Bernardus and Radog. And now, I like all three of those varieties from Mercy.

The discussion about how to promote an AVA reminded me of similar discussions I've had with representatives from Suisun Valley and the Santa Maria Valley. All AVAs recognize the desirability of being better known and respected in the consumers' mind. Unfortunately, it's really hard to do that, most of the time, no matter how good the wines may be. That's where we writers enter the picture: we can educate.

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