American Winescapes
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The Cultural Landscapes of America’s Wine Country

Gary L. Peters
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Gary L. Peters
Introduction:
A Geographer’s Appreciation of America’s Wine Country
Imagine yourself sitting in the restaurant veranda at the Domaine Chandon winery in California’s ethereal Napa Valley on a warm September evening. The powerful, penetrating light of a late summer day softens around you. The sun slips quietly behind the Mayacamas Mountains; shadows of oaks and conifers grow longer, gradually engulfing you. Across the valley, the Vaca Mountains turn rufescent, then become even redder in the waning light. Throughout the valley, the hectic harvest pace slackens as weary workers seek an evening of quiet and rest—lights are on late at local wineries as fresh grapes begin their journey toward becoming wine. Wine makers fuss about, anxiously smelling and tasting the grapes, making sure that the tangle of hoses is properly routed, praying for another good year. Meanwhile, your waitress brings your cool glass of sparkling Blanc de Noirs, reminds you of the evening’s specials, then leaves you to decide what to eat, to linger quietly and savor the gentle coming of the night.

You’re in “wine country,” and in all likelihood you’re loving every minute of it. You came here because you knew, or at least had some idea, what to expect—a dramatic and welcome change of place (and probably pace as well!). You are, like most everyone else, a geographer at heart, even though you might never have thought about it. Places, locations, regions—most of us are intuitively interested in them. Professional geographers—and I am one—simply carry those interests further, into something of a passion, perhaps. They seek to understand more about places—who lives and works in them, how their landscape features have been shaped over time, how they differ from other places, and how they continue to evolve.

“Wine country,” as the term is used by typical travelers and wine lovers, sets apart in their minds places that are characterized by the presence of vineyards, wineries, and often small towns that serve the local population and visitors as well. These are working landscapes, but to many they seem to offer much more. At their richest, they can be synonymous with civilized enjoyment; food, wine, and conversation often come together here in harmonious ways. As Robert Mondavi wrote (Meyer 1989:6):

We believe wine is the temperate, civilized, sacred, romantic mealtime beverage recommended in the Bible. It is a liquid food that has been part of civilization for 8,000 years. Wine has been praised for centuries by statesmen, scholars, poets, and philosophers. It has been used as a re-
religious sacrament, as the primary beverage of choice for food, and as a source of pleasure and diversion.

In contrast to whatever romantic notions about the wine industry we might hold, however, we should also add that wine growing is a serious business. It is currently estimated to have an annual value of more than $12 billion in the United States, which ranks fifth in production among wine-growing nations behind Italy, France, Argentina, and Spain, in that order. In their excellent study of the economics of American wine making, journalists Jay Stuller and Glen Martin (1994:5) have put it more bluntly, telling us that “the American wine industry is a hurly-burly venue that includes cutthroat financial dealings and brutal competition for sales.”

Americans have long had a fondness for agricultural landscapes. Although for some people rural landscapes are still reminiscent of the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian republic, most see them more realistically as an occasional refuge from the bustling life of modern American cities. To wander among landscapes permeated with colorful crops, unusual buildings, strange equipment, small country roads, and fences is to find respite from the city—from its accelerated pace, its congestion, its noises and smells, its congested center and dispersed suburbs.

**Wine and Geography**

The study of wine and geography constitutes a delightful marriage, a union not likely to end in either disillusion or dissolution.

Professional geographers approach their studies of wine in two separate, if not always distinctively differentiated, ways. One approach is regional and the other, topical; the two approaches come together at times, each helping us to better comprehend the other.

For most geographers, the topical study of wine would probably begin with maps that show where wine grapes are grown and where wines are made. These maps are descriptive and answer the basic “where” questions for us; they show us the spatial distribution of wine growing (a term used to include both viticulture, or the growing of grapes, and enology, or the making of wines). These maps then raise other questions, especially the following one: Why is wine growing located where it is? Answering such “why” questions leads us in search of related variables, from the annual amount of rainfall and tempera-
tures during the growing season to the market for wines of different types, which is itself a reflection of various cultural characteristics.

The places where grape growing and wine making are found together delineate discrete regions, which we could simply call “wine regions,” or “wine country.” Such regions are characterized by the presence of one or more specific criteria, such as the presence of vineyards and wineries, which give the region its distinctiveness. From the topical maps, then, we could identify the locations of a nation’s wine regions, just as we could identify its steel-producing regions, wheat-growing regions, or urban regions.

Wine regions most certainly are distinctive; they differ both from other types of agricultural regions and from urban or manufacturing regions. In turn, their uniqueness generates considerable appeal, hence the consequential popularity of visits to wine country. Furthermore, as geographer James Newman (1986:301) once commented: “The geography of wine does not end with a landscape. Color, smell, and taste of wine, including judgments about quality, most often stamp a region with its identity.” We don’t hear many people talk about visiting “beer country,” for example—fields of barley and hops are usually grown far from where the brewers ply their trade, and those fields lack the grace and beauty of long rows of well-tended vines, bright green beneath the summer sun and heavily laden with ripe grapes as fall approaches. At the same time, however, though they have common attributes, not all “winescapes” are the same.

Wine regions may be viewed along a continuum, from landscapes in which wine growing is virtually the only agricultural enterprise to those in which wine grapes are only thinly intermixed with numerous other crops, including apples, cherries, peaches, prunes, walnuts, and even berries. At one end of the continuum is California’s Napa County—which includes America’s archetypal wine region, the Napa Valley—where in one recent year the total value of crop and livestock production was $154,055,000, of which wine-grape production accounted for $147,161,000, or 95.5 percent, of the county’s total agricultural output (Napa County Agricultural Crop Report 1994:1, 6). The continuum extends downward from there to embrace counties in which wine growing accounts for only some small percentage of total agricultural output and commercial wineries may be altogether absent. Nonetheless, all wine regions are of interest from the standpoint of the geographer or the eager tourist willing to seriously consider the landscape as he or she passes through it. Viticultural landscapes have much to tell us.
Regions and Landscapes

The definition of a wine region can generally be agreed upon. Wine regions have boundaries that can be drawn around them, and that process has been going on unofficially for decades and officially (as implemented by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms [BATF]) for more than a decade now, with the BATF designation of American Viticultural Areas (AVAs). The terms “place” and “landscape” are more ambiguous. The professional literature in geography is enlivened with detailed discussions of place and landscape, both of which are central to the very core of the discipline. A place can best be thought of first as a locality, a location, or a particular milieu; places, then, are considerably influenced by the people who occupy them and by the culture within which they exist. They may have a notable distinctiveness—what both geographers and many great novelists recognize as a sense of place, or local ambience. A landscape consists of what we see in front of us, from the shape of the land and its covering of vegetation to the cultural impress of roads, buildings, land uses, and inhabitants. Geographers often distinguish between natural and cultural landscapes, though there are few of the former remaining today; most landscapes sustain marks of human exploration and habitation.

Agricultural landscapes constitute specific types of cultural landscapes. They consist primarily of topographic surfaces, the kinds of plants and animals that are produced and nurtured within them, and the assemblage of structures that people have added to make these landscapes more productive. From rolling fields of grain and gleaming grain elevators to trellised rows of grapevines and adjacent wineries, agricultural landscapes reflect what people have been able to do with their natural environment. Of course, all cultural landscapes change over time, influenced by everything from the discovery of new crops and improved technology to changing tastes among consumers.

Geographers have long studied agricultural landscapes, especially their form and evolution. Descriptive studies of agricultural regions have focused on their appearance, principally on cropping practices and the array of built structures found within the regions. These structures, in turn, serve distinctive purposes. Some farmhouses, for example, may have been built at least partly to be pleasing to their inhabitants, whereas others may have been designed to facilitate certain functions. Over time, of course, as land uses change, buildings once designed for one function may be converted to another; others remain
only as relics, often slumping under the weight of gravity, solemn evidence of changing times. A number of old dairy barns in the United States, for example, are now serving as wineries; horse barns in the Midwest, by contrast, have normally been allowed to deteriorate as tractors have replaced horses in the fields. Built environments not only tell us about a region’s function but also provide clues to local cultural influences and even to the use of local building materials.

Agricultural landscapes evolve as the result of numerous individuals making decisions about how to use the land, how to build buildings, and how best to design settlements to serve rural residents. Confronted with similar physical environments, rational people end up making similar decisions about which crops to grow and how to grow them. Topography, climate, inherent fertility of the soil, and water availability combine to determine which plants and animals can be maintained profitably in a particular location. Some regions may be extremely constrained by environmental circumstances, whereas others have a wide array of farming possibilities. For example, a farmer in California’s Great Central Valley may have a choice of a dozen or more different crops that can be grown profitably on a given piece of land, whereas a Kansas farmer may be restricted to only one crop, wheat.

Crops can be viewed as having both environmental and economic optima, and the two options might often conflict, as when demand or competition from more valuable crops may displace a given crop from its environmentally optimum location. For example, the climate of California’s Great Central Valley is not only excellent for wheat and corn but also for vineyards and orchards. Most often, the result is to locate vineyards and orchards in the best locations—those with good soils and adequate water supplies—and push wheat and corn onto more marginal lands or toward locations that are more remote from major markets. This happens because peaches and grapes are more valuable and perishable than wheat or corn. Still, the crop can be elbowed only so far from its optimum before it can no longer be grown economically at all.

Where the combination of environmental conditions in a given location represents an optimum for more than one crop, the crop that produces the highest return per acre is most likely to be grown by economically rational farmers. For example, in some of California’s coolest viticultural areas, grape growers typically have several varieties to choose from; the overwhelming choice in recent years, however, has been Chardonnay because of high prices and strong con-
sumer demand. Riesling and Gewürztraminer grape growing has been declining in those same regions, mainly because these varieties have fallen out of favor among American wine consumers, not because they can’t be grown successfully in the same locations.

As specialized agricultural regions evolve, the dominant activities within them produce a distinctive assemblage of common landscape features. Where livestock is present, for example, fences are common. Vineyard and orchard landscapes, however, often have few or no fences. Greenhouses and nurseries may or may not be present. The shape of fields, the flow of water, and the ways that farms are connected to the rest of the world (by roads and telephone lines, for example) are all determined to some extent by the type of agriculture that is being carried on in a region. Other important factors include whether farmers live on their land or in nearby villages and the local topography. In turn, agricultural regions usually develop systems for the distribution of their products as well; collection points, inspection stations, processing centers, packing sheds, and warehouses may be common features in the agricultural landscape.

Finally, rural landscapes in the United States are increasingly filling up with nonfarm populations, especially in agricultural regions that lie in close proximity to major metropolitan areas. Land uses in such rural landscapes are often threatened by rising land prices, increasing highway traffic, and growing conflicts between newcomers and longtime residents; the boundary between rural and urban has become increasingly blurred in modern America. California’s Santa Clara Valley, for example, was once prime vineyard land, renowned for its Cabernet Sauvignon. Today, it is a landscape strewn with seemingly endless suburbs, fenced-off freeways, wide streets, parking lots, shopping centers, and a vast array of high-tech industries; it has become “Silicon Valley.” Landscapes are seldom static.

Winescapes

America’s viticultural landscapes, or winescapes, are human creations that have unfolded as the elements of the natural landscape—landforms, climates, vegetation, soils, and water supplies—have been brought together with the environmental needs of wine grapes. Such landscapes are worthy of attention as specific examples of agricultural landscapes, and understanding their evolution and distinctive features
can add to our knowledge of rural landscapes in the United States. We can understand more about viticultural landscapes by considering the three fundamental elements that shape them: (1) the grapes and their needs, (2) the natural environments that best meet those needs, and (3) the viticulturists and wine makers who determine everything from the varieties of grapes, spacing of the vines, and trellising systems to the final product that enters the bottle. Furthermore, all of these elements can come together to produce wine regions only within the broader context of cultural practices and economic viability: If Americans drank no wine, we would probably produce little if any of it because sales would depend entirely on export markets.

This book explores why wine country exists in some places and not in others and why one can expect to find both similarities and differences among wine regions within the United States. Although the purpose of wine regions is always to produce wine, these regions may differ considerably in scale of operation, the varieties of grapes grown, the way viticulturists plant and trellis the vines, and even in irrigation practices and pest-control methods. In each case, however, a distinctive winescape is created; most such regions are capable of both generating a profit for wine growers and bringing considerable enjoyment to those who venture into them.

This book examines wines, wine growing, how viticultural landscapes have evolved in the United States, and why many of them are now so frequently visited. It is about American wines and winescapes. It begins with a historical view of wine grapes—their gradual diffusion to the United States, the native grapes that were already here, the hybrids that have been created, and the environmental requirements of the vines. Modern wine making and viticulture are then discussed, along with the identification of wine regions in the United States and the official designation of appellations of origin, which takes readers briefly into the political geography of viticulture and introduces the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Wine-growing landscapes are then discussed, along with perceptions of them, seasons within them, and ceremonies and festivals that help draw people to them. The last part of the book considers visits to wine regions, discusses communications related to wines and vineyards, and takes a parting look at future prospects and problems for America's wine industry and its viticultural landscapes.
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