

NAPA VALLEY *life* MAGAZINE



Discover Coombsville, AVA

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A once sleepy, understated grape growing region of the Napa Valley has long been the secret ingredient for many award-winning and 90-plus point wines. Acclaimed vintners like Robert Mondavi, Joseph Phelps, Louie Martini, Dario Sattui and Paul Hobbs, to name a few, sourced their grapes from the rocky soils that abut the shadows of Mt. George in the Valley's southeast side.

Prior to 2011, the grapes sourced under the Napa Valley American Viticulture Area (AVA) on these labels didn't truly

give credit to this unique area of wine country. And it wasn't until 2011 that the Coombsville AVA was designated as the newest Napa Valley Sub Appellation.

"Becoming an AVA gave us more credibility and the serious recognition that this area deserves," said Elan Fayard, Proprietor of Azur Wines. "We are no longer a blending source, but a specific designated area."

This 11,000-acre AVA is a hidden gem even to most locals. The mostly family-owned wineries and vineyards there pay homage to what the rest of the Napa Valley used to be – slow, deliberate, and little to no traffic. One can spend three days here and only travel three to four miles. No one winery is alike. Its location often is missed by passersby on Highway 29 or Silverado Trail. It is only five minutes from the resurgent, historical, Downtown Napa that features epicurean delights, shopping, musical venues, and the majestic Napa River.

A bird's eye view from 20,000 feet above looks like Coombsville is shaped like a horse shoe. Millions of years and continuous erosion have left the land rich in volcanic ash and rock. The gravelly loams and volcanic soils drain easily and the ash sub-soils hold water which the vines can access as the dry growing season progresses. The caves at Caldwell Vineyards reflect the different layers of activity over the years.

David Howell, geologist and co-writer of the book *The Winemaker's Dance*, explained that the Coombsville AVA is the remnant of a volcano that collapsed inward

after a large eruption, forming a circular depression. This depression is cradled by a crescent-shaped section of the foothills of the Vaca Range, topped by Mt. George and Atlas Peak, and flanked by the town of Napa and the Napa River.



Palomares Vineyards

"From the perspective of our property's history, Henry Hagen could have established a property anywhere in the Napa Valley when he arrived in 1876," said Christian Gastón Palomares of Palomares Vineyards. "Letters he wrote referred fondly to the cooler climate and elevation diversity of the Mt George property. Mostly though he was attracted to the abundant water and springs flowing down from the mountain. He founded Cedar Knoll vineyards and won one of the first accolades ever given to a Napa grower by the French, a silver medal at the Paris tasting in 1888 for his Brandy. It was quite the accomplishment for the town of Napa at the time. Coombsville has played host to many early settlers of Napa's wine history."

Another strong characteristic of this new AVA is the numerous micro-climates.

"Coombsville is a large AVA and has a large variety of microclimates," continues Palomares. "Being only miles from the North Bay waters, Coombsville is often described as a cooler climate. Even on the hottest nights of a Napa summer, Coombsville enjoys critical vine resting cool nights as

bay breezes roll in. Since our elevation spans nearly 2000-feet, we have areas that sit above the fog such as the mountain vineyards of Palmaz Vineyards atop Mt George. This creates excellent complexity, elegance, and diversity of the area's wines."

"Coombsville is a magical area," said Vintner John Caldwell, whose 60-acre vineyard was the first to be established in the region since the 1960's. "It's the only AVA that has diverse geography circling around an old ancient caldera. There is no other place as unique in the world."

"We have perfect weather conditions – fog burns off later in the morning," said Bob Arns of Tournesol. "We get a longer hang time in the season, but it's not a cool climate. We get high temperatures too with the numerous microclimates within this AVA."

"Coombsville is a sweet spot for Cabernet grapes," agreed Paul Maroon of Maroon Wines. "It is a little cooler in the southern end of the valley, and we benefit from this by being able to ripen the grapes slowly and evenly."

But according to Caldwell, the cooler temperatures were misleading for years and it was thought that only Chardonnay and Pinot Noir could grow in this diverse region. "I bought my property for a real estate investment and thought I was going to subdivide it, but the county changed the ordinance and I couldn't do that so I decided to plant grapes on the property," said Caldwell. "I was told only Chardonnay would grow. I tracked the temperatures for two years and realized our climate was warmer than the Bordeaux Region of France. So, I planted Cabernet Sauvignon and then all five of the Bordeaux varietals: Cab Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Malbec. Robert Parker gave the wines high scores, so there you go."

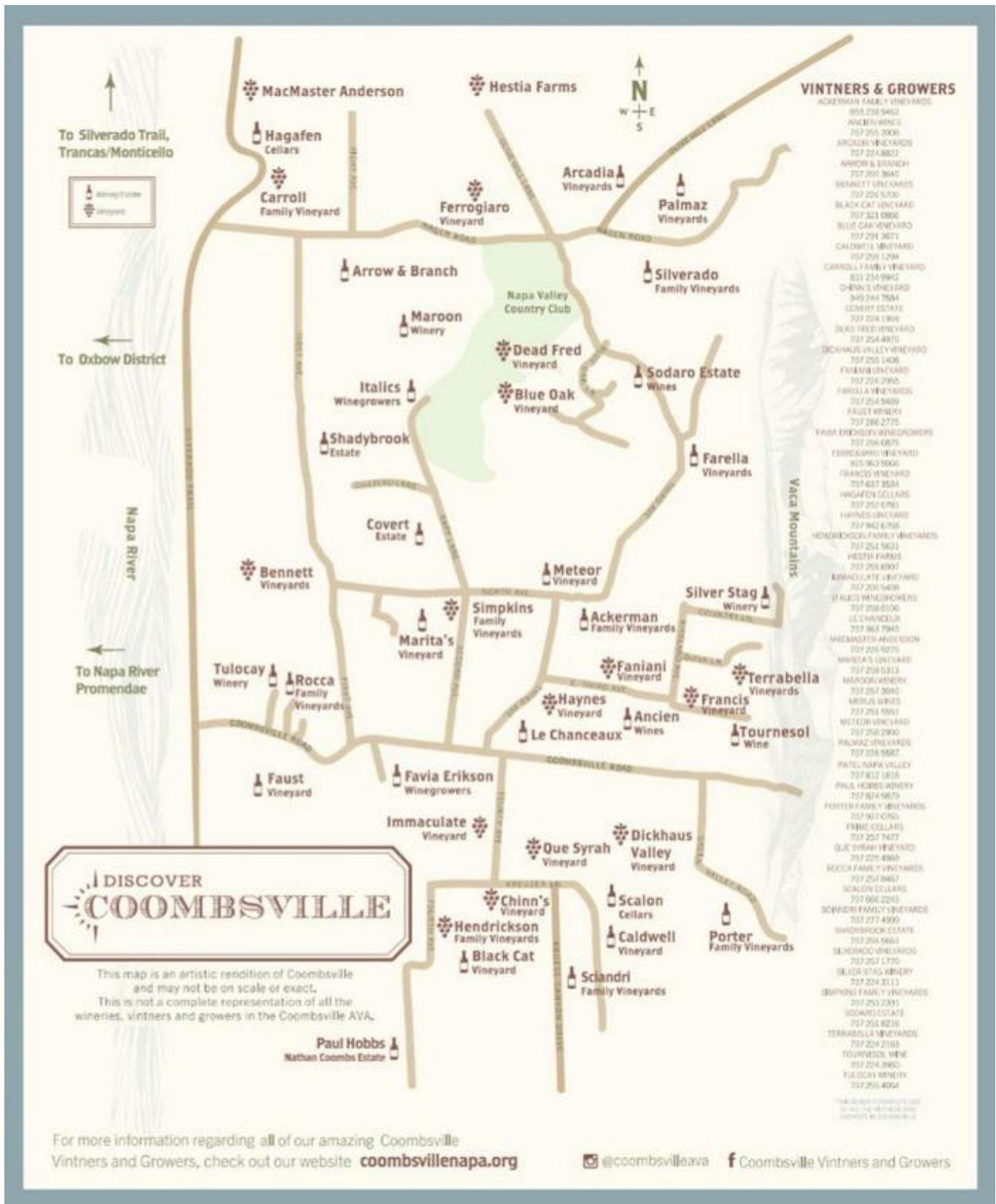


Talking to a group of representatives from the AVA, they all agree that one can't go to one winery in Coombsville and get an understanding of what the AVA is like. The 38 vintners and growers encourage people to explore the AVA, as it's fundamentally different than other areas, provides spectacular Valley views, and each vintner has a unique story. The diversity in this small area is incredible.

"One brand is not a stand-alone – A rising tide raises all boats," said Taylor Martin of Italics Winesgrowers. "Temperatures vary throughout the region. On our property alone, there is a 250-foot drop in elevations, which results in a 10-degree temperature difference."

"Visitors who come to Coombsville get a different experience than the 'main strips' of Napa," said Palmaz. "Often times it's more intimate and more one-on-one with the customers. Again, it's similar to how Napa used to be in the early 80's. I think some initially thought of Coombsville as a bunch of 'backyard' growers. Now with enough award-winning producers, the region is really turning heads. I believe palate fatigued collectors are enjoying a return to a more balanced style of winemaking where elegance is celebrated. Coombsville is at home in that style."

Coombsville has a real homey feel to it. Most of the producers live on the properties, and tend to raise their families here, and they remain fully dedicated to making the finest wines they can. The wineries range in size large to small, but the spirit behind these projects is the same.



"In Coombsville, guests get to meet the families and growers directly; visitors become family," said Bulmaro Montes of Marita's Vineyard. "They learn how we cultivate our vineyards and techniques used to make cult wine. We are winegrowers with passion for the land. As small

growers, we not only take well care of our vineyards, but also our environment. This results in our producing competitive wines in the Napa Valley and within the marketplace.”

“Coombsville is approachable, down- to-earth, and simply gorgeous,” beamed Fayard. “You feel like you’re in the hills of Tuscany with a local flair. It’s one of the most beautiful corners of the valley.”

Moving forward, the members of the Coombsville AVA want to grow as a collective unit and keep that rural, rustic feel as they continue to define the terroir and increase quality at each individual winery according to Fayard.

“As our success and popularity grow, Coombsville will be tasked with ensuring that our visitation is respectful of our neighborhoods,” said Palmaz. “Fortunately, the majority of our winery operators live in these neighborhoods and also care about protecting them.”

As Napa Valley patrons return over the years, they tend to seek alternative experiences. They love to be introduced to new brands and learn new stories. Coombsville is full of unique stories that beg to be discovered.

To see all the wineries and vineyards in the Coombsville AVA, visit the website, www.coombsvillenapa.org, and click on individual logos to hear more stories and plan your next visit. Not all wineries are open to the public and those that are, are by appointment only.

Mark Your Calendar

April 13, 2019 is the Discover Coombsville Grand Tasting Event at the Napa Valley Country Club from 3:30-6PM.

About 15 CVG members (owner/vintner/grower/ winemaker) will be present to pour Coombsville wines.

Follow the Coombsville Vintners and Growers on Instagram @coombsvilleava and check www.coombsvillenapa.org for updated event details and information.

Article Courtesy of Kari Ruel, Napa Valley Life Magazine