

Bennett Valley

California's newest hot spot for Syrah and Grenache

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Just south of the city of Santa Rosa, nestled among the mountains, lies Bennett Valley, Sonoma's newest AVA. The area is so remote that you're more likely to encounter a mountain lion than a tour bus. Not only is it one of the most distinct regions in Sonoma, but also, at about 900 acres planted, one of the smallest. Most important-as evidenced by the emerging list of wines being made in Bennett Valley and the number of producers seeking out the region's grapes-it has become one of the most exciting areas in California for Syrah and Grenache.



Approved as an AVA in 2003, Bennett Valley is clearly defined geographically, tucked between the Sonoma, Taylor and Bennett mountain ranges. Despite its name, Bennett Valley is hardly a valley at all, but a rolling benchland ranging from about 450 feet to 1,100 feet in elevation. "Look," says Joe Judge, a grower in the area who sells grapes to vintners such as Tor, Novy and Morlet, as he sweeps his hand over a view of the terrain. "There's hardly a level spot out there. Everything slopes."

It's cool in Bennett Valley-cooler even than Russian River Valley to the west. Marine influences from three different directions pour into the area, creating a bowl of cool air, which in the summer months turns to dramatic fog. "When it's warm, warm air goes up, and the mountains act as a vacuum to the cold air coming in from the San Pablo Bay and the coast," explains Matanzas Creek winemaker François Cordesse.

Despite the cooling influences, the area definitely gets hot during the day, and there can be as much as a 40° F to 50° F swing from daytime highs to lows. The result is a long growing season, longer than Russian River, with grapes traditionally harvested as late as October or early November. Bennett Valley's soil is diverse and full of volcanic rocks. While developing his vineyard, Judge says he cleared as much as 100 tons of rock per acre.

The region's history dates back to the pre-phylloxera years of the mid-1800s, when a winery named Belle Mount was created. Its modern era began in 1977 with the founding of Matanzas Creek Winery, which remains Bennett Valley's biggest and best-known winery. Some of Matanzas Creek's former winemakers, including Merry Edwards and David Ramey, helped establish its reputation as a Chardonnay, Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc specialist. For a long time, the wines were bottled under the Sonoma Valley appellation.

In 2000, wine heavyweight Jess Jackson, of Kendall-Jackson, purchased Matanzas Creek and brought his marketing muscle into the area. Jackson is the largest vineyard owner in Bennett Valley, with nearly 300 acres in three different locations, supplying grapes to Matanzas Creek and other labels in his portfolio. While Matanzas Creek still produces plenty of Chardonnay and Merlot (and increasingly, Pinot Noir), the producer has responded to the excitement of Rhône varietals in the area with more plantings of Syrah and Grenache. Jackson was also instrumental in attaining AVA status for Bennett Valley.

There is a strong sense of community among the vintners and growers. "This isn't an absentee grower group," Judge says. "Most people here live on their place, and their vineyard is their front yard. I think that comes out at the end of the day." The region's growers and producers, including a handful of newcomers, are changing direction to focus on Rhône varieties like Syrah and Grenache. It seemed as if they all came to the same conclusion simultaneously. Now Bennett Valley is a haven of small, mostly Rhône-influenced vineyards.

Jim Mack is one of these newer vintners. He purchased his 20-acre vineyard in 2002 and makes wine under the Jemrose label (tapping the winemaking talents of Kosta Browne's Michael Browne). He also sells grapes to other vintners, including Syrah from a block he calls Cardiac Hill to Carlisle. "Just walk up the hill a couple times and you'll know how it gets its name," he jokes. The region's unique climate and landscape make it clear that Rhône grapes would do well here-and vintners have taken notice.

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Recommended Wines

95	CARLISLE Syrah Bennett Valley Cardiac Hill 2006	\$43	211 cases
94	GREY STACK Syrah Bennett Valley The Narcissist Dry Stack Vineyard 2006	\$48	75 cases
92	ERIC KENT Syrah Bennett Valley Dry Stack Vineyard 2006	\$40	285 cases
92	JEMROSE Syrah Bennett Valley Cardiac Hill Vineyard 2006	\$44	144 cases
92	TOR Syrah Bennett Valley Rock Judge Family Vineyard 2006	\$53	200 cases
91	BEVAN CELLARS Syrah Bennett Valley Dry Stack Vineyard 2005	\$70	96 cases
91	MORLET Syrah Bennett Valley Bouquet Garni 2006	\$85	125 cases
91	NOVY Syrah Bennett Valley Judge Family Vineyard 2005	\$29	313 cases