

Living on the Edge

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The NorthBay biz “Hidden Gems” series focuses on the North Bay’s lesser-known appellations (or AVAs). Our first trip will be to Sonoma County’s beautiful Bennett Valley. So sit back and enjoy your virtual visit—and don’t forget to enjoy a bottle of Bennett Valley wine while you read this.



Can you name the top five most memorable views you’ve ever taken in during this lifetime? Think about it for a moment; at least a few will come to mind. One of mine was a few years ago, when I was on the way home to Santa Rosa from San Francisco one afternoon. It had rained earlier in the day, and the sun was beginning to break through the scattered clouds. I decided to take Petaluma Hill Road to avoid some traffic and enjoy the scenery. I turned onto Crane Canyon Road headed toward Bennett Valley—and as I crested the hill and began to make my descent into Santa Rosa, there was a brilliant double rainbow arched from one end of the valley to the other. It was so bright and breathtaking, it almost seemed unreal. I stopped the car so I could get out and fully enjoy the moment. I didn’t have a camera with me, but it didn’t matter, because it’s one of those views I’ll always be able to see clearly just by closing my eyes.

Bennett Valley is one of those places that has a bit of magic to it. Nestled between Taylor Mountain to the west, Sonoma Mountain to the south and Bennett Mountain to the east, it’s actually more of an alluvial benchland than a valley, constantly cooled by ocean breezes and fog.

A little history

The area was first settled by the Miwok, Pomo and Wappo tribes, who named the stream that flows southeast from Bennett Mountain into Sonoma Valley “Yulupa” (which loosely translates into “sacred” or “magical”). There’s that word again. Spanish and Russian settlers began to move in, and an outbreak of smallpox wiped out most of the native populations. By the 1830s, General Vallejo’s land grants prompted further Spanish settlement into the area and, in 1849, a Missouri immigrant named James Bennett purchased property on the peak called “Yulupa.” Bennett prospered in his new found home,

even rising to the position of assemblyman and introducing the bill that made Santa Rosa the county seat in 1854.

About the same time, an influx of settlers moved into the area, and Bennett Valley became a productive agricultural region. Its first winery, owned by Isaac DeTurk, was called Belle Mount. But after phylloxera and prohibition ensured its demise, winegrapes were put aside and agricultural products reigned. Following prohibition, winemaking came back on scene. John Shackleford Taylor (Taylor Mountain) had a dairy and a stock ranch, grew Zinfandel and Mission grapes, and owned the “White Sulpher Springs” resort (now Kawana Springs). He also helped get the first racetrack started for the county fair.

In 1873, the Bennett Valley Grange Hall was built, and today it’s the oldest standing active grange hall in the United States.

Modern times

Bennett Valley received its official designation as an AVA in December 2003. The region encompasses 8,140 acres, of which about 850 are planted with grapes. It was a group effort that was spearheaded by Jess Jackson of Jackson Family Wines, which owns Matanzas Creek Winery, the largest and only commercial winery in Bennett Valley.

“It took a couple years,” says Patrick Connelly, general manager at Matanzas Creek. “But we channeled the necessary resources to make it happen. We wanted to promote the fact that there are a lot of growers doing a lot of special things here. It took someone like Jess, who’s lucky enough to be in a position to make something like that happen, to help push it through. He was happy to do it.”

Connelly notes that, to satisfy the requirements to become an AVA, you must prove it’s a good farming location (“that’s a given!”), distinguish the area from its immediate surrounding AVAs, prove climate and soil composition differences, and so forth. “The biggest element is the climate,” he says. “There’s 20 to 25 percent more rain here annually than even in the immediate surrounding areas. This is largely due to the mountains and the Petaluma Wind Gap. I drive to work every day from an elevation of 1,800 feet. It’s usually clear and sunny where I live, but when I arrive here, it’s foggy—and stays that way until usually about 11 a.m.”

Matanzas Creek currently farms 320 acres in Bennett Valley, made up of mostly Merlot, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

“This place is an artist’s palate for us,” Connelly continues. “It has so many microclimates and differences in terroir, even just on our property. So part of what we’re doing right now is producing small batch wines, of about 200-250 cases, to represent those specific areas.”

Matanzas Creek is best known for its Merlot, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc (the Sauvignon Blanc is grown in warmer climates)—and an array of lavender products made from its extensive lavender gardens. Its annual Days of Wine and Lavender event is held when it’s in full bloom (this year it takes place Saturday, June 27; tickets go on sale April 1). You can visit www.matanzascreek.com for more information.

Even when there’s not a special event going on, Matanzas Creek is a destination facility (see “Great Tastes,” January 2009). “We like people to seek us out,” says Connelly. “We like to show off the property when visitors come, so they can see what we see as a gracious lifestyle. We’re in the middle of nowhere—but also in the center of everything.”

Bennett Valley Grape Growers

Once Bennett Valley was declared an AVA, it became time to spread the word. Local growers grouped together and formed the Bennett Valley Grape Growers (BVGG), with several goals in mind: To promote the area as a premier source of premium wine grapes and wines; to help members improve grape and wine quality; to promote good land stewardship (including sustainable practices); to emphasize the area’s unique climate, topography, soils, history and people; to facilitate education and disseminate information; and to encourage practices that respect the entire community.

I recently spent an afternoon with three of its members: Joe Vivio of Vivio Vineyards, Joe Judge of Judge Family Vineyard and Jim Mack, owner of Jemrose Vineyards and who, along with his wife, Gloria, hosted us with a lunch and some of his delicious wine: a lush, lively Viognier that truly jumps out of the glass (no, I didn’t spill!) and a spicy, peppery Syrah with equal verve. Mack’s property has an expansive view of the valley; we could see Vivio Vineyards, just south of Jackson Park off of Grange Road (which is what Crane Canyon turns into once you crest the hill), and the Judge Family Vineyard a little closer by, adjacent to Grey Stack Vineyard. (They pretty much knew every house, vineyard and property owner within sight.)

And although there are about 40 growers and a handful of wineries in the area, it’s not a heavily touristed place, with Matanzas Creek being the only commercial winery around. Mack says that, most of

the time, he has people over to his house to taste his wine. “It’s what Napa was like in the 1970s,” he says. “There weren’t many wineries, and you’d spend your time sitting around a table for a few hours.” Which is nice, because you really get to know the people behind the product—and vice versa.

“This is a great place to live because of the social aspects,” says Mack. “I’d just moved here and was invited to the first BVGG ‘meeting,’ which was basically a party, where they were naming the board. A few names were announced and we went right back into drinking. I remember thinking, ‘I’m going to like it here!’”

Joe Vivio of Vivio Vineyards, who’s president of BVGG, has a similar memory. “A neighbor invited us to a kids’ party. There were about 40 adults and everybody brought wine—maybe 200 bottles were there!”

But those good times come with hard work.

“We have to work together,” says Judge, president-elect of BVGG, while talking about the area’s unique qualities. “Especially around harvest time—you never know when something’s going to break or you’ll need a tractor.”

Mack adds, “Bennett Valley is unique, because there’s a mix of long-time farmers and those who’ve started a second career here. The common bond is the land and the farming.” And what most people are farming is grapes. “The whole ecosystem here feeds off the grapes. Everything and everyone.”

Mack sites an example of when he called Judge to talk about growing Grenache: “He went through 15 minutes of steps [about how difficult it is to work with],” says Mack. “But then said, ‘Yes! Grow it!’” He explains that Grenache is very vigorous and fruitful, and you have to cut almost half of it off before it even ripens. “But that’s what it takes to get quality fruit that makes great wine.”

Vivio adds that the area is focused on high-quality, small family farms. “With red grapes, we only have the ability to produce about three tons or so per acre,” he says. “So the option of a heavy crop isn’t really there. That means we’re forced into a higher quality and prevents someone from selling a lot of low-quality fruit out of Bennett Valley. We’re all in this together,” he adds. “It’s not competitive.”

He then notes the BVGG started with neighbors gathering to share ideas. They banded together to hire Chris Bowland, a vineyard manager, to take care a lot of the vineyards in the area. “We couldn’t have done that as individuals,” says Vivio. “But now he keeps a crew here all the time. It’s the same group, and they know the area well because they’re always here. The BVGG made that possible.”

Adds Mack, “Being in this type of climate, you have to be on top of things. You do a lot more canopy management and crop thinning, for example, to ensure the grapes reach optimal ripeness.”

“We spend a lot to bring the grapes to their full potential,” says Judge. “But one of my favorite sayings is, ‘Mother Nature bats last.’ Farming is one of the riskiest businesses out there. You don’t know what you’re going to get.

“When you don’t have a choice, you have to provide high quality,” says Vivio, who grows several clones of Syrah and a small amount of Rousanne. “I wanted to grow Syrah for the spicy Cote Rotie style [that Bennett Valley grapes provide],” he says. “The cooler climate means a longer hang time without getting too high of a brix level. The acid stays high and the sugar stays low.” Vivio says a lot of people who came to the area in the late 1990s and early 2000s wanted to grow “not Merlot,” partly due to its decline in popularity, but also to provide something different.

Mack agrees. “The smaller growers here are focusing on Rhone varietals (see “When in Rhone”). The Bennett Valley Syrah has the spice, pepper and meaty qualities like that grown in the Northern Rhone.”

Vivio adds, “It’s Cote Rotie but with some fruit!” (laughs). “We can be competitive with Pinot Noir, but instead of fighting that fight, we’re focused on Rhone varietals.”

Mack continues, “Even though Rhone varietals aren’t as much of an easy sell, they’re getting attention from restaurants because they’re more food friendly. We’ve started with Syrah, Grenache, Viognier and Rousanne. We want to be unique—and winemakers have started noticing.”

“Buyers are lined up because we have a distinctive profile,” says Vivio.

“Jim puts his own grapes into his wines,” says Judge. “But Joe and I sell most of ours. In the beginning, wineries were taking a chance with us. It was unknown fruit. But it was very well received, and now that they know the quality, they’re approaching us seeking specific attributes.”

Shane Finley is associate winemaker at Kosta Browne Winery and has been purchasing grapes from Mack (since 2006) and Judge (since 2008) in the past couple years for his own label, Shane Wine Cellars. “I cold called Jim Mack after I saw an advertisement for his Syrah. Then I met Joe through Jim. I also knew the Judge vineyard by reputation,” he says.

“The most noticeable thing about the Bennett Valley grapes are their cool climate characteristics: spicy, peppery and moderate in alcohol. They get flavor development at a lower brix level, and better acidity. They do have a true Northern Rhone spirit.

“The grapes I buy from Bennett Valley are 100 percent Syrah,” he says. “I started the Shane label [which makes only Syrah] in 2006.” Prior to that, Finley received a bachelor’s degree in English, then lived and worked in France and Australia, and finally back in the United States, to develop a hands-on education in winemaking. In 2006, he made 250 cases, that’s increased to about 750 cases for the 2008 vintage. You can find Shane wines online by signing up for the mailing list at www.shanewines.com, or through local restaurants such as The Girl & the Fig, Carneros Bistro, Mosaic, Cyrus and Dry Creek Kitchen (among others). No retail yet, but keep an eye out. Shane’s hidden gems are sure to sparkle.

Brett Raven is the owner and winemaker at Frostwatch Vineyard and Winery, which is also located in Bennett Valley. A lawyer-turned-winemaker, he found his love of wine at UC Davis, where he met his wife Diane. “What I think makes Bennett Valley unique is its interesting climate. It also has good soils— not too deep, which helps avoid excessive vine vigor; cool temperatures; and grapes that have high flavor, low sugar and good acidity.” Raven found his 22-acre property in 1995, and planted a vineyard in 1997.

“I took some classes from [NorthBay biz wine columnist] Rich Thomas, and he offered some very practical advice. He had a very accurate estimate of vineyard planting costs, right off the top of his head!” says Raven. Around that same time, he began working in the wine industry, first at Alderbrook Winery, then Matanzas Creek, and finally at (David) Ramey Wine Cellars (where he still helps out part time as needed). When his vineyards matured, he began selling Merlot to Clos du Bois and Chardonnay to Landmark Vineyards.

Raven then took some winemaking classes at UC Davis, and began making commercial wine on his own in 2002 (having fully phased out practicing law in 2001). He produced his 2003-2008 vintages at David Ramey's winery ("he's been very helpful"), and will move production to Vinify Wine Services' custom crush facility for the 2009 vintage. Raven produces Merlot, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon out of Bennett Valley, as well as a Zinfandel and a Napa Cabernet with grapes sourced from other areas (the grass is always greener, right?). "I'm also planting some Pinot Noir," he says. "It's a very good site for that."

Like Vivio, Gardner Britt, owner and winemaker at Vitruvian Red, has his focus on Syrah. (Although he says his "real" job is as an emergency medicine physician at Memorial Hospital in Santa Rosa.) "The Syrah here is arguably some of the best in the world," he says. "It's so cool here; it's a bizarre microclimate that's cooler than Russian River Valley. We harvest two to three weeks later than they do."

"For me, that means better flavors [due to longer hang time]. Having studied wine for 35 years, I find that Bennett Valley Syrah combines the forward fruit of California and the integrity and structure of France, creating a very beautiful wine."

"We're the last AVA to harvest grapes," concurs Judge. "I've been into November and it's not pretty [laughs], dancing between the first and second storm and deciding when to pick." But as anyone can attest, the results are well worth the wait.

What the future holds

"This valley is bucolic and pristine in so many ways," says Matanzas Creek's Connelly. And its residents feel very strongly about keeping it that way. While they're forward about promoting the valley's virtues, they don't want to see a lot of change. "Bennett Valley is very protective about any development," says Jemrose's Mack. "It's even very hard to get a house built here." At the same time, it's not quite as hard to get permission to plant vineyards.

"There was a window in the late 1990s and early 2000s when people moved in and began planting. But there are only ever small parcels available. And people kind of like it that way, so they don't sell [he points out that he and his neighbor both bought their property at the same time, about 2000, and both parcels hadn't been for sale for 20 years prior to that]. It keeps the momentum of progress slow."

Stand on any hill in Bennett Valley, and you can see almost the entire AVA. Perhaps its small size is part of its charm. "Several of us arrived and thought it was a wonderful place to give [growing grapes] a try," says Judge.

Yes, it most certainly is.