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The Russian River Valley is a region rich in history. Grape growing and winemaking are integral to the story of the land. The valley is named for the first non-natives to settle in Sonoma County. The Russians, who settled along the Sonoma coast at historic Fort Ross from 1812 to 1841, left a significant impact on the area. They found this region optimal to hunt sea otters for their furs and to provide food and staples for Russian colonies in Alaska. Agriculture, including viticulture, was a primary goal in this endeavor and the fertile soils of the Russian River Valley provided a region apt for farming and sustaining their outposts.

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During the 1830s, the Russian settlers ventured southeast from Fort Ross in search of more temperate agricultural regions. Outposts were established in the areas of Sebastopol, Graton and Freestone. Wine grapes planted at Fort Ross on the Sonoma coast, and subsequent vineyards started by the settlers throughout Sonoma County, took place well before the Gold Rush of 1849. Although we don't know exactly when the Russians first planted grape vines or if wine was actually produced from these plantings, we now believe those early plantings at Fort Ross were the first in Sonoma County. The Russians summarily abandoned their foothold in Northern California around 1841. The migration of subsequent settlers, many from wine-producing European countries, continued to develop this initial viticultural venture, establishing the foundation for what would become a flourishing industry within the Russian River Valley.

By 1876 viticulture was well established in the Russian River Valley. It is recorded that the region produced in excess of 500,000 gallons of wine, with about 7,000 vine acres planted. Larger wineries began to flourish, including The Santa Rosa Wine Company established in 1876, Martini & Prati Winery in 1880, Korbel Champagne Cellars in 1882 and Foppiano Winery in 1896.

During Prohibition, the Russian River Valley saw drastic changes and an overall decline in wine production. Many of the wineries that surfaced during the late 1800s and early 1900s did not survive the severe restrictions placed on all alcohol production and consumption.

From 1920 to 1933 wine production was severely limited, forcing many wineries out of business. Those who wanted to continue to make wine legally were forced to produce only 200 gallons of non-intoxicating cider or fruit juice per year for household use; though some were brazen enough to disregard the production regulation. Prohibition ended in 1933 with the repeal of the 18th Amendment; however, by then less than 50 wineries remained within Sonoma County.

The current era in Russian River Valley winemaking began in the 1960s when Bob Sisson, the University of California Farm Advisor for Sonoma County, began urging local growers to turn their focus toward cool climate grapes like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Smart farmers listened, and the rest is history.

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All wines start in the vineyard. In the Russian River Valley, individual vineyards are as famous as individual winemakers. The basic character of any vineyard is determined by two primary factors: weather and soil. Nothing can improve the almost perfect weather, and wine makers can be very careful with their land. And the more careful they are, the better the wine becomes.

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A Cool Place to Grow Grapes

The Russian River Valley climate is sculpted by the regular intrusion of cooling fog from the Pacific Ocean a few miles to the west. Much like the tide, it ebbs and flows through the Petaluma Wind Gap and the channel cut by the Russian River. The fog usually arrives in the evening, often dropping the temperature 35 to 40 degrees from its daytime high. The fog retreats to the ocean the following morning. This natural air-conditioning allows the grapes to develop full flavor maturity over an extended growing season – often 15 to 20 percent longer than neighboring areas – while retaining their life-giving natural acidity.

Rocks Become Dirt

The geologic history of the Russian River Valley is both active and recent. The collision between the North American and Pacific tectonic plates caused the uplift of ancient bedrock, which then eroded. Within the last few million years the eruption of volcanic vents immediately to the east resulted in the deposition of volcanic ash on the shallow ocean bottom. The resulting sandstone gave the Russian River Valley what is known as –Goldridge loam soil.–

Water flowing off of the Sonoma Mountain range carried with it eroded volcanic material, creating soils with large amounts of clay in the central portion of the appellation. Then, in what remains a major mystery to geologists, the Russian River, which once flowed south to what is now San Francisco Bay, changed course and headed west through the coastal foothills. Along its course it deposited large amounts of alluvial materials that are now river bench lands. Each of these different soils has a profound effect on wine produced from grapes grown in this soil.

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The most widely planted are:

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**Varie
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%

Total RRV Acreage

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Chardonn
y •

41%

over 6,300

Pinot No
r •

29%

over 4,500

Zinfandel	9%	over 1,400
Merlot	5%	over 800
Cabernet Sauvignon	4%	over 600
Sauvignon Blanc	4%	about 600
Syrah	2%	over 300
Other Reds	1.5%	about 200
Pinot Gris	1.5%	over 180
Petite Sirah	1%	about 100

Other White	1%	over 100
Viognier	.5%	about 60
Gewurztraminer	.5%	about 60
Total		Over 15,000 Acres

Chardonnay

â€œThe Queen of White Winesâ€•, Chardonnay is known for the Old World style of Chablis and the Cotes d'Or of Burgundy and the New World style reflected in the wines from warmer growing areas of California. Russian River Valley Chardonnays tend to split the difference. Over 6,000 acres of Chardonnay are under cultivation in the Russian River Valley.

Pinot Noir

A difficult grape to grow, this native of the Burgundy region of France achieves greatness in only a handful of places worldwide, and the Russian River Valley is one of those places. Our Pinot-perfect climate combined with an amazing complexity of soil types, results in wines that reflect their individual sites but share a common thread. In the Russian River Valley, over 4500 acres are dedicated to Pinot Noir production.

Zinfandel

This heritage grape is widely planted throughout California. In the Russian River Valley, new Zinfandel plantings have joined vines planted as early as the late 1800s. Today, over 1100 acres of Zinfandel are cultivated in the Russian River Valley. Our long, cool growing season allows Zinfandel to achieve superb levels of ripeness.

Merlot

There is substantial acreage in the Russian River Valley planted to Merlot yet most of our Merlot grapes are used to enhance Sonoma County Merlots and Meritage blends. However, Merlot shows its Russian River Valley pedigree when bottled on its own. Over 1000 acres of Merlot are cultivated in the Russian River Valley.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Although Cabernet Sauvignon is considered a warmer climate grape, our extended growing season allows Cabernet to achieve full ripeness but with less aggressive tannins than many other areas. Most of the Cabernet is planted in the warmer more northerly portion of the Russian River Valley, but scattered plantings occur in other areas in the Valley. Over 700 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon is planted in the Russian River Valley.

Sauvignon Blanc

With our long, cool growing season, Sauvignon Blanc enjoys the best of both worlds. The cool climate keeps the wines crisp and allows the natural character of cool climate Sauvignon Blanc to come through. Over 500 acres of Sauvignon Blanc are planted in the Russian River Valley. Note: Wine produced from this grape is sometimes called FumÃ© Blanc.

Syrah

Syrah is also known as Shiraz, particularly in Australia. The climate in the Russian River Valley is much more akin to that of the northern Rhone Valley of France, its ancestral home, and the wines are stylistically similar to the wines from this region. In the Russian River Valley, over 80 acres of this unique varietal are cultivated.

Pinot Gris

A relative newcomer to the Russian River Valley, this white variant of Pinot Noir is ideally suited to our climate. Already, over 140 acres are planted to this varietal in the Russian River Valley. The Russian River Valley produces Pinot Gris more like the rich wines of the Alsace region of France than the Pinot Grigios of Italy. Pinot Gris is a grape varietal that often loses acidity quickly on the vine, but our cool nights allow it to develop its full flavor potential while maintaining acid levels.

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