



Clay's Trip to the Culinary Institute of America, Greystone Campus  
St. Helena, California, Napa Valley  
Mastering Wine I

Installment Three

Our fourth day of class morning lecture and discussion was about the difference between American Viticultural Areas and European designations for wine making such as Appellation Origination Controlee (AOC) in France or (Denominazione di Origine Controllata, (DOC) in Italy. In the U.S.A an AVA designates only the place a wine comes from. In Europe an AOC, DOC or other designation not only is a specific area, but is actually a set of laws that control the kind and percentage of each grape that can be planted, the kinds of viticultural practices allowed, dates of harvest, wine-making techniques to be employed, when the wine can be released, the minimum alcohol levels, and even how the wine can be labeled. This all may seem to be complicated and even stifling, but it is a guarantee to the consumer that they are getting exactly what they think they are paying for.

A point of interest is that wine tasting always refers to wine on your palate, and uses the terms front, middle, and back as if they were physical places. Actually a wine palate is not a physical place, but when the many factors of wine such as flavor and body show up during a tasting. A well balanced wine starts high in quality and taste at the front of the palate (the first few seconds), continues to a higher level in the mid-palate (the next couple of seconds), then only drops off slightly at the back of the palate (the finish). Most wines have "holes" in their palate, that is something seems to be missing. A wine maker will blend their wines from different barrels, vineyards, etc. to try to balance a wine.

Day five was our last day of class. Our morning lesson included the components of grape juice, viticultural technique and its affect on wine. We rode to the Shafer vineyard for a tour of the fields, the wine cave, and a barrel tasting of a new wine called "Persistence." Our vineyard tasting was to compare the Napa Cabernet Sauvignon to the Hillside Select Cabernet. Hillside Select grapes come from the Stags Leap District AVA of the Napa Valley AVA. This opportunity to spend a morning with John Shafer tasting and commenting on his wine was a most marvelous experience and a perfect ending to all of our field trips.