

Why winemakers are landing on Moon Mountain

California's Moon Mountain AVA may be part of Sonoma County, but its gravitational pull comes from Napa Valley and it's on the ascent, writes *Roger Morris*.



If someone told you they had just visited a fascinating California wine region— one whose rugged mountain vineyards are known for producing pricey and highly rated Cabernet Sauvignons and old-vine Zinfandels, a place where winery owners are a mix of Silicon Valley and Hollywood multi-millionaires with palatial winegrowing estates co-existing alongside growers who have farmed their mountain vineyards for generations – which region would you think they had toured?

You would be forgiven for answering Napa Valley, but you would be wrong.

The region is the Moon Mountain District AVA in Sonoma County, a mega-appellation on the Pacific Ocean where vines are grown in fog-enshrouded valleys. Yet the name Moon Mountain is itself telling, as it wouldn't be too much of a flight of fantasy to believe it had once been a hunk of Napa Valley that had broken off and floated away and was still under the gravitational pull of its parent.

Epicurean polymath

"Moon Mountain is Sonoma's equivalent of Napa's Howell Mountain," says Avignon-born Christophe Tassan, an epicurean polymath with serious culinary and sommelier credentials, who is currently wine director at Moon Hollow winery.

"We still have the family wineries, but also the newer people who have the financial resources to show what is possible on Moon Mountain. The only competition [among us] is to see who can get the best out of the mountain."

Increasingly, connoisseurs, collectors and critics are paying attention.

“These hillside vineyards offer an intriguing mix of the old and the new, a melting pot of historic vineyards, established players and a generation of younger winemakers who are bringing their energy and enthusiasm to these sites,” wine critic and publisher Antonio Galloni recently wrote.

Geographically, Moon Mountain shares a ridgeline boundary with Napa's Mt. Veeder AVA. The sides of both regions are stitched together where the Mayacamas range comes down to sea level at San Pablo Bay. Most of the mountain's wineries are accessed from the east side of Route 12 between the towns of Kenwood and Sonoma.



7,147 hectares

Formally recognised in 2013, the appellation is spread out across 17,663 acres [7,147 hectares] of mountainside facing Sonoma Valley below, but it has only about 1,500 acres [607 hectares] of vineyards. Elevations start at around 400 feet [133 metres] and rise to about 2,600 feet [867 metres] at the ridgeline bordering Napa Valley.

The Moon Mountain District Winegrowers Association lists 27 members and associate members, but there are probably double that number growing grapes and/or making wine. For example, Gallo, whose iconic Monte Rosso vineyard now has 350 acres [142 hectares] of iron-rich soils, making it the area's largest producer, is not a member of the association, although the owner is well-regarded as a readily accessible source of wine grapes. So although many wineries can add “Moon Mountain” to their labels, only slightly more than a dozen actually operate a winery there.

Before the mountain acquired its lunar name, wines made from Gallo's Monte Rossi grapes were already achieving recognition for their quality. Napa Valley pioneer and winegrower Louis M. Martini purchased the vineyard in 1938 not long after the end of Prohibition and gave the property its present name. Significantly, in 1940 Martini planted Cabernet Sauvignon vines on the mountain.

Decades later, in 1977, Martini became the first California winery to use a vineyard designation – “Monte Rosso” – by placing it on Martini's Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel labels. Martini also sold Monte Rosso grapes to other winemakers until Gallo purchased both the Martini winery and the property in 2002.

Burgundy touchstone

By contrast, the other Moon Mountain producer to gain early attention had Burgundy, not Bordeaux, as his touchstone. That vineyard and winery was Hanzell, founded in 1953 by paper baron James Zellerbach, whose desire was to produce French-style Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs.

Zellerbach was also the first wealthy entrepreneur to make significant investments in his winery and equipment. Hanzell is still family-run and remains true to producing only Burgundy-style wines.

Hollywood royalty

But it was a Hollywood screenwriter who ultimately authored the script resulting in Moon Mountain becoming an official appellation. In fact, he rather immodestly claims, "The history of Moon Mountain is divided into BR and AR – 'Before Robert' and 'After Robert.'"

The "Robert" in question is Robert Mark Kamen, a well-known Hollywood writer, who penned *The Karate Kid*, and also the owner of the 280-acre Kamen Wine Estate. Kamen likes to tell the story about how in 1980 he was hiking with a friend after his first big script sale (the film was never produced) and fell in love with a rolling stretch of mountaintop, impulsively buying the property a week later. He began as a grape grower, planting Cabernet Sauvignon, but graduated to producing Kamen Estate wines in 1999.

“Surrounded by clowns”

The genesis of the Moon Mountain AVA, according to Kamen, came not long after when he was on a Sonoma Valley AVA vintners roadshow in New York and a fellow producer said that his only claim to fame was having once been employed to dress up as McDonald's Ronald McDonald clown. It was not the kind of back story scriptwriter Kamen wanted associated with his wines.

"I pulled my wine, pissing off a room full of buyers, and went out on the street, looked for a cab and called Phil Coturri. I said, 'Phil, I'm surrounded by clowns.'"

The only solution Kamen saw was forming his own AVA. With him as the driving force, that happened in 2013.

If Kamen was the lever that started the launch of the breakaway sub-region, then Coturri, who comes from a winemaking family on the mountain and is widely known for his organic grape-growing acumen, was the fulcrum. At a recent Moon Mountain roadshow in New York, Coturri said: "Any red grape will grow well on Moon Mountain."

Unlike Napa's Howell Mountain, Moon Mountain is a crazy quilt of multiple types of volcanic soils. As Coturri points out, a single vineyard may have several soil types bumping together, some redder and iron-rich, some with white ash deposits, others boasting loam and sedentary deposits, especially lower down on the mountain.

Dark fruits

The resulting Cabernet Sauvignons are understandably varied, but most tend to be darkly coloured, darkly flavoured fruits with what Rodrigo Soto, co-owner of Far Mountain winery, calls "scratchy tannins."

"But most of all," Soto says, "I see the same criteria for excellence happening on Moon Mountain that has been happening in Napa Valley. They both are going into the same place."

Which isn't surprising, as the two have long been in the same orbit.