

Investigating the Terroir of the Chalone AVA: An interview with Michael Michaud

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by Laurie Daniel

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If Michael Michaud seems passionate about the Chalone AVA in northeastern Monterey County, there's a very good reason for his zeal. After all, he's spent most of his winemaking career there. Michaud joined Chalone Vineyard in 1979 as assistant winemaker under the legendary Dick Graff. At that time, Chalone was the only winery in the area. In those early days, water had to be trucked in for irrigation (the AVA averages only 10-12 inches of rainfall a year, about two-thirds of what a vine typically needs) and power was supplied by generators. Michaud became the winemaker in 1983.

In 1981, while he was still at Chalone, Michaud started planting his own vineyard nearby, in the northern end of the AVA. At first, he sold the grapes to Chalone, but in 1998, Michaud left the winery to devote more time to his own brand, Michaud Vineyard.

Today, Michaud farms 28 acres, mostly Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, along with a little Syrah, Sangiovese, Marsanne, Pinot Blanc (actually Melon de Bourgogne) and Chenin Blanc. He spoke recently with Laurie Daniel, Appellation America's Monterey Regional Correspondent, about the challenges of cultivating vines in the unusual terroir of the Chalone AVA.

Laurie Daniel (LD): How is the Chalone AVA distinct from the broader Monterey AVA? Does the Chalone AVA have a defining characteristic such as climate, soil or

something else?

Michael Michaud (MM): The Chalone AVA has elevations ranging from 1,500 to 1,800 feet, and it has an unusual soil composition (decomposed granite and limestone and assorted types of volcanic rocks, that drain very well). It also has a high desert ecology (low rainfall, low humidity, daily temperature swings of 40-60 degrees); and lots of sunlight (any fog usually recedes in the early morning, while much of the Salinas Valley may only receive a few hours of direct sunlight on foggy days). This intense sunlight creates vivid flavors in the grapes as well as ample tannins for good color and long aging.

All of the different exposures are available, as the appellation is essentially a rolling, hilly plateau on top of the Gavilan Mountain range. It is somewhat warmer at the southern end, because the air is dammed up by North Chalone Peak, which partially blocks the afternoon breeze. There are areas of geothermal heating as well, with below-ground temperatures of 73 degrees. This appellation produces wines that are very different than most of California's other appellations. These are very distinctive wines with much in common with the wines produced in Burgundy. This is likely due to the vivid minerality captured in the wines made in the Chalone AVA.

LD: The AVA is best known for

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Why do those varieties do well there? Is one better suited to the Chalone AVA than the other?

MM: They both do a lot better now since they receive adequate irrigation as compared with the dry years preceding Chalone Vineyard's pipeline system (built in 1986 to carry water from the Salinas Valley). Both varieties ripen easily given the sunlight and warmth. They ripen essentially at the same time, although some years one will ripen several days to a week before the other. The acidity is preserved by the cool/cold nights but is also somewhat reduced by the soil's alkalinity. The vines take up a lot of the minerals, and that minerality is a strong component of the local terroir expressed in the wine.

The only real difference is that Chardonnay is susceptible to powdery mildew, which is found throughout the appellation, while Pinot Noir is not as affected by this problem.

LD: You talked about the big temperature swings. Highs during the summer can be quite hot. Sometimes it would seem too hot for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Do you take any special measures in the vineyard to mitigate the effects of high temperatures?

MM: About the only thing we can do is to make sure that we're irrigating. We irrigate twice a week.

LD: What other grape varieties show promise in the AVA?

MM: Syrah, Sangiovese, Muscat, Pinot Blanc (Melon de Bourgogne), Marsanne, Chenin Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon have all been grown here, with outstanding wines produced. Zinfandel, Grenache and other Rhone varieties such as Tempranillo, Mourvedre and Albarino would probably all do well here, although Mourvedre ripens very late in this region.

LD: Which of these are you growing?

MM: Sangiovese, Syrah, Pinot Blanc -- which, as you know, is Melon -- Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Marsanne.

LD: Is there a regional style for Chalone Pinot Noir? What about Chardonnay?

MM: At the moment, I am not sure that there is a definable regional style. At this time, there is a range of styles, from late picked to ripe fruit at 23 degrees Brix, with a range of acidity from soft to fresh, and no oak to all new oak. One characteristic of the appellation is that it produces wines that tend to be closed and tight in their youth and are able to age for a long time. I once had a 1969 Chalone Chardonnay that was 20 years old and tasted like it was 3 to 5 years old.

The old Chalone Pinot Noirs were great after 20 years as well, but required 3 to 5 years of bottle age to loosen up. Newer clonal selections, adequate irrigation and different winemaking techniques like whole cluster pressing, exclusion of stems for reds and use of native yeast have softened the tannins and improved the wines' accessibility without compromising their ability to age. The regional style for both Char-

donnay and Pinot Noir made in the AVA shows minerality and vivid fruit characters with good acidity.

LD: Are there particular clones of Chardonnay that do better in your AVA? What about Pinot Noir?

MM: The old Wente field selection of Chardonnay planted in 1946 by William Silvear thrives here and produces wines with flavors reminiscent of apricots, nectarines and peaches. The wines have a smooth texture and satisfying viscosity that you don't often find. Mount Eden and Stony Hill clones of Chardonnay produce wines similar to the Wente and probably were taken from the same initial source.

Silvear also planted a small cluster, small berry Pinot Noir clone that has lovely aromas and flavors but is light in color when grown on the high limestone content of that vineyard and is rather tannic. Dick Graff had selected a few different Pinot clones in 1970 and 1973-4. One of those has a wonderful rose-like character and good color, soft texture and restrained tannins. The other Graff selection has ripe cherry, blackberry and spice characters, with good tannin balance and good color. The Dijon selections 113, 114, 115, 667 and 777 produce wines with great fruit aromas and favors as well as softer, supple tannins, which when blended with the older clones produce wines that are accessible sooner and more balanced and complete than the wines produced solely from the older clones.

LD: How has the appellation changed in the years since you started working at Chalone Vineyard?

MM: The biggest change since I started at Chalone as assistant winemaker in September 1979 is that the appellation is no longer in the

19th century. Until Chalone built a private power line in 1984, there was only electricity from generators. In fact, I didn't even have a generator until 1982. I used kerosene lamps. In 1985, they added a private telephone cable, and in 1986, a water pipeline eight miles long. Now you can also get satellite TV and Internet (no cable or DSL, though).

The other major change is that there are now seven other vineyard owners besides Chalone Vineyard. All are quite small -- Brosseau and Michaud are 28 and 35 acres respectively, Woodward and Antle about 10 acres each, Boer and Graff Family approximately 5 acres and Naylor Vineyard is about an acre.

LD: Are the current boundaries of the appellation appropriate, or should they be revised?

MM: The boundaries could probably be extended, as the same conditions prevail along the top of the Gavilans at a similar elevation, with the caveat that it gets generally cooler and windier as you go north and hotter as you go south.

LD: Extended by how much?

MM: Maybe you could justify doubling it, or at least a 50 percent increase. North, you could go quite a bit further. The limiting factor is always going to be water, though.

LD: Chalone Vineyard is well known. But the Chalone AVA isn't familiar to many wine consumers. What have vintners in the AVA done to overcome that?

MM: The growers and vintners of the appellation have established an annual wine tasting called the Pinnacles Wine Festival, held in late April at the Inn at the Pinnacles, next to Chalone Vineyard. Growers have tried to find winery customers with prominent reputations to produce

vineyard-designated wines. Most of the Chalone appellation growers are members of Monterey County Vintners and Growers Association.

LD: Some well-known wineries from outside the area, such as Testarossa and Loring, make vineyard-designated wines from the AVA. What impact has that had on the reputation of the appellation?

MM: I think it helps to have as many prominent labels as possible with the Chalone AVA on them. Once you leave the San Francisco Bay area, it is harder to find awareness of AVAs, other than Napa and Sonoma. Having a number of Chalone AVA vineyard-designated labels will increase that awareness.

LD: What misconceptions do wine consumers have about your area?

MM: Probably some of the same misconceptions that linger about Monterey County in general. I was at a tasting in L.A. the other day, and a lady was soliciting wineries to attend high-end tastings that she puts on for clients. She asked where the wine came from, because she did not know where Chalone was. When she heard "it's in Monterey County," she immediately turned to the person next to me, who had wines from Napa. People do not realize the size of Monterey County and its diversity of climates and the more temperate growing conditions caused by Monterey Bay. People would also be surprised to learn how many tons of Monterey fruit are shipped to Napa each year!

LD: Aside from some very old vines at Chalone Vineyard, many of the plantings in the area are relatively new. As those vines mature, how will the wines from the AVA be affected?

MM: Sadly, most of the oldest vines are gone now. Many of Chal-

one Vineyard's plantings are 20-30-plus years old. There seem to be a couple of plateaus or "rungs on the ladder" that the vineyards reach.

One is at 7-8 years of vine age. At that time, the wines produced have significantly more flavor and depth than those of the 5-6 year range. Then, when the vines reach 20 years or so, they seem to have even more character depth and flavor. The old vines that are 50-plus years old don't produce as much crop but seem to have an elegance, complexity and grace not found in younger vines. So we have a lot to look forward to in the AVA.

~ Laurie Daniel, Regional Correspondent - Monterey