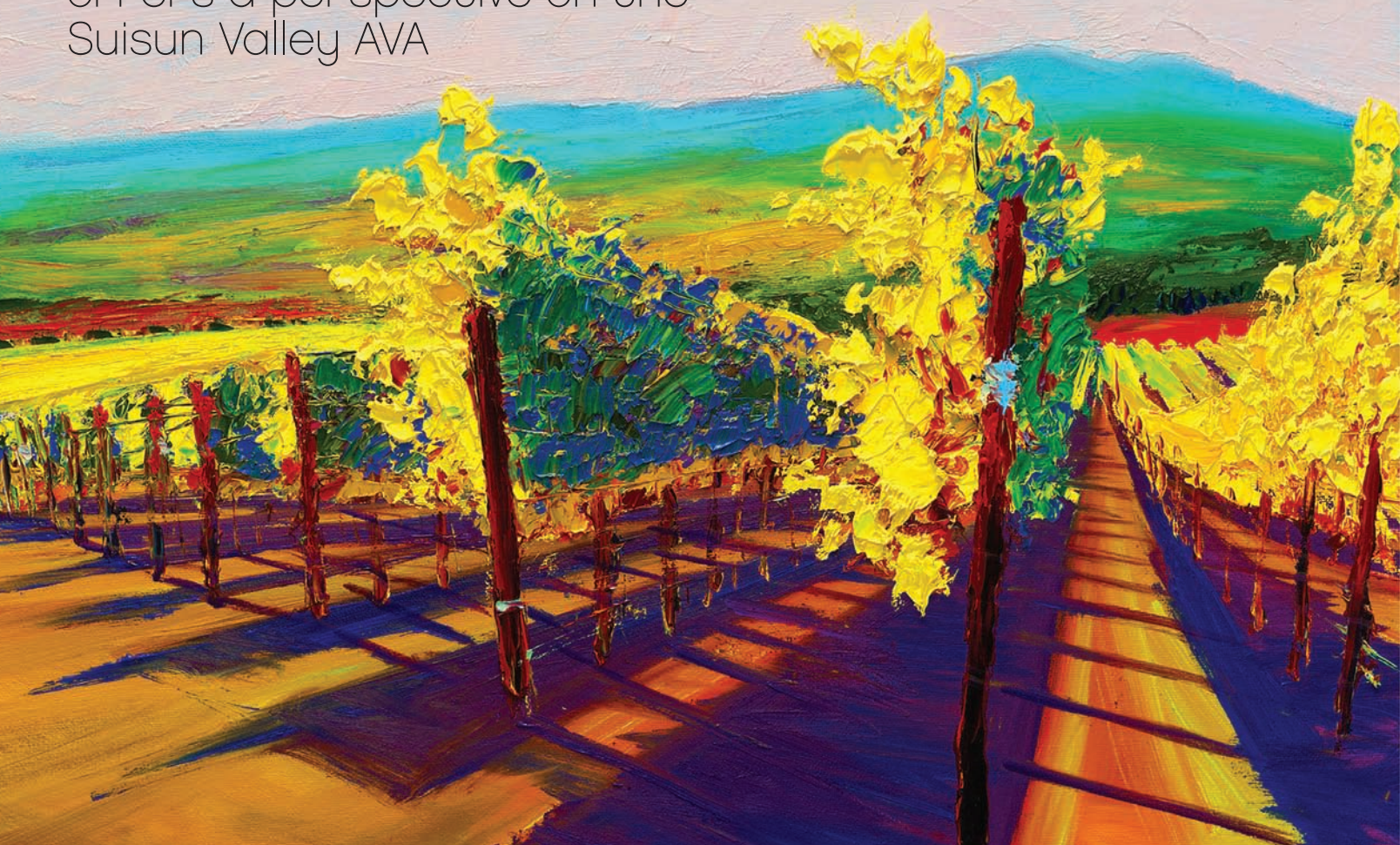


Climbing Out of Napa's Shadow

Winemaker **Jeffrey Miller**
offers a perspective on the
Suisun Valley AVA



About the artist: San Francisco based artist Ann Rea created “End of Harvest” as part of a series to celebrate the Suisun Valley’s 20th anniversary as an AVA. Rea is known for reviving the tradition of the French Impressionists, with a contemporary point of view. Winemakers take her on a tour of their vineyards; she then plants her easel and paints in oil colors inspired by seasonal light.

The collectible status of her work is quickly increasing. Ann’s paintings, and her inspiring personal story, continue to receive national media attention. American art icon Wayne Thiebaud has commended her talent, and she has a growing list of collectors across the U.S., Canada and Europe. Her book, *Colors of Terroir: Artist Ann Rea’s Tour of Sonoma*, will soon be available on www.annrea.com.

You've probably never heard of Suisun Valley—few people have. Even fewer know where it is (nestled against the eastern side of the Napa Valley appellation). And fewer yet realize why they should know more about it.

First, a little history. Suisun Valley labored in the shadow of its Napa neighbor for decades, producing grapes that were processed elsewhere, usually added to North Coast blends.

That was the valley's general operating policy until recent years. Then the economics of the lower-priced segment of the wine market changed dramatically; the Central Valley was able to grow and sell grapes for less money than the coastal valleys could. Since price, not quality, was what drove the lower end of the market, Suisun Valley couldn't compete.

Adding insult to injury, much of the valley had been planted to Merlot, a varietal that has suffered a notorious slump in recent years. So, Suisun Valley was hit with the so-called "double whammy."

In retrospect, however, this sad turn of events may have been a blessing in disguise. Unable to compete at the low end, the valley was forced (sometimes kicking and screaming) to compete in the premium marketplace. And it found that it could.

Even though the valley is just east of the coolest parts of Napa Valley, it is sheltered from the cooling breezes and fog of San Francisco Bay by a range of low hills. While some of the southern parts have more temperate climates, most of Suisun Valley is hotter, more like Calistoga than Carneros, enabling it to excel at Rhône varieties.

There are some excellent Syrahs here, but the best grape in Suisun Valley is Petite Sirah. As grower Jim Parr is fond of saying, "You really have to work hard to grow bad Petite Sirah in this valley." These wines are marked by power, opulence and ripeness. When it comes to reds, the offerings from Suisun Valley are not for the faint of heart.

The Suisun Valley AVA—measuring three by eight miles and encompassing 15,000 acres, now with 2,200 acres under vines—was created in 1982. Just a few years ago there were almost no wineries in this grower-focused region, but the number has grown recently. There are currently six wineries in the AVA, and more than 20 producers are showcasing the appellation on their label. Some noted winemakers—including Matt Smith (Blacksmith Cellars and Winterhawk), Larry Langbehn (Ledgewood Creek) and myself (see sidebar)—are making wine in the Valley. Napa Valley's Olabisi Winery has also produced several highly-rated wines from Suisun Valley fruit.

"We were grape growers, but one of our strategies was to grow more wineries," points out Roger King, President of the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association, "and that's been a pretty big accomplishment."

Close-Up:

Suisun Valley Winemaker Jeff Miller, Seven Artisans

Jeffrey Miller started a second career as a grower and winemaker with property that he purchased in Napa Valley. Along with wife Beryl, he owns a small Napa vineyard and has 41 acres under cultivation in the adjacent Suisun Valley.

Miller has teamed with Richard Burnley to create several wine brands.

Their common interest in "man's best friend" gave birth to the whimsical name for their first brand, Sly Dog Cellars, a Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon. In an



Jeff Miller surveys his vineyards in Suisun Valley.

effort to differentiate their Suisun Valley wines, Red Côte was born as their dry rosé label, and Seven Artisans was created for a Meritage blend as well as a Petite Sirah.



The **Seven Artisans 2006 Meritage, Suisun Valley**, is a blend of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, with small amounts of Petit Verdot and Malbec. Well-structured, with good acidity and dark fruit, it pairs well with rich foods, especially lamb, beef and game.

The **Red Côte 2008 Rosé** is, first and foremost, fruit-forward (strawberry and citrus), the result of a long, cool fermentation. The low 12.5% alcohol level, bright fruit and high acidity result in an off-dry wine that's perfect for a hot summer afternoon. The grapes, a blend of Merlot and Syrah, were sourced from Seven Artisans' vineyards in Suisun Valley. ■■