

**What's For English  
Wine in Easy English  
Gerald Wright**

**#3: A California Wine Label**



**1993 La Jota Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon, 12<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Release**  
(photo by Gerald)

Some key words and concepts that you will learn by listening to the podcast include the following:

- Producer
- Varietal vs. Variety
- Varietal wine
- Single Varietal
- Blend
- Grown, produced and bottled by...

- Terroir
- AVA – American Viticultural Area
- Regular release
- Reserve wine
- “Great wine is made in the vineyard”

Hello and welcome back to Wine in Easy English on What's For English Dot Com. I'm Gerald Wright.

So in the last two podcasts I think I explained my ideas about this wine podcast and why I'm creating it. So I suppose you have an interest in wine and you'd like to improve your listening and English skills by listening to some short talks on wine.

Today, I'd like to talk a little bit about California wine. In fact, let's talk about California wine labels. Some of you might be confused by wine labels – even though California wine labels are pretty easy to understand compared with French or German or Italian wine labels.

So in this podcast, I'll be mentioning a few terms and concepts that might be useful to understand wine labels better. Maybe you'll be able to buy a good bottle of wine if you can read and understand the label. But there's one more reason to look at wine labels. And that is I think they can tell us a little bit about what the winemakers believe is important about their wines. So maybe we'll gain some insight about a particular winery by looking at the wine label.

OK. Well, let's take a Look at the label.

This is La Jota Vineyard 1993 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. It's a Napa Valley Cab, produced by La Jota Vineyard in 1993.

Now, I'm not going to talk much about the wine itself. I'm not going to review it or make a recommendation. Really, I chose this wine just because it's a good example of what a label can tell us.

La Jota Vineyard is the producer of this wine. Cabernet Sauvignon is the Varietal. 1993 is the vintage. Napa Valley and Howell Mountain – or I should say – Howell Mountain IN the Napa Valley is the place where the wine comes from. The grapes were grown on Howell Mountain. Toward the bottom, it says, "Grown, Produced and Bottled by La Jota Vineyard". This sentence is important: it tells us that the owners did everything themselves. Finally there is a warning: Contains Sulfites. If you are allergic to sulfites, perhaps you should not drink this wine.

Now I'll go back through this label in a little more detail.

As I said La Jota Vineyard produced this wine.

Apparently the name refers back to a time in Napa, long before the Americans arrived. When this part of California belonged to Mexico, the land here was called Rancho La Jota.

I said earlier that the label can give us some insight into what the producer believes is important about their wine. In this case, note that the company is called La Jota Vineyard – not La Jota Winery. Many wine producers call themselves a winery. Why would this producer be different? Well, probably, they're very proud of their vineyards on Howell Mountain. According to their website, the land has been planted with vineyards for over 100 years. So the owners probably believe that their vineyard is the most important part of their business – maybe even more important than their winemaking process. Many people these days say, "great wine begins in the vineyard." Probably the owners of La Jota believe this, too.

Now let's talk about the varietal. The type of grape used in a wine is the varietal. This is a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.

Varietal - it's a funny word. If we talk about the different types of apples, bananas or tomatoes, we'd say varieties. Fuji apples are a variety of apple. But with wine grapes - Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Syrah - we call them varietals.

A wine made from one varietal is called a varietal wine. Or - anyway - a bottle with a label that mentions one varietal is a varietal wine. (I'll talk a little more about the distinction there in a moment.) A wine made from more than one varietal, we'd probably call that a blend.

In California - and many other countries, wineries like to emphasize the varietal. The varietal is usually very clearly displayed on the label. In France and Germany and some other countries, the wineries usually emphasize the location or area where the grapes were grown (but I'll talk about that more in a future podcast). Some wineries produce several varietals and they bottle them separately - as single varietals. Other wineries blend some varietals together in a blend.

In California if the bottle is labeled as a single varietal, it must have a minimum of 75% of that varietal. Many single varietal wines are blended with a little something else. A little Merlot is often blended with Cabernet. And if the Merlot is less than 25%, they don't have to state that on the label.

You might wonder why.... Lot's of people would like a little more truth on the label, but really that's another subject for another podcast.

I mentioned that La Jota Vineyard is proud of their vineyards on Howell Mountain. Howell Mountain (and Napa Valley) is well-known for producing wine of a certain character.

Wine growers usually believe that the area where they grow their grapes has a powerful effect on their wines. The soil can be rocky or sandy or full of clay. The climate might be warm or cool, dry or humid. The vineyard may be on a mountain or in a valley. All these factors can influence the character of the wine. Wine growers may also begin to realize that the wines produced in some area will share similar characteristics - in the taste or in how well the wines will age. This is sometimes referred to by the French word, "terroir".

In the US, if a group of vintners can convince the US government that their local area is unique and special, they can apply for their area to become an American Viticultural Area - or AVA. Napa Valley has several AVAs - maybe you've heard of some of them - like Carneros, or Stags Leap. There's also Mt. Veeder and Rutherford Bench. St. Helena.

According to the rules, if you see "California" on the label, 100% of that wine must come from California. If you see a county name - Napa County, Sonoma County - 75% of the grapes must come from that county. A county is not necessarily an AVA. If the label does have an AVA on it - like Napa Valley or Howell Mountain - 85% of the grapes must come from that particular location. Some wine bottles may also include a vineyard name. In that case, 95% of the grapes must come from that vineyard. When a winemaker believes one particular vineyard produces very special wine, she'll place the name of that vineyard on the label. (This bottle of La Jota is NOT a single vineyard wine).

Moving down, what's the meaning of 12<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Release? Many wineries might make a few batches of their wines. They might make a regular release as well as a reserve. The reserve would come from their best vineyards, maybe with the oldest vines. They might age the wine longer or give it some other kind of special treatment. The regular release, on the other hand, might come from younger vineyards or vineyards that produce higher quantities of grapes. They'll ship the wine earlier than the reserve. Obviously, the reserve will cost a lot more. But it would probably be meant for more special occasions – or for longer aging. So if you see "Reserve" on the label, expect to pay a bit more.

So 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary release is just the particular name that La Jota chose for their reserve wine. I think they released their first wine in 1981. So 94 is their 12<sup>th</sup> release. These days they call their reserve the Heritage Release. The website says that in some years they blend the best grapes while in other years they may use the best vineyard.

Well... this podcast has taken a little more time than I'd intended. I wanted to talk more about alcohol – this La Jota has 13.5% alcohol, but we may have to leave that for another time.

What do you think of these podcasts? If you have a suggestion, leave a comment.

That's all for now. Thanks and come again.