

Connecting the Wine World to the Real World Building Brand Identity Through Conjunctive Labeling Monterey County Testimonials

As in any winegrowing region that is large enough to be subdivided into distinct climatic and terroir-specific subAVAs, the Monterey AVA embraces many unique sites, each of which has its share of lore and stories. Those stories were marketed in some cases more effectively than others, leading to a disparity in name recognition. When the topic of conjunctive labeling was broached for the second time by the Monterey County Vintners and Growers Association (MCVGA), Executive Director, Kim Stemmler, and then Board President, Scott Caraccioli, anticipated some pushback from the more active subAVA groups, in particular, the Santa Lucia Highlands Artisans, which had become a powerful marketing force.

For Scott Caraccioli, a winegrower whose family has considerable land holdings throughout Monterey county, particularly in the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH), the perspective of the SLH membership was clearly understandable. They did not want to dilute the brand that they had spent so much time defining and promoting.

Yet, for Caraccioli, there were two overarching reasons for pursuing conjunctive labeling. First, to capitalize on the rich history and brand identity that Monterey as a destination has with consumers worldwide and secondly, to raise the awareness of the entire winegrowing region as a collective whole.

“To me, it was the most singularly important thing we could do to ground Monterey with its nine individual subAVAs. Having Monterey County on the label helps tell that story in a digestible and cohesive way: it lets people know where all those other places are within the broader context of Monterey.”

Monterey as a brand name evokes a legend larger than life. It is John Steinbeck and all his stories, the Monterey Aquarium, the rich agricultural salad bowl of the world, the exclusiveness of Pebble Beach, the charm of Carmel and the profound beauty of Big Sur. There is no denying the positive and overarching appeal of this collective place in the mind of the tourist. Why not capitalize on that by putting Monterey County on each and every wine label produced in the county?

Says Stemmler, “People outside the area don’t know where the Santa Lucia Highlands are, but they do resonate with Monterey.”

Adds Caraccioli, “It’s a matter of who has the most brand equity with people. It’s not just about the wine world, but about the real world. Hames Valley, San Antonio, Arroyo Seco: these don’t mean anything to consumers until you tell them they are all in Monterey County.” He adds that when he was selling his own wines from the SLH, 30 to 40% of the somms he dealt with had not idea where the SLH region was located.

“We had to own where we’re from,” Carccioli continues. “The Highlands doesn’t mean the same thing to consumers as Monterey does. If we didn’t help people connect the dots, we were leaving brand equity on the table.”

An early opponent of the conjunctive labeling idea, Dan Lee of Morgan, one of the founders of the SLH group, was wary of previous associations with Monterey as a grapegrowing region that decades ago had a reputation for producing “green” fruit from varieties that frankly didn’t belong there. That has long since been rectified, and the surging popularity of both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, both of which are ideally suited to Monterey’s many growing regions, have solidified the region’s status as a primary supplier of these varieties.

Still, he initially viewed the conjunctive labeling idea as not necessarily helping the SLH, but the other way around: “The tide lifts their boats, but not ours!” he recalls thinking. Eventually, though, he and most of the other members of the SLH group came around to seeing the value of the idea.

Lee says he talked with some of the Sonoma County people who were going through their own conjunctive labeling process, and they had agreed to a compromise that was mutually agreeable, allowing the process to move forward. Says Lee, “We eventually said, ‘We think this is fine: we can get behind this idea.’ Some people were unhappy, but they went along. This happened in 2015. Frankly, people forgot about it. Really, in retrospect, it just wasn’t that big a deal. I think Monterey has a great reputation now.”