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01.07.2008

Meritage Association Turns 20

No matter how they pronounce it, 200 wineries now belong

by [Paul Franson](#)

Petaluma, Calif. -- The Meritage Association signed up its 200th member in December, as the organization prepares to celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2008.

The latest member is tiny Revolution Winery in Ashburn, Va., joining other new members from Massachusetts (Red Oak Winery from Middleton) and Arizona (Jerome Winery from Jerome) as the group's membership has spread far beyond its roots in Northern California to all over North America and even the world.

"I think it's fitting that our 200th member is Revolution Winery," said Julie Weinstock, current chairman of the Meritage Association. "When we started 20 years ago, Meritage truly was a revolutionary idea in the wine industry."

The association was founded and the term "Meritage" was coined in 1988 by a group of two-dozen American vintners led by Agustin Huneeus, Mitch Cosentino and Julie Garvey. They were dissatisfied that labeling regulations forced them to label blends of Bordeaux varieties with no more than 75% of a single variety as mere "table wine."

But "Bordeaux-blend" didn't work either. In addition to being illegal, as Huneeus remarked, "I knew 'Meritage' was a great opportunity, because we needed a denomination. Bordeaux blend is a misnomer--our grapes are not grown in Bordeaux, and the wines are not produced there."

After forming the group and conducting a contest for a name, they chose Meritage for "merit" and "heritage." Though the intended pronunciation rhymes with "heritage," the group has finally stopped correcting those who try to give it a French twist by calling it "Meritahzh." "We don't care what they call it," Weinstock told *Wines & Vines*.

The red Meritage wines are blends of at least two of the eight Bordeaux varieties (often stated as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petite Verdot, but also including Gros Verdot, Carménère and St. Macaire). Perhaps the only vintner who planted all eight was former owner Orville Magoon at Langtry Estates in Guenoc Valley, Lake County, Calif.

No grape can represent more than 90% of the blend. There are also a few white Meritage wines, which contain Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon or rarely, Sauvignon Vert as in Chimney Rock Winery's version.



Mitch Cosentino's 1986 Meritage "The Poet," a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot, was the first red Meritage wine released in the United States. "Meritage is now a recognized category of top-tier wines, and I'm proud to have been a part of the process," Cosentino said.

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The oldest wine released, however, was made by Dave Stare, a founder of Dry Creek Vineyards, who released a 1985 vintage labeled Meritage.



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After initial interest and acceptance by the federal government (then the BATF), the group seemed to stagnate for many years, though the concept of Bordeaux blends didn't. Many of California's most famous Bordeaux-variety blended wines were released under proprietary names, such as Joseph Phelps' Insignia.

Some vintners complained that they didn't see any benefit from signing up and paying the licensing fee to use the name, though it is now only \$1 per case with an annual cap of \$500 (though Weinstock said it may be going up a bit soon).

The organization was primarily a technical and licensing group. It has never policed the quality of the wines, but Weinstock says the original intent was to use the term for the top blended wines from each winery. "I believe people associate Meritage with quality," she said. "And with so many wines out there, it's always a good idea to help differentiate your products."

The idea received a big boost when Michaela Rodeno, the marketing-oriented president of St. Supéry Winery, became association president in 1999 and changed the focus. Julie Weinstock, who was at Cosentino Winery, admitted, "I'd thought the association was floundering until Michaela took it over. She turned it into a marketing organization."

Since then, the term has received growing recognition by consumers, trade and media as a better way to communicate about blended wines. Many retailers and restaurants have created Meritage sections, often including proprietary wines from wineries that aren't even members of the group. "I think one of the biggest accomplishments is that it allows buyers and sommeliers to put wine into a category in their minds."

Weinstock, who became president of the Meritage Association in 2006, is general manager of Adobe Road Winery in Petaluma, Calif., which is readying its first Meritage wines. Weinstock said that many wineries don't use the term, even if they're members of the group, while others use both proprietary names as well as Meritage.

"A company like Phelps doesn't need it," she said, but Weinstock believes the term can help others who aren't as well known. That includes the many new wineries outside Napa and Sonoma.

In the last two years alone, membership has increased 35% and the organization now has members in 20 U.S. states and six countries--Argentina, Australia, Canada, Israel, Mexico and the United States.

The association has created a website (meritagewine.org), partnered with wine education groups like Women for Winesense, and increased donor participation in high profile wine-related charity events such as Auction Napa Valley, and events by the High Museum in Atlanta and WBGH Boston.

In addition, the group has sponsored educational conferences and consumer tastings bringing together winemakers, media and trade throughout the U.S. In 2003, the association gained the recognition of the European wine community when 12 Meritage wines were included in tastings at VinItaly, and again in 2006, when Meritage wines were invited to participate in a tasting of Bordeaux-styled wines organized by Italian journalists in Vicenza, Italy.

The association plans to work closely with its members throughout this anniversary year, providing Meritage-focused educational materials and tools that can be modified by individual wineries in their own promotional and marketing efforts.

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