



# What Does the Term 'Rutherford Dust' Mean?



Winemaking legend André Tchelistcheff once said, “It takes Rutherford Dust to grow great Cabernet Sauvignon.” And that phrase—*Rutherford Dust*—is today a well-known descriptor of Napa Valley’s Rutherford AVA.

“It’s an apt descriptor, as there is an undeniably ‘dusty’ characteristic to the ancient, mineral-rich soils of Rutherford, which were formed millions of years ago and spread out from the hills as alluvial fans,” says Lauren Pesch, president of the **Rutherford Dust Society** (RDS) and partner of both Leeds & Pesch Vineyard Consulting and **Chavez & Leeds Family**



However, Pesch makes a point of noting that it's more than the actual dust on the ground contributing to the distinct minerality found in the wines. In fact, it is a combination of complex environmental factors that create this quality, including the maritime influence blown in from the Bay to the South, influencing the overall climate. Pesch describes Rutherford's temperatures as consistently cooler than AVAs to the north but warmer than those to the south during the summer growing season.

The region also experiences more overall sun exposure than others in the Valley, as it is "located at Napa Valley's widest point." According to UC Davis, Rutherford is categorized as Region II, clocking over 3,000 growing degree days. It also receives a significant diurnal shift of about 12°F during that same time, ensuring good acid retention whilst achieving full phenolic ripeness.

"We use 'Rutherford Dust' as shorthand for all of these factors that make our region one of the most enviable places on earth to cultivate grapevines and produce world class wines," Pesch says. "We like to think of this as the 'sweet spot' in the Valley for developing complex and nuanced flavors."

Not surprisingly, it is Cabernet Sauvignon that takes the lead as the most planted grape variety. Pesch attributes its success to the combination of well-drained gravelly loam soils and the "sweet-spot" temperatures. "Our typical year provides enough sunshine to take the grapes to optimal ripeness without over-stressing the vines or prematurely shriveling our fruit. This translates to vineyards that are healthier and longer lived," she says.

Like any other AVA, Rutherford is not uniform and, in fact, is home to a variety of soil types, micro-climates, and topography that impact the grapes grown and wine styles produced. The RDS notes that Rutherford is relatively flat; elevation does not exceed more than 500 feet at its highest point. But talk to any vintner farming the area, and those undulating hills will inform everything from varietal and clonal choices to trellising and vine-row orientation decisions based on the specific altitude, aspect, and of course soil composition.

"Rutherford's winegrowing history dates back well into the 1890s," comments Pesch. "As a result of the long history of quality farming in Rutherford, growers have largely come to understand these idiosyncrasies [within] their properties and optimize plantings and farming practices accordingly."



Rutherford are often thought to have notes of bittersweet chocolate, black tea, and even tar—a tasting note André was known for using,” she says.

Some of the Valley’s most iconic wineries call the Rutherford AVA home. For a taste of the region’s most legendary producers, check out **Inglenook**, **Beaulieu Vineyard**, and **Freemark Abbey**. But Pesch points out that it is also an AVA filled with small, family-owned businesses who are beginning to build upon their long-standing reputations as quality grape growers by producing wines of their own. She names **Morisoli Vineyard**, **SR Tonella Cellars**, **Chaix Wines**, and **Piña Napa Valley** as a few examples to seek out.

A full list of Rutherford Dust Society **member wineries** and **growers** is listed on the Rutherford Dust Society website.

## Stacy Briscoe

Stacy Briscoe is a Sonoma-based wine journalist and editor who produces content for several publications including Wine Enthusiast, SevenFifty Daily, and Wine Industry Network, among others. She also speaks at industry conferences, judges wine competitions, and is a WSET Diploma candidate. Stacy has a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from the University of California Santa Cruz and is often found with a book in hand (and a glass of wine in the other).

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