

Eola-Amity Hills AVA Background by David Patte

The Eola-Amity Hills is one of Oregon's finest viticulture areas for winegrowers, winemakers, and wine lovers. Located one-hour southwest of Portland, this area is known for its diverse plantings, premium wine offerings, and adventurous and luxurious tasting rooms. This region offers everything the wine country has to impart - from the rugged to the refined.

Wines produced from this region offer high acidity and red wines, a firm structure, and a darker, edgier personality than those from surrounding areas.

The Eola-Amity Hills American Viticulture Area (AVA), established in 2006, is located northwest of Salem, entirely within the Willamette Valley AVA, and encompasses roughly 37,900 acres within Polk and Yamhill Counties. Approximately 2,850 of these acres are planted to vines. The main ridge of the Eola Hills runs north-south and has numerous lateral ridges on both sides that run east-west. Most of the region's vineyard sites exist at elevations between 250 to 700 feet (75-215 m).

Compared to the surrounding areas, the soils and geology of the Eola Hills are distinctive in two regards. The prevailing soils are basalt-derived and shallower than other hills in the north Willamette Valley. Volcanic basalt rock from the lava flows of the Miocene epoch underlies the Eola Hills, and marine sedimentary rock of the Oligocene epoch underlies areas at the lower elevations of the ridge. The soils at the middle and higher elevations of the Eola Hills are largely well-drained silty clay loams weathered from basalt; those on the lower slopes are silt loams weathered predominantly from sedimentary rock, particularly on the west-facing slopes.

The dominant basalt-derived soils on the Eola Hills are Nekia soils (recently reclassified as Gelderman) and Ritner and Jory soils. The preponderance of the shallower Nekia and Gelderman soils in the Eola Hills differentiates the Eola Hills from the Red Hills farther north, where Jory soils are predominant. Nekia and Gelderman soils have a much lower available water capacity than Jory soils. The most common sedimentary soils on the Eola Hills are Steiwer, Chehulpum, and Helmick soils, especially on the west side of the ridge. Also in the Eola Hills are soils formed in alluvial deposits, the most common of which are the silt loam Woodburn soils. Such alluvial soils generally are only at the lowest elevations of the proposed viticultural area (below 300 feet). Like the soils mentioned above, these alluvial soils are also suitable for wine grapes on steep slopes for good water drainage.

The climate in the Eola-Amity Hills is greatly influenced by its position due east of the Van Duzer Corridor, which provides a break in the Coast Range that allows cool Pacific Ocean air to flow through. Summer ocean winds vented through the corridor often caused dramatic late afternoon drops in temperature, which further distinguished the area from the hills further north and helped grapes retain acidity as they ripened. During the growing season, average maximum temperatures at the middle elevations range from 62 °F in April to 83 °F in July. These factors contribute to the ideal conditions for the "cool-climate" grape varieties that dominate in the Eola-Amity Hills vineyards, such as Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, and Chardonnay.

The agricultural history of this area dates back to the mid-1850s. However, it wasn't until the 1970s that winemakers started to discover the area as having ideal growing conditions for high-quality wine grapes. Around this time, a few modern pioneers, including Don Byard of Hidden Springs, planted a patchwork of vineyards in the Eola-Amity Hills. Soon after, others followed suit, and today, this area produces world-class, handcrafted cool-climate varietals.

The AVA is named for Eola Hills, situated at the southern end of the ridge, and the Amity Hills, at the northern end. On January 17, 1856, the Oregon territorial legislature incorporated a village called "Eola," a name derived from Aeolus, the Classical Greek god and keeper of the winds. The source further states that the Eola Hills "constitute one of the important groups of isolated hills in the Willamette Valley."