

Appellation America squeezed

30 Jul 2009 by Linda Murphy

AppellationAmerica.com, the website which for six years educated consumers on the 300- plus federally recognised wine regions in the United States, will cease adding new content in mid August, and will likely die on the vine.

A combination of the recession (ie, big drop in advertising); high operating costs (including paying dozens of correspondents, cartographers and illustrators); an apparent lack of critical- mass consumer interest in exploring US wine regions other than California, Oregon and Washington; an abandoned attempt to sell wine on the site; the departure of founders Roger and Adam Dial in late 2008, after squabbles with investors, and a last- gasp conversion just weeks ago, from free content to subscription, doomed the site.

In short, Appellation America was unable to monetise its content. It was five years ahead of its time, identifying promising winegrowing states such as Michigan, Ohio, Texas and Colorado, and recommending specific wines from them, long before consumers were ready to hear the news.

Its correspondents wrote timely, informed features and commentaries. Links led viewers to information on the grapes grown in each appellation, the wineries located within them, and the overlapping appellations. Google Maps pinpointed winery locations, and contact information was provided for those wishing to visit. It's all still there, yet now for a price. But for how long?

While the site is still available at www.appellationamerica.com, it now costs \$4.95 per month and \$49.95 per year to view it. With no new content being added after already commissioned articles are published through mid August, the site will lose its newsworthiness and inevitably become stale. There will be no one on watch if Mississippi Muscadine becomes the Next Great Thing.

CEO Tom Welch told *Wines & Vines* magazine that Appellation America will continue as an archive site, databases intact, and that its Best- of- Appellation tasting program – in which wines are evaluated against others from the same variety and region - will continue (wineries pay to enter BOA tastings – one of the site's few income streams).

It reminds me of my time at WineToday.com, the *New York Times'* wine web site, which launched in 1998 and closed in 2001, a victim of the dot.com bust. WineToday was a ground- breaker in videocasting, in covering major wine events in real time, and in putting web cams at wineries during harvest (including Château Lynch Bages). WineToday's wine reviews were available on Palm PDAs, and site visitors had access to some 7,000 reviews and 3,000 winery profiles. For free. Yet New York Times pulled the plug, and wiped out all Internet remnants of the site. Such a waste of great content.

I hope Appellation America doesn't suffer the same fate, though I fear for its survival. They say that pioneers get the arrows in the back; Appellation America is in such a position. If it doesn't survive, my money is on someone else coming along five years later with a similar business plan, and succeeding.