

PART ONE

A California Wine Primer



A Brief History of Wine in California



MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED YEARS after Spanish missionaries brought vine cuttings with them from Mexico's Baja California and established the first of the California missions in San Diego, researchers at Madrid's National Biotechnical Center, using DNA techniques, have traced those first vines back to a black grape that seems to be a dark-colored relative of the Palomino grape still in use for the production of Sherry. That humble beginning may not seem like it would have much to do with today's burgeoning wine industry, but the fact is that the Mission variety became the vine of choice in California as its population grew first through the arrival of trappers and wealthy landowners, then with the small but steady stream of wagon trains that came west out of the country's heartland and the establishment in the 1840s of the clipper ship trade. By the time the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, California's wine economy had become established, and despite world wars and periods in which the sale of alcohol was banned, the industry hung on and finally exploded into its current shape with the wine boom of the 1970s. Today, the Mission grape is gone, but the wine industry it helped spawn now boasts over a half million acres of wine grapes from one end of the state to the other.

1760 TO 1780

In 1769, Father Junípero Serra established the first of the Spanish missions at San Juan Capistrano in Orange County south of Los Angeles. Despite the supposed two hundredth anniversary of California wine that was celebrated in 1969, it is believed today that Father Serra did not plant vines and make wines until a decade later. During the last fifteen years of his life, Serra established eight more missions and associated vineyards. Serra planted a grape variety from Mexico that became known as the Mission grape and later thrived as the leading grape in California until the wave of settlers in the 1850s and 1860s would bring more noble varieties to California. What became a total of twenty-one missions would sustain the production of more wine, but it was all for the members of the church and not a wine “industry” per se.

1830 TO 1850

During this period, the only ways to get to California were overland, mostly by wagon train, or by clipper ship around the southern tip of South America. Because the continental railroad was still two decades away, California might have resisted population growth had it not been for the discovery of gold and the resulting Gold Rush. Indeed, in the early 1800s, there was almost no nonnative population in existence in the region. By the 1830s, though, Mexican land grants led to the establishment of farms and then to the development of villages. One such landowner was George Yount, who settled in the Napa Valley in 1836 and soon after planted the first vines there. It wasn't long until he attached his name to history by establishing Yountville in the Napa Valley.

Also during the 1830s, an aptly named Frenchman, Jean Louis Vignes, brought the first substantial stock of French vines to Los Angeles. While his contribution did not spark the first California wine expansion, his vines did find their way into the plantings in Southern California. And while Vignes may have been the first, his influence did not spread. Rather, it took a completely different circumstance to change California forever—the discovery of gold in the Sierra mountains east of San Francisco.

Back east, prior to the Gold Rush, a small wine industry developed in the Midwest, focused substantially in Ohio, while, at the same time, horticulturalists along the East Coast were growing grapes in hothouses and entering them in the competitions of the day. We know that one such

person was a clipper ship captain named James Macondray. His prize-winning Zinfandel grapes were honored in Boston as early as the 1830s. Macondray would, by 1850 or so, settle in San Francisco. The records of his journey do not specifically list Zinfandel as part of his cargo, but it is very likely that Macondray is a primary source of the grape that for so long was known as California's own. His cuttings found their way to Napa and then to Sonoma.

Also during this period, Spanish land grants gave over-large blocks of what was thought to be unproductive dirt to California farmers. The shape and location of these holdings would influence later development, and even today the land grant known as Los Carneros still finds its name prominently attached to the Napa and Sonoma wine country. Still, by all accounts, the population of California at the end of this period was something like fifteen thousand, with about 40 percent immigrants and 60 percent native inhabitants. By 1850, that total would grow to almost one hundred thousand, boosted by statehood and the Gold Rush.

1850 TO 1870

This era was the first explosive period of California wine growth. With the discovery of gold in the Sierras, the population of California grew enormously and wine production along with it. While historians may differ on the impact of the Gold Rush, it is clear that the population of California grew from fifteen thousand in 1848 to almost six hundred thousand by 1870 and that the great majority of that population was centered in the swath from San Francisco to Sacramento and up into the Sierras. During the height of the Gold Rush, local agriculture in the Sierras and Sierra Foothills flourished. El Dorado County alone reported that six thousand acres were devoted to agriculture to feed the miners and camp followers who quickly filled the hills. Approximately half of that was vineyard land, and there were substantial holdings in the other foothill counties as well.

At the same time, the urban population was growing apace. About half of the newcomers arrived by boat in San Francisco, many of whom settled there and elsewhere in Northern California. Many of the settlers were of European ancestry, including notable wine pioneers such as "Count" Agoston Haraszthy (Sonoma County), Charles LeFranc and his future son-in-law, Paul Masson (Santa Clara County), and Charles Krug (Napa County). Hungarian Count Haraszthy, for one, imported some hundred

thousand cuttings from many European vineyards and planted them in California. Haraszthy pioneered numerous winemaking techniques now thought commonplace, including hillside planting, and caves dug for aging. He founded the Buena Vista Winery in the Sonoma Valley, considered the birthplace of winemaking in California. Less well-known but also important were the exploits of folks like Sam Brannan who set up camp near the hot springs in Calistoga, thinking that he would re-create the atmosphere around New York state's Saratoga, and who, in 1860, realizing the potential for grape growing in the Napa Valley, would go to Europe, where he also arranged for thousands and thousands of noble grape vines to be sent back. At the same time, New Englanders other than Macondray began to import their prized grapes from home, and Zinfandel was prime among them—albeit as both table grape and wine grape.

The recognizable potential in California and in the West generally sparked interest in the construction of a transcontinental railroad as early as the mid-1840s. Statehood in California and Oregon and the subsequent discoveries of precious metals intensified that interest, not to mention that thousands of people were heading west by wagon train and long ocean journey. By the 1850s, a plan was realized, but the railroad was not completed until 1869. Until that time, the booming wine industry in Ohio and elsewhere supplied most of the wine for thirsty easterners. The establishment of the railroad would help change that equation forever.

By 1870, the basis for a California wine industry had been established. Grape varieties far more suited to fine table wine production had been introduced, and many of the areas that today are world famous for wine quality had seen their first plantings go in. Wine had very quickly progressed from religious use to thirst slaker for the mining community to commodity for sale first to a growing urban population and then to the rest of the country. California winemakers were able to compete with the established midwestern and eastern makers, and California very soon became the single largest wine-producing state—a status that has remained unchallenged to this day.

1870 TO 1919

With its base established, the California wine industry entered a long period of expansion. The Napa Valley slowly became the center for fine wine production. With Krug and Jacob Schram opening wineries in the 1860s and others planting grapes, Napa's place in history began to emerge. Among

MAP 1
California



names we still recognize today, Beringer was started by the brothers Jacob and Frederick in 1875 and was followed by Captain Gustave Niebaum, who founded Inglenook in 1880, and by Georges de Latour with Beaulieu in 1900. At the same time, new regions were emerging. Spring Mountain was first planted about 1880, and the very significant grape-growing operations in the Livermore Valley were started by the likes of Karl Wente and James Concannon in the 1880s. Grapes were also planted in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and the Montebello Wine Company came into being in the 1880s as well. Today, Ridge Vineyards is the most important winery on Monte Bello Ridge. Grape growing and winemaking found homes all around the San Francisco Bay and in almost every friendly agricultural valley and flatlands from the southern reaches of Santa Clara Valley up to Santa Rosa and beyond. Mendocino County was not really opened up to grape growing until the 1900s despite limited attempts prior to that time.

California's population grew from 600,000 to 3,500,000, and San Francisco and Los Angeles each rushed past 500,000 in population as they became important financial and commercial centers in their own right. But there was trouble brewing as well, and the scourge of phylloxera, a root louse found in the East, reared its ugly head. During the 1870s, various native American grape varieties were taken to England for study, with the unintended consequence that phylloxera went along for the ride and became introduced to Europe, where it quickly attacked European grape varieties that had no built-in defense and thus died off. The disease waited a decade or so before it also decimated many of the fledgling vineyards of California. It wasn't until the closing years of the nineteenth century that scientists and growers learned that by grafting European vine material onto native American rootstock, the disease could be thwarted. It was then, and into the early decades of the twentieth century, that wine production flourished in America, and in California in particular. The growth of the California wine industry presaged the developments of a hundred years later, but it took many a twist and turn before the California industry would mature. California growers brought in disease-free vines and made wines similar to the ancient and prestigious offerings of France and elsewhere in Europe. In the early decades of the new century, California vintners were in the enviable position of exporting their product to Europe and Asia. In the period leading up to Prohibition, California wines were winning tasting competitions in Europe, a feat that would not be repeated for sixty years—because everything would change thanks to the moral imperatives of Prohibition.

In 1920, the United States went dry—by law. What happened in reality is another story, but the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment one year earlier meant that as of January 17, 1920, the “manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors” was prohibited. To the wine industry, and indeed every sector of the economy that was involved in the prohibited activities, it mattered not that a third of the states has always been dry and that several others had joined their ranks during World War I for “patriotic reasons.” The forces of the Anti-Saloon League, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and a host of social and industrial reformers had banded together and brought about the outlawing of alcohol. There were attempts after the ratification process had run its course to define the amendment as not applying to beer or wine, but Congress passed the Volstead Act, which said that the amendment specifically limited the level of alcohol in any potion to 0.5 percent.

In addition to providing Eliot Ness with a stream of cases, Prohibition created new levels of subterfuge among winemakers and average citizens, the former making medicinal and sacramental wines and the latter becoming expert garage winemakers. Bootlegging flourished. Bathtub gin became a popular drink, and the Roaring Twenties, with its uproarious ways, made the cocktail more popular than ever before. Grape prices went through the roof for varieties that could be shipped, but other varieties fell out of favor. Working within the provisions of the law that allowed home winemakers to produce up to two hundred gallons a year for home consumption, large businesses sprung up to ship and distribute grapes across the country. Crowds lining up to receive boxcars full of grapes in the fall became the order of the day. In the world of unintended consequences, grape acreage increased during Prohibition by almost 100 percent.

Despite the many ways in which people skirted the law, both legally and illegally, Prohibition all but destroyed the production side of California’s wine industry. Production in wineries fell dramatically—some measures suggest by as much as 95 percent. Businesses closed, and tanks went empty, rotted, or dried out. By the time the country recognized that a monster of illegality and violence had been created and allowed the industry to open its doors again, both the wine industry and the public had changed. And it did not help that Repeal came in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Repeal arrived at the end of 1933, the result of a recognition that consumers did indeed want to use alcoholic beverages without a criminal stigma.

But the industry was unready for the impact of Repeal. Demand for wine grew but failed to reach the levels of two decades earlier, and home wine-makers remained a major buyer of wine grapes for decades. Much of the wine that was produced turned out to be inferior, and the industry went through a period of readjustment. The sales of fortified wines exceeded the sales of table wine in the post-Prohibition era, and it took thirty-five years for varietal table wines to outsell fortified wines again. Prohibition had shaken the winemaking industry to its roots, and it would take another revolution to turn it back in the direction with which it had flirted at the turn of the century—namely, as an industry that could produce wines of high quality.

1933 TO 1966

During the middle years of the twentieth century, winemaking grew first in quantity and then in quality. In the late 1930s, Beaulieu Vineyards' George de Latour had introduced—with the help of noted winemaker André Tchelistcheff—new techniques such as cold fermentation, malolactic fermentation, and aging wine in small French oak barrels. Brother Timothy built the Christian Brothers into a leading winemaker after Prohibition. Wineries like Krug, Martini, Inglenook, Simi, and Sebastiani all survived, and they and others frequently produced wines of great quality. However, quality was not really in vogue except among a small band of dedicated collectors. The most intriguing figure during this era was the iconoclast Martin Ray, who got his start at Paul Masson and later went on to found his own winery. Insisting on using the techniques of the best Old World wineries, but not always able to find consistency, Ray made some of the legendary wines of the era as well as some of the most expensive vinegar. Still, it was Martin Ray, as much as anybody else working in the post-Prohibition era, who made it possible for others to imagine a fine wine world in California.

In the 1950s, with winemaking still mostly done in old wood vats, without temperature control, and almost never using small barrels for aging, the industry saw the emergence of a few pioneers who would set the stage for the wine boom that would follow. James Zellerbach, a San Francisco financier with a taste for the wines of Burgundy, bought land high in the eastern hills of the Sonoma Valley and began to produce both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay using modern techniques, including fermentation in stainless steel and aging in oak barrels imported from France. At the same time, advertising executive Fred McCrea bought land in the Napa Valley

hills for a summer retreat. He soon added grapes, and over the years, Stony Hill Chardonnay became one of the most sought-after wines made in California. Lee Stewart was yet another 1950s pioneer. His Souverain winery evolved over time to become a producer of very high-quality Cabernet Sauvignon—so much so that by the time the wine boom hit, his winery was already a household name to collectors.

By 1960 and the years that followed, things began to heat up in the winery formation business. Joe Heitz, who had been instrumental in opening up Beaulieu to the world, left and founded his own label. David Bennion and a bunch of Stanford friends founded Ridge Vineyards. And in 1966, Robert Mondavi, son of Cesare Mondavi who had purchased Charles Krug in the 1940s and moved his wine business to Napa from Lodi, left the family business in a huff and, with the help of investors, built the first new winery in Napa Valley in decades. But it was not just the newness of the winery that made it instantly successful. Mondavi had chafed under old winemaking regimes at Krug and felt that there was a better, more modern way to make wine. When so many of his competitors, even successful competitors such as Beaulieu and Inglenook, were still following the practices of years gone by, he adopted new techniques, recast wine in new styles, and, more than anyone else, set the tone for the modern California wine industry as it exists today.

The Gallo brothers, Ernest and Julio, might have argued that they, not Robert Mondavi, were the driving force in the reemergence of table wine as the focus of the industry. And it would be hard to argue. Aggressive in marketing and driven to bring wine to the masses, the Gallo brothers built a jug wine empire that, at its peak, was reputed to be selling one-third of all the wine produced in California. In fact, the Gallos and Mondavi were great friends who understood that they were looking at the wine industry through opposite ends of the telescope. Now, in an industry that has matured, it is unlikely that we will ever again see titans like Robert Mondavi and Ernest and Julio Gallo.

1966 TO 1980

By the late 1960s, great wines were already being made with the modern techniques of the day. California fine wine had become a collectible for more than a few, but it was still only a larger few. Yet, in truth, despite the many fine wines available, the modern industry was still in its infancy. Consider just these three sets of facts. First, in 1964, there was not enough acreage of

Chardonnay to have it be listed among the grapes planted in California. It was instead listed among other “red” varieties and was outnumbered by the likes of Green Hungarian, Grey Riesling, Burger, and, yes, even the long-ignored Mission. Second, by 1970, its standing acreage had increased to three thousand; by 1980, it had reached twenty thousand. Finally, it took until 1968 for the sales of table wine to exceed the sales of fortified wines. Prohibition ended in 1933, yet the industry, once having a table wine focus, took thirty-five years just to get back to parity with fortified wines. Today, the ratio is 30 to 1 in table wine sales versus those of fortified wines. Winery expansion is significant as well. From the beginning of the period to the end (i.e., 1966 to 1980), the number of wineries doubled to something just over five hundred. The 1970s were the years of the Great Wine Boom. No longer was the industry building a platform. It was maturing, growing, and expanding into new vineyard areas. By this time, California wine had begun to play on the world stage again. But how to rebuild the reputation of an industry not long removed from fortified wines made in enormous quantities? By deciding that it was time for table wine to become world-class at the top end and to lose its “cheap, soft, mawkish” character at the low end. The jug wine orientation of Sonoma and other areas changed to a varietal focus. Whole new regions, such as Monterey, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara counties, emerged as major players; at the beginning of this period, only San Luis Obispo with five hundred acres of Zinfandel rates a mention in the grape acreage charts, but by the end of 1980, these three counties are nearing fifty thousand acres total and have become integral parts of the California wine scene.

The recognition that California had a special set of circumstances capable of making world-class wine meant that wine styles changed forever. Old tanks made of overused redwood and cement were replaced by stainless steel. Fermentation temperatures were controlled; grapes were crushed with an eye toward producing tighter structures, more tannin, and greater age worthiness capable of matching the best from Europe. At the same time, Zinfandel emerged from the background, first with encouragement from folks like Darrell Corti, the Sacramento-area wine merchant and rising star in the wine firmament, and helped along by wineries like Sutter Home with its early production of Amador County wines, by the now-legendary Joe Swan and the bunch at Ridge who recognized the inherent potential of old-vine Zinfandel grown in coastal counties. By the end of the period, Ravenswood, Rosenblum, Seghesio, and others were making Zinfandels that capture the palates of millions. Sauvignon Blanc, in the hands of Robert Mondavi, became a dry wine with recognizable varietal character and

bracing acidity. And Cabernet Sauvignon, long considered California's best red grape, leads the charge as the number of collectable wines grows from two dozen at best to hundreds with the establishment of a long, long line of makers including Mondavi, Heitz, Ridge, Chappellet, Caymus, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Chateau Montelena, Conn Creek, Mount Eden, Clos Du Val, and Cuvaion, to name just a few of the more obvious players at the time. In the mid-1970s, California also recognizes that Cabernet Sauvignon in Bordeaux is regularly blended with other varieties; and starting with Louis Martini in 1968, Merlot, so long absent from California, makes an appearance. By the end of the period, Merlot has become a staple, and wineries like Duckhorn emerge and make a career with this newly accepted grape.

Along the way, the French unwittingly helped—much to their chagrin. In 1976, to celebrate America's bicentennial and to introduce California wine as a much-improved product, Paris wine seller Steven Spurrier organized a blind tasting in which top California wines were evaluated alongside their French equivalents. The tasters were all members of French wine nobility, and after concluding that the highest-rated wines in the tasting were all French, they were amazed to find out that the winners were from California. In the Chardonnay category, Chateau Montelena was ranked highest by the judges. Stag's Leap Wine Cellars had won among the reds for its Cabernet Sauvignon. The world knew then what many fans of California wines had already concluded: California could make and sell wines of great quality. The Paris tasting may not have started the wine boom, but it certainly confirmed its validity and boosted it further.

Journalistic coverage of the California wine scene also changed in the 1970s and paralleled the growth of the industry. By 1974, both the *California Grapevine* and *Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine* gained very quick popularity for their concentration on California wine. A few years later, the *Wine Spectator* emerged in a brief newsprint format. All three of those publications, and Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate* with its worldwide focus, became the new voices in wine writing and still exist today as major forces. Others have joined them over time, of course, but these pioneers of the 1970s changed the face of wine journalism in the United States for decades to come.

1980 TO PRESENT

By 1980, the California wine industry had begun to enter into a period of "dynamic maturity." Large-scale changes continued to appear, but so did a series of events that were intended to bring even greater levels of

“fineness” in the ways that grapes were grown, wine was made, labels were expressed, and the land was tended. Grapes continued to be planted across the entire three decades with the result that 270,000 producing acres grew to approximately 450,000. Cabernet Sauvignon jumped from 20,000 to 75,000; Chardonnay vines in production increased from 13,000 to 92,000; Pinot Noir grew from 9,000 to 26,000; Merlot expanded from 2,000 to 47,000. At the same time, less well-appreciated grapes were pulled out at astonishing rates, and the once ubiquitous Mission is now about to disappear—its few hundred acres of grapes barely register.

Rhône varieties, so long ignored, finally arrived in earnest by the mid- to late 1980s. Pinot Noir, 125 years in the doldrums, found new homes in the 1980s in Carneros, the Russian River Valley, the Anderson Valley, and Santa Barbara County and fell in love with its new cool-climate homes. By 1990, Pinot Noir displayed a new, more vibrant, more keenly focused personality and became world-class. Even the world’s leading wine writer, Jancis Robinson, commented that Russian River Valley Pinot Noir now stands second in the world only to its native Burgundy.

Beginning in 1980, the regulatory arm of the federal government, then known as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) and now morphed into the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), began to allow a new form of geographic identification on wine labels. This system, called American Viticultural Area (AVA), is more fully explained in the later chapter *The Language of Wine*. Its existence has given rise to a series of geographic definitions that, in most cases, more accurately describe where the grapes in the bottle were grown than the old system of counties and states. In California, the Napa Valley AVA was the first to be recognized, and there are now over a dozen smaller AVAs within the larger boundaries of the Napa Valley designation. Today there are well over one hundred such AVAs, each of which is described in this book, ranging in size from tiny, one-grower areas to multicounty designations. The intent, not always realized by the areas approved, was to improve the accuracy of wine labels by encouraging area definitions that offered common characteristics.

Along with the AVA system, other aspects of a mature industry also arose even as the final decades of the twentieth century continued to see enormous production growth in California in both high-volume and low-volume sectors of the industry. On the one hand, there was great consolidation within the industry, creating a handful of megaproducers with worldwide distribution and substantial marketing resources. On the other

hand, many, many small, “boutique” winemakers turned loose a raft of superior wines that could compete with any in the world. Prices at the high end of the industry increased exponentially at the same time as customers sought out values such as those offered by the negotiant Bronco Wines, essentially a broker looking to buy or sell the surplus wines found in the market. Its “Two Buck Chuck,” sold exclusively by Trader Joe’s markets for \$1.99 a bottle, demonstrated to the industry that there were truly two ends of the California wine spectrum and that even incredibly low-priced, cork-finished wines would sell and not give one a bellyache.

New areas continued to emerge with potential for great wines. Hillsides once thought far too steep to cultivate now became home to row upon row of vines, their planting and management made economically feasible by consumer demand and wine quality. Even today, relatively unheard-of varieties for Californians continue to find their ways here, and if grapes like Marsanne, Roussanne, and Tempranillo are far from household words, they are being planted in the hopes that they, too, will find the same happy homes that their European predecessors have enjoyed. By 2010, the number of bonded wineries in California rushed past three thousand, despite the economic downturn, and California continues to produce nearly 90 percent of all wine made in America, even though this proportion has slipped a point or two over the past decade due to the dramatic growth of winemaking across the country.

By the twenty-first century, the California wine industry had reached a semimature stage. Wine styles and grapes have become established, and, if the rate of growth has slowed, it has not come close to stopping. With nearly half a million acres of wine grapes and most areas of the state now participating in the wine industry, it is issues like wine characteristics, explorations into new clones, attempts to define small patches, and the care and stewardship of the land that now occupy center-stage attention. Concern for the environment, on the one hand, and concern for the most natural way to grow grapes, on the other, is today leading winery after winery into the development of sustainable agriculture practices. Organic grape growing is becoming commonplace despite the lack of evidence that it improves wine quality because, at the very least, practitioners believe it is good for the planet. And a few wineries, some with high reputations earned decades ago, have adopted the biodynamic teachings of the German mystic Rudolf Steiner. At the same time, the choice of grape clones has become a major focus for many wineries—so much so, in fact, that it is not unusual to pick up a bottle and find references to various clones by number or

source shown on the label as an indication of the winery's pride in its proprietary mix of intended grape characteristics.

2010 AND BEYOND

The clash between natural winemaking and extensive intervention in the process of turning grape juice into wine is going to become increasingly public. The naturalists will make it so by proclaiming their use of native yeasts, noninterventionist farming, reduced reliance on high ripeness, and oak barrel characteristics. And they will charge you accordingly for the privilege of the hands-off policy—which, by the way, requires far more diligence and hard work than relying on chemicals and over-the-top ripeness to achieve attractive characteristics. The level of alcohol in California wine, already dropping by the middle to the end of the 2000s decade, will retreat further as more and more wineries gain acceptance for a brisk, sturdier, but less forceful style of wine. There will be attempts to bring back some of the grape varieties that have been abandoned over the years like Riesling and Chenin Blanc, as well as new attempts to make something special from Grenache, Tempranillo, Nebbiolo, and Malbec—all grapes that produce wines with interesting personalities in other parts of the world.

California winemaking may have matured, but it will not rest. There is more history to be made here, and the combination of climate, soils, creativity, and imagination that have built a world-class wine industry over the last century and a half remains as much in place as ever. Together these factors assure that maturity does not mean complacency.