

The birth of American wines

In 2001, the year “Uncorked” made its debut in The Anniston Star, California wine shipments in the U.S. amounted to 162 million 9-liter cases. (A typical 9-liter case holds 12 bottles of wine.)



Pat Kettles

Uncorked

In 2016, California shipped 238 million 9-liter cases.

More than 60 percent of wine consumed in America comes from California.

America became the largest wine-consuming nation by volume in 2010. In a report to the Wine Institute, Jon Moramarco, partner and publisher of the Gomberg-Fredrikson Report, which tracks wine consumption data, attributes this growth to an increase in population in the last decade and the entry of millennials into the wine market.

Given how wine now proliferates in all states, consider for a moment that America has no native vinifera grapes, nor did we have what could be considered the beginning of a wine culture until the early 1970s.

The genesis of California’s billion-dollar wine industry came in the late 17th century, when Spanish Jesuit and Franciscan monks established missions along coastal California, extending from south of what is now Los Angeles to as far north as Sonoma. These missionaries planted a vinifera grape from their native Spain, appropriately called “mission grape.”

Winemaking efforts limped along until 1849, when gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill. This discovery brought a wave of immigrants to California. In “A History of Wine in America,” Thomas Pinney estimates that California’s population was about 14,000 before the gold rush and swelled to more than 200,000 before the rush ended.

Many of these 200,000 were European immigrants who brought their wine culture with them, including grape cuttings from their homeland. Many became

landowners and planted vineyards, primarily to make wine for personal use.

One such immigrant was Count Agoston Haraszthy from Hungary, though his title is dubious. Haraszthy speculated on various land ventures, finally ending up with sizeable holdings in Sonoma, where he built a palatial residence and established one of California’s first commercial wineries.

He traveled extensively in Europe, studying winemaking techniques and collecting specimen vines to be planted at his winery, Buena Vista. He dubbed himself the “Father of California Wine.”

He lost Buena Vista and fled to South America to escape his creditors, where he was allegedly eaten by an alligator.

Haraszthy was among the first to recognize the commercial potential of California wines. After the end of the Civil War until the enactment of Prohibition, the California wine industry experienced steady growth. It is estimated that before Prohibition, California had more than 700 wineries. When Prohibition ended in 1933, there were fewer than 150.

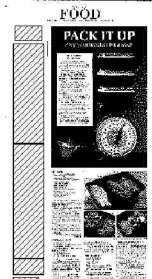
It would take almost 30 years for California to emerge from the Prohibition cloud, and even then European wines were more readily available than those from California.

As the nation emerged from Prohibition, immigrant families with recognizable names like Gallo, Martini, Mondavi and Rossi were the first to ramp up production. They had managed to stay relevant during Prohibition by making wine for the church and by shipping grape concentrate to individuals for home use.

The Prohibition Act allowed families to make up to 200 gallons of non-intoxicating cider and fruit juice per year for personal consumption. Who knows how many of those gallons accidentally and spontaneously turned into wine?

In 1966, Robert Mondavi built the first modern winery in Napa since the end of Prohibition. It attracted the likes of Warren Winiarski, who would later start his own winery, Stag’s Leap Vineyards, and Michael Grgich, owner of Grgich Hills, both in Napa.

These men are significant because they are responsible for making the two winning wines — a 2013 Chateau Montelena chardonnay by Grgich and a 1973 Stag’s Leap Vineyards cabernet sauvignon by Winiarski — that were judged to be superior to competing wines from France in the now famed 1976 Paris wine tasting.



This event put California wines on the map, and nothing has been the same since.

Today, California has 4,285 bonded wineries. More remarkable, there are now 10,417 bonded wineries in the United States.

Yes, America, we now have a wine culture.

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