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Mission revival: State's first wine grape, circa 1760, rides again



Mission was the first wine grape (*vitis vinifera*) planted in the United States — in fact, in North America. Brought to Mexico from Spain, where it's known as Listán Prieto, in 1540, it was planted in New Mexico in the 1620s. The grape was first cultivated in California at the Mission San Diego sometime after Junípero Serra founded it in 1769. Eventually, Mission vineyards grew at all of California's missions, from 1 acre at Santa Clara to 170 acres at San Gabriel.

But by the late 19th century, in post-secularization California, a movement had gained ground — led by people like Hungarian-born Agoston Haraszthy, founder of Buena Vista Winery — to move away from the cultivation of Mission in favor of so-called noble grape varieties, things like Cabernet Sauvignon and Riesling. John Muir was a proponent, and replaced the Mission grapes at his Martinez home with Muscat and Zinfandel. “The padres ought to have known better,” Muir was quoted in *The Chronicle*, “such good judges as they were in most things related to the stomach.”

As hardy as the settlers who brought it, the grape has obvious appeal for a less-advanced era of viticulture. “When you look at a vine, you see why the Spaniards brought it,” says Brian Maloney, winemaker for Buena Vista, which — despite its founder’s anti-Mission position — has just released its first angelica. High-yielding and impervious to mold and mildew, as Maloney puts it, these are “big vigorous vines, with thick skins, big tannins, which I assume would make it resistant to bugs. It was able to thrive.”

“I think there’s some nice examples, but it’s not very serious,” says Maloney of dry Mission wines. “It’s only when you do it as a fortified that the tannins get velvety, especially after two years of aging.”

Tasting notes: Mission and angelica



Buena Vista Angelica (500mL, 17.76%): A Tawny Port-like wine, showing honeyed, oxidized fruit notes — wild berries, browned apples, dates. A spicy molasses character dominates at the finish.