

## Chinese Laborers Built Sonoma's Wineries. Racist Neighbors Drove Them Out

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In Sonoma Valley about an hour north of San Francisco, there are many reminders of the immigrants who built California's wine industry: tasting rooms that look like Italian villas or signs bearing French names. But you won't see any vestiges of the group that made up an estimated 80 percent of the workforce that first put Sonoma vineyards on the map: the Chinese.

"Not many Chinese people in this little town now," says Jack Ding, an immigrant from Jiangsu, China, who has been living in Sonoma since 2008. "But some of my neighbors and friends said, 'Hey Jack, you're Chinese. Let me tell you stories of Chinese who lived here 50, 100 or 150 years ago.' These were verbal stories from the family, generation by generation."

One of those friends was Gordon Phillips, a retired attorney and local historian who spent nine years researching the history of Chinese in Sonoma, poring over books, census data and old newspapers searching for articles, editorials and political advertisements mentioning Chinese workers. "All these vintners were making money off these initial Chinese workers and nobody knows about it," Phillips says.

To understand how Chinese workers arrived in California's wine country, one must look to the east — to the Sierra Nevada. As the Gold Rush of the mid-1800s petered out and the construction of the transcontinental railroad neared completion, there were Chinese immigrants looking for work. That's where two key immigrants came into play. In 1857, a wealthy Hungarian named Agoston Haraszthy purchased a ranch in Sonoma Valley and named it **Buena Vista**, with the vision of introducing winemaking techniques from his homeland. Historian Charles L. Sullivan, author of numerous books about California's wine industry, calls Haraszthy "the great supporter of Chinese labor in the vineyards."

Haraszthy turned to Ho Po, a Chinese labor contractor from San Francisco, who sent 150 of his countrymen to build Buena Vista, Sonoma's oldest commercial winery.

Those caves are still in use today at Buena Vista Winery, where visitors can tour the 15-by-30-foot spaces carved out of rock. "Workers literally dug the caves by hand," says Tom Blackwood, general manager of Buena Vista. "They still have the original markings. Those were the same skills they were using through the railroad."

Photos of Chinese men working in the fields and bottling wine are displayed in Buena Vista's tasting room. "We feel it's more important than ever to talk about the reason we exist and the people who contributed to it — Chinese, Hungarian, French," says Jean-Charles Boisset, whose family company, Boisset Collection, bought the winery in 2011.

Cecilia Tsu, a history professor at the University of California, Davis who studies Asian-Americans in the West, points out that winemaking is much more labor-intensive than wheat or other crops grown earlier in the state.

"Chinese immigrants were indispensable on multiple levels," says Tsu. "They built roads; cleared land for farming; planted, pruned and harvested grapes. They did backbreaking, physical labor, as well as horticultural work that required significant knowledge and skill."

Without Chinese workers, perhaps California wouldn't be famous for its most popular varietals. In his 2004 book, *The Beasts of the Field*, Richard Steven Street notes that between 1856 and 1869, Chinese planted the majority of Sonoma County's 3.2 million grapevines. "The Chinese also played a key role in improving wine quality by ripping out old mission grape vineyards and replanting them with Riesling, Muscatel, Traminer, Black Hamburg, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, and other fine French and European varieties," writes Street.

However, as the vineyards grew, so did backlash against the Chinese on the West Coast. Anti-Chinese leagues were formed in many counties, with whites accusing Chinese of undercutting wages. Asians were paid about \$30 per month, while white workers were paid up to \$50 monthly. Others complained that the Chinese were unable to assimilate into local culture. Racism was common in nearby wine-producing areas, such as Napa and the Russian River Valley, although the Sonoma Valley might have been more hospitable.

"There was virtually no organized anti-Chinese agitation in the Sonoma Valley during the 1870s, much unlike what was common throughout much of the Bay Area, particularly in San Jose, Santa Rosa and Petaluma, even Napa," writes Sullivan in a [2014 article in the Wayward Tendrils Quarterly](#). Haraszthy refused to stop employing Chinese at Buena Vista, despite the growing political opposition. He began carrying a gun to protect himself, and in 1868, he fled to Nicaragua to produce rum.

Meanwhile in wine country, nativist sentiments continued to take root. By 1877, lawmakers in Washington, D.C., debated a bill to stop Chinese immigration. Sonoma Valley grape grower John Hill testified in Congress to defend Chinese labor. "He explained that Sonoma Valley grape growers depended on the 500 Chinese laborers employed in his 'neighborhood,'" Phillips wrote in his 2015 thesis for his master's degree from Sonoma State University.



Ho Po, a Chinese labor contractor from San Francisco, sent 150 of his countrymen to build Buena Vista.  
Courtesy of Buena Vista Winery



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Edward Muybridge/Courtesy of Buena Vista Winery

But spurred on by Denis Kearney's Workingmen's Party, a labor-oriented political group that supported nativist policies, Congress eventually passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, barring nearly all immigration from China. And whites drove out Chinese from many rural areas throughout the West. "There was a movement to forcibly remove all the Chinese from Sonoma by starving them out — don't hire, don't patronize any shops that hire Chinese. During that period, a lot of Chinese left Sonoma. They were chewing on weeds down by the riverbanks, things got so bad," explains Phillips. According to U.S. Census data, the Chinese population in Sonoma County dropped from 1,145 in 1890 to fewer than 200 in 1930.

That ugly past isn't always highlighted in the popular lore of the West. Nor are the contributions of the Chinese. "We tend to assume that native-born American growers and maybe some European immigrants were pioneers of viticulture in California," Tsu says. "[But] in reality, they were utterly dependent on Chinese immigrant labor."

That erasure bothers both Ding. "It feels bad," he says. "I went to a bookstore to look at Sonoma history books. I bought one, and I didn't see any pictures of the Chinese laborers."

Recently, there's been a movement to call attention to the Chinese legacy in wine country. Last fall, Phillips and Ding — along with the Sonoma-Penglai Sister City Committee — went before the Sonoma City Council to propose the building of a monument to the early Chinese. The council unanimously voted to approve the construction of a *ting* (a tile-roofed covered pavilion) in a city park. "It's a physical object that people can see is Chinese," explains Phillips. "It'll attract their attention to something Chinese. When they read the plaque, they'll realize the vineyards are here based on a lot of Chinese labor."

However, the city isn't funding the \$75,000 cost of construction. The northeastern Chinese city of Penglai, also known for wine production, is donating \$25,000. With other fundraising, the volunteers have raised \$50,000. Construction is expected to begin as soon as the remainder of the money is raised.

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