

THE FINE WINES OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY

BY LAUREL RANDOLPH



*Los Angeles County Seal,
1887-1857*

WHEN I FIRST MET THE FOUNDERS

of Angeleno Wine Company they were on their way to a meeting with the Department of Public Health. This is not unusual—Jasper Dickson and Amy Luftig Viste’s days are often filled with county and city officials, zoning boards, health departments, and more bureaucratic rigmarole. And the red tape shows no signs of thinning, with plenty of hurdles left to clear before they can make their Los Angeles-grown wine in actual Los Angeles. For the last few years, they have harvested grapes in LA County and driven them north to be turned into wine upstate. In a city with so much momentum and an ever-growing brewing and distillery scene, it is surprisingly hard to open a winemaking operation. So hard, in fact, that Angeleno Wine Company is the first one to do it in over 100 years.

But the wine business is nothing new for Los Angeles. Long before Sonoma and Napa, Los Angeles originated and then dominated the California wine scene. Acres and acres of vines covered LA and the surrounding region, producing hundreds of thousands of barrels a year. Downtown was home to wineries and vineyards of all sizes, some stretching for forty acres, in the very area where Angeleno Wine Company plans to open up shop. A longtime absence of local wine and an ever-changing

6th and Main in Downtown Los Angeles, 1906



“The Wines of Los Angeles County,”
George Holbrook Baker, c. 1876

cityscape have all but wiped out a big chunk of LA history—almost a century of prolific wine making—and beyond a few streets named after vintners, almost all traces of the city’s wine producing past has been lost to the archives.

It all began way back during Spanish rule with the migration of Franciscans into California. In the 1780s, the padres journeyed from Mexico by way of Baja California to set up missions throughout the state. The missions needed sacramental wine, so vines were planted as the religious men settled. The plantings were what we now call Mission grapes, a variety that

dominated Southern California wine making for much of its early history. Some later argued that the limitations of this prevalent vine are what held Los Angeles back from achieving true wine greatness. Nevertheless, the grape variety grew confidently in the soil of southern California.

Although the Spanish missions were primarily making wine for Mass, while they were at it they made wine for the table, too. The first known California-grown vintage was produced between the 1780s and early 1800s, and by 1830 the pueblo of Los Angeles had at least 22 vineyards for less than 800 residents. Soon after, Mexico (then in charge of the region for a short while before the United States forcibly took over) declared the missions secularized. Wine making rapidly shifted from a sacramental to a commercial affair, and enterprising immigrants from Europe began to buy up land and blanket it in vines.

Jean Louis Vignes arrived in Los Angeles in 1831 from Bordeaux, France and wasted no time pioneering large-scale wine production in California with his El Aliso Winery. William Wolfskill, an American known more widely for helping to establish the citrus industry of Southern California, followed soon after and was quickly nurturing 60,000 producing vines on his property in the downtown. Both winemakers shipped their wines to Northern California and San Francisco, not yet a

notable wine region, and helped establish the commercial wine industry on the West Coast.

By the mid to late 1800s, wine was a thriving industry in Los Angeles and many of the region's over 100 vineyards were located right downtown along Wine Street and Vineyard Street (now known as Olvera and San Pedro Street, respectively). Acres of vines grew among an extensive water ditch system and alongside fruit trees, other agricultural crops, and cattle. Little evidence of these vineyards remain today, save for a few old grape vines quietly still draped over market stalls on Olvera Street, next to the site of the original Pueblo de los Ángeles.

The wine business prospered in Los Angeles until the end of the 19th century and even into the 20th, but a long list of factors led to its demise. Overplanting and a booming population meant a decline in vineyards within the city, with a large portion of the grape growing pushed out into the countryside. A vine disease decimated much of the harvest in the late 1800s, and Prohibition followed shortly by the Depression were the nails in the local wine coffin. By the time World War II settled in, redirecting labor and resources to things other than alcohol, wine production was all but a footnote in Los Angeles history. San Antonio Winery, established in 1917 and the only winery to still survive in the city of Los Angeles, today sources its grapes from outside LA county.



Edward Germain, President of the Edward Germain Wine Company, *As We See 'Em: a Volume of Cartoons and Characitures of Los Angeles Citizens*, 1900



An Advertisement for H. Boetcher, Wine Grower, *California Historical Society*, [s.d.]

Chinese Farm Workers
Pruning a Los Angeles
County Vineyard, *Library
of Congress*, c. 1900

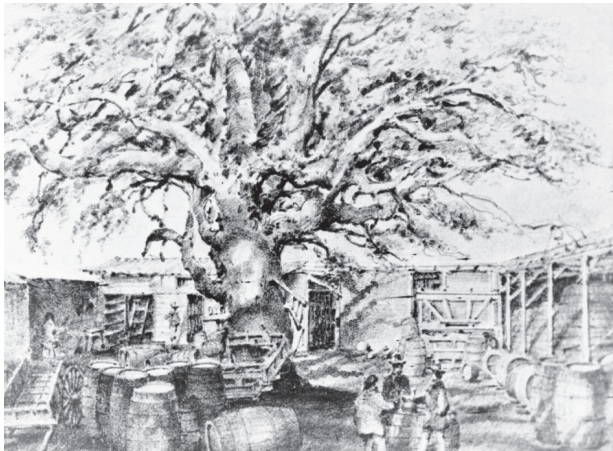


Lake, Vineyard, and
Orchards, *Library of
Congress*, c. 1900-1905



Now only a few small vineyards grow grapes in Malibu, where vine planting is heavily restricted, as well as in the Agua Dulce region to the north of the city. The land is too valuable in much of Los Angeles County to turn even a small profit from wine, so most don't attempt to grow anything substantial. Angeleno Wine Company instead gets most of their grapes from a vineyard in the northern part of the county run by Juan Alonzo. Alonzo, Spanish-born and trained as a chef in France, moved to the region in the 1990s and opened a restaurant. Soon after, he began planting vines on his land, eventually closing the eatery and gradually adding to the Alonzo Family Vineyard over the years. He tends varieties like Grenache and Tannat, both of

which commonly grow in strikingly similar terroir to the Agua Dulce's hot days and cool nights. The vast majority of his precious grapes go into Angeleno Wine Company bottles. Outdated regulations leftover from the 1920s and 30s have thus far prevented a resurgence of the LA wine industry, but wine makers like Viste and Dickson and growers like Alonzo strive daily to not only change how city officials and county boards see local wine, but the public too. They are working to rebuild a wine community, a century later, while reminding everyone of Los Angeles' wine-soaked past. For a quick reminder in the meantime, you needn't look further than the official LA city seal. Floating at the top is a grape vine, waiting for someone to notice. ■



"The Aliso [Winery] at Los Angeles, the old Vignes Wine," *California Historical Society*, 1874



"Products of Grapes," *California Historical Society*, [s.d.]

LAUREL RANDOLPH
is a writer based in Los Angeles.