Introduction

Italians have played a major role in shaping the California wine industry, as is clear by the profusion of vowel-ending names among the state’s wineries. In fact, many of the Italian American wineries that now dot the map of California’s wine regions are third-generation immigrant operations whose heritage goes back to men and women who left Italy for the Golden State at the turn of the twentieth century. Italian grape growers and winemakers have not been alone in making California wine a quintessentially immigrant industry: when they first started arriving in the 1880s, they joined already established German, French, and Scandinavian immigrant winemaking ventures. In the century that spanned from the 1880s to the 1980s, however, Italians almost single-handedly transformed the American wine market from a reserve of immigrant groups and urban Europhile elites into the mass national market it remains today.

Soft Soil, Black Grapes explores why, of all the many ethnic and immigrant groups in turn-of-the-twentieth-century California, Italians were the ones who came to dominate one of the state’s most
important agricultural industries; why a small minority of recent immigrants (in 1900, at the peak of immigration, Italians in California numbered 14,495 out of a population of 1,485,053) had the vision and the resources to accomplish such a task. In so doing, it illuminates some of the dynamics that have shaped ethnic entrepreneurship in the United States and the relative success of different immigrant groups at different times in different economic sectors.

*Soft Soil, Black Grapes* argues that the single most defining factor in the experience of Italian immigrant entrepreneurs and workers in California winemaking was race—something scholars on ethnic entrepreneurship have traditionally understood as an invariable attribute that predetermines human relations and the social mobility of ethnic groups. *Soft Soil, Black Grapes*, on the other hand, takes race as a changing, modular, and heavily contextual process that influences, in different and often unpredictable ways, everything from the social status of ethnic entrepreneurs and workers to power relations within the ethnic group to the reception of the commodities produced by ethnic businesses in the marketplace at large.1 From this perspective, Italians established such a strong presence in the California wine industry because they were able to make sense of the complicated ethnic mosaic in which they were immersed from the time of their arrival in the late nineteenth century. Within California’s articulated ethno-racial structure—which included Asians, Latinos and Latinas, other European immigrants, and whites of Anglo-Saxon heritage—a group of Northern Italians managed to actively transform their middle-ground racial status into a crucial factor for the development of an ethnic niche. From the long-standing image of wine as a foreign beverage; to Anglo winemakers’ discrimination against Italian workers; to the presence of a vast workforce of disenfranchised Asian and Mexican laborers; to Northern Italian immigrants’ own prejudicial attitude
Introduction

toward immigrants from Southern Italy, race decisively shaped Italian winemaking in California.

Even immigrant entrepreneurs’ choice to enter winemaking in the first place depended largely on racial dynamics. With the rise of the temperance movement at the turn of the twentieth century, race combined with morality and business to make wine an especially promising field for Italian immigrants in California. While entrepreneurs from other ethnic backgrounds were deterred by wine’s increasing stigma as a foreign vice in the United States, Italian winemakers, who were latecomers to the trade, turned this ghettoization to their advantage. By the time Prohibition came along, their ethnic specialization was well established and they profited from the loophole allowing for the yearly domestic production of two hundred gallons of wine per household by turning into grape growers and purveyors of a product that often verged on the illegal. Accepting the risks and drawbacks of such an informal market proved rewarding: at the time of the repeal, a few Italian wineries emerged from Prohibition as undisputed market leaders.

The social and cultural capital that stemmed from the racial identity of these ethnic entrepreneurs allowed them to attract a nationwide Italian American consumer base and develop their commercial networks. Even more important, it helped them to secure the low-cost labor, expertise, and allegiance of the Italian labor migrants who tended their vineyards, crushed their grapes, and operated their wineries. In Italian wineries, ethnicity often prevailed over class: anti-Italian prejudices pushed immigrant workers into providing their labor to fellow ethnic winemakers for lower wages, and anti-Asian and anti-Mexican prejudices entitled Italian laborers in Italian wineries to special rights and benefits purely on the basis of their race. As race made the formation of a wine niche market a bargain for both Italian winemakers and workers, minimal labor conflict ensued. Within
the Italian community, regionalism—yet another form of ethno-racial identification—was also important. For immigrant entrepreneurs from the single Italian region of Piedmont, regional solidarity functioned as social capital by giving them a competitive edge over entrepreneurs from other regions of Italy, and as cultural capital by helping to establish a narrative of the “Piedmontese as skilled winemaker,” which would become a commercial asset.

*Soft Soil, Black Grapes* deals with three companies in particular. These three wineries were founded and run by first- and second-generation Italian immigrants who eventually succeeded in expanding California winemaking into a mass-market operation and turning wine into a national beverage. Decades before middle-class Americans developed their taste for quality wine and California wines began competing on equal footing with the world’s most prestigious wines, the Italian Swiss Colony, the Italian Vineyard Company, and the E. & J. Gallo Winery had already developed large-scale systems of production and nationwide marketing and distribution.

The Italian Swiss Colony winery of Asti in Sonoma County was established in 1881 as a grape-growing estate by a group of Italian immigrant businessmen from San Francisco. By 1900 it was producing more than two million gallons of wine from fourteen thousand tons of grapes. Its storing capacity amounted to more than three million gallons. By statute, the winery reserved jobs for Italian immigrants: fifty of them worked at the winery year-round, but at harvest time and other peak periods a full two hundred were employed. Years before the Panama Canal was opened in 1914, the Colony shipped thousands of gallons of wine each year from its warehouses in San Francisco to cities along the east coast of the United States, as well as to international markets like South America, China, and Japan. While the Colony’s most important consumer bases were the large Italian communities of cities like New York, Chicago, and Boston,
the winery also had licensed distributors in Denver, Kansas City, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Memphis, New Orleans, London, Liverpool, Germany, and Switzerland. The Colony’s director, an Italian-born former pharmacist named Pietro Carlo Rossi (1855–1911), was widely considered responsible for these successes and one of the brightest minds in the California wine industry. When he died suddenly in a horse accident in 1911, his children inherited the management of the winery. They ran it for three more decades, helping it survive Prohibition (1920–1933) and emerge as one of the three largest winemaking companies in the nation. In 1942 the Italian Swiss Colony was sold to National Distillers Corporation for a substantial sum.

Secondo Guasti (1859–1927) started his own winemaking business five hundred miles south of Asti, in Cucamonga, a former Mexican rancho east of Los Angeles in the San Bernardino Valley. In 1900, with the small amount of capital he had managed to collect from a few Italian immigrant investors, he founded the Italian Vineyard Company. Ten years later, Guasti’s company could claim to possess the largest vineyards in the world, comprising five thousand acres of grapevines. The winery harvested more than twenty thousand tons of grapes each fall and, to contain all the wine it produced, its storage capacity was 3.5 million gallons. During the crushing season, 300 Japanese pickers accompanied the 250 mostly Italian permanent workers. While the Italian Swiss Colony’s forte was dry wine with a high tannin content, the Italian Vineyard Company specialized in sweet white wines, which better suited the warm climate of Southern California. Like the Italian Swiss Colony up north, Guasti also boasted a vast national market for his wines and branches in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans. Under the Volstead Act, he decreed that “no vines will be removed until it is certain that the wine industry can no longer survive commercially because of Prohibition,” and successfully converted the Italian Vineyard Company into a wine grape-growing
and grape juice–making operation. He never lived to see the repeal of Prohibition, however, and the premature death of his son Secondo Jr. inaugurated a series of property transfers that by the end of the 1940s had transferred control of the Italian Vineyard Company from immigrant hands into those of financial corporations.

Notwithstanding the dominant position they had achieved in the U.S. wine industry by the 1940s, the thirteen-year hiatus of Prohibition frustrated the efforts of the Italian Swiss Colony and the Italian Vineyard Company to break out of the secure but limited immigrant market and reach a truly interethnic mass market. The ultimate success these two companies achieved was the fact that major corporations bought them out. Right after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, however, second-generation immigrants Ernest (1909–2007) and Julio Gallo (1910–1993) took on the dreams of Rossi and Guasti to create a national market for wine and be accepted as full-fledged American entrepreneurs. The winery they established in Modesto, in the Central Valley, with negligible capital and hardly any winemaking skills, would become the leading American wine company after World War II. The Gallos arguably contributed more to the creation of a mass wine market in postwar America than anyone else by selling branded, standardized, and inexpensive wines to consumer segments that had never been reached before, well beyond the largely ethnic market dominated by the Italian Swiss Colony and the Italian Vineyard Company. (Ironically, for many years the Gallos’ vital source of profit was yet another “race market”—the African American drinkers of cheap fortified wines who lived in inner-city ghettos—and their success could not be complete until the cultural revolution of the 1960s began to give wine full American citizenship.)

By the early 1980s, the two brothers had finally accomplished the task envisioned by the preceding generation of immigrant winemakers by turning California wine into a national beverage and, in the process,
creating an empire. By 1985, the E. & J. Gallo Winery was selling 140 million gallons of wine, or a 26.1 percent share of the U.S. wine market, including imports (their closest competitor, Seagram, came in a distant second at 8.3 percent), and employing more than three thousand workers in Modesto alone. In the 1990s, the Gallos began responding to the increasingly discriminating demand of consumers by expanding their production of quality wines and acquiring thousands of acres of vineyards in the prestigious Sonoma Valley. They succeeded in this new direction as well, and without departing from their ethnic roots. Despite its dramatic growth—today it is the single largest exporter of California wine and one of the world’s largest wineries—the E. & J. Gallo Winery has never gone public. The family-run winery remains in the hands of Ernest and Julio’s many children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and in-laws.\footnote{5}

The immigrant status of Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos forms a connecting thread between the stories of these three wineries. Their founders all set out from two small neighboring provinces in the Northern Italian region of Piedmont: Langhe and Monferrato. Rossi, Guasti, and the father of Ernest and Julio Gallo all came from rural towns in the area, a characteristically hilly land bordering with the Alps and France to the west and Liguria and the sea to the south. Rossi left his native Dogliani in 1881 as a young pharmacology graduate, perhaps to break away from his family, who owned some land and properties. In San Francisco he joined his uncle, who was one of only two pharmacists in the city at the time. Guasti grew up in a family of bakers in Mombaruzzo d’Asti. He was on the road to becoming a merchant when he decided to sail to Mexico, moving on to Arizona and finally arriving in Los Angeles in 1883. Joe Gallo was born into a family of butchers and tavern keepers in Fossano. In 1900, he immigrated to Venezuela and later to Pennsylvania, where relatives had preceded him, before heading to the West Coast after
hearing of opportunities in the mining towns of Northern California. Many of the workers that Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos would later employ in their wineries in California also came from the same areas of Piedmont.

The fact that the Italian hegemony in California winemaking was mostly born out of the agency of a few immigrant petty capitalists and a few hundred workers from a single small section of Northern Italy not only adds to the value of these stories but also helps us better understand the dynamics of ethnic entrepreneurship in the United States. Why did men like Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos reach such a dominant position in California wine, to the point that they even managed to create the conditions for developing a national market for this product (a process only briefly interrupted by Prohibition) and eventually succeeded in transforming one of the country’s most important agricultural sectors? Why did Italians in particular embark on such an undertaking and why were the most successful of these a handful of immigrants from a poor, mountainous backcountry of Piedmont?

Soft Soil, Black Grapes focuses on the history of a few specific ethnic businesses because it is only by moving away from general theories and toward the actual historical experience of immigration that the many different and interrelated variables at work in the production of an ethnic economic niche can be perceived. Analyzing the life stories of ethnic businessmen and the contexts in which they made their decisions helps to dispel the stereotypes that too often mar any
explanation of the relative success of one ethnic group in a particular economic field. As Werner Sollors has noted, “It is not any a priori cultural difference that makes ethnicity. ‘The Chinese laundryman does not learn his trade in China; there are no laundries in China.’ . . . One can hardly explain the prevalence of Chinese American laundries by going back to Chinese history proper. It is always the specificity of power relations at a given historical moment and in a particular place that triggers off a strategy of pseudo-historical explanations that camouflage the inventive act itself.”

Chapter 1 shows how traditional explanations for the success of Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos have indeed been laden with stereotypes in addition to being essentialist and determinist. Conventional wisdom in both historiography and popular culture has credited the achievements of Piedmontese winemakers to the striking similarities in landscape, ecology, and climate between California and Italy. Such geographical affinities allegedly functioned as the basis for the successful transplantation of Old World wine culture and expertise from Langhe and Monferrato to the west coast of the United States.

As chapter 2 demonstrates, however, the “striking similarity” between California and Italy was a cultural construct of nineteenth-century travel and commercial literature that sought to provide an Anglo-Protestant reading public with a California landscape (the sun, the sea, the hills, and then the vineyards, the olive groves, and the citrus fruit orchards) that resembled the geographical imagery of relaxation, pleasure, and fantasy that Northern Europeans had for centuries perceived in the Mediterranean, and Italy in particular. In his account of his expedition to Northern California (1843–1844), John Charles Frémont was the first to depict the soon-to-be state as an “Italy on the Pacific.” By 1875, the San Francisco–born real estate developer Charles Victor Hall published California: The Ideal Italy of the World: An Outline Mirror of the State for Health, Happiness, and
Delightful Homes, codifying an imaginary spatial connection that anticipated many later writings equating the hills of Sonoma County to those of the Langhe. Immigrants themselves absorbed and reinforced this connective discourse in their accounts of the American Far West, raising the issue of “striking similarity” when, for various reasons, they wanted to attract further immigration from their own paesi (hometowns) to California. In 1882, the Emigration Commissioner of Genoa wrote, “Although geographically distant, San Francisco is the destination of many emigrants from this province. Emigration agents have been presenting San Francisco and the surrounding territory as a duplicate of our province, and returnees seem to agree.”

Chapters 3 and 4 deconstruct this discourse and the agendas that shaped it to dispel the geographical determinism that obfuscates the historical explanation. Constrained as they were by their often-minimal starting capital, Italian immigrant grape growers ended up cultivating whatever land was available to them. Lacking money, the would-be winemakers typically purchased poor or marginal tracts of land that scarcely resembled the idyllic hillsides of their native Piedmont. Intensive immigrant labor is what first transformed those lands into “winescapes.” The other stereotype to be dispelled is that of the technical winemaking know-how that Piedmontese immigrants supposedly transplanted to their new homes in California. A reconstruction of the biographies of the most successful Italian winemakers—Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos—reveals that none of these children of professionals and merchants had any serious winemaking experience before emigration, let alone the training and skills required to build a modern wine industry. The very limited role that traditional Piedmontese grape varieties played in the immigrant winemakers’ world provides another clue of the inventive nature of Piedmontese winemaking in California. For example, Nebbiolo, perhaps the most
important varietal in Piedmont, was hardly ever planted in California; even the more common Barbera was only ever produced in limited quantities.

As was the case for the Chinese laundryman, purported traditional skills or Italian history per se cannot be credited with causing a successful economic niche to emerge. The success stories of Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos show that ethnicity, when applied to business, is best understood as a productive source of symbols, meanings, solidarities, and power, rather than as a resilient legacy in the face of the homogenizing forces of the capitalist market and commodification. The establishment and eventual success of a Piedmontese niche in California winemaking was not predetermined by geography, environment, and traditions. Rather, it was the result of the agency, social capital, and cultural invention used by these immigrants as they negotiated their relations with the many others they encountered in California.

WINE INTO BLOOD: RACE AND LABOR IN THE EXPERIENCE OF ITALIAN WINEMAKERS IN CALIFORNIA

Chapters 5 through 8 illustrate how, in the complicated ethnic scenario of the West Coast, race determined many of the circumstances in which immigrant winemakers and wine workers operated. The different racial structures and social circumstances that turn-of-the-twentieth-century Italian immigrants met in the agricultural West make for a perfect example of the contextuality of race in U.S. history, and of the different opportunities that such contextuality provided for ethnic groups in different times and places in the United States. For their part, Northern and Southern Italian immigrants
had already been classified as two distinct races by Italian scientific racism, and they thought about themselves in this way upon their arrival. The immigrants’ racialized self-identification was only reinforced by the different degrees of racist discrimination they had to suffer in different parts of the United States. In California before 1900, the mostly Northern Italian immigrants from Liguria, Tuscany, and Piedmont encountered other European immigrants who had been there for only a short time, as well as large minorities of Chinese, Mexicans, and Japanese who were categorized as non-European and nonwhite. As the Italian newcomers soon understood, racialization crisscrossed the social division of work. In post-1850 California, large industrial farms would begin to displace small family farms. California was admitted to the United States as a free state, which implied the recruitment of large numbers of proletarian wageworkers. Large-scale farmers preferred to hire migrants—predominantly Mexicans and Asians, but also Europeans, Canadians, and “Okies”—because their status as alien or transient workers made them more easily exploitable. Employers could also take advantage of ethnic and racial divisions to segment and control agricultural labor forces. But this scenario had no place in the republican agrarian ideal of the family farm as the foundation of economic security and individual freedom. At the same time that it came to represent the bulk of farm labor, agricultural wage work was stigmatized as undesirable, fit only for workers with no other options, and, because of the historical association between dependent work and slavery, racially degraded. As a result, whiteness became the main means of moving out of wage labor in the fields to skilled agricultural jobs or into independent farming or nonagricultural occupations, and social mobility and whiteness thus became interconnected.¹²

In New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and the other industrial cities of the East, where mostly Southern Italian immigrants from
Campania, Sicily, Calabria, and Basilicata settled, “nonwhite” minorities were smaller or nonexistent. African Americans were a relatively minor presence in the large cities of the North before World War I, which significantly “darkened” already racially suspect Southern Italians. In the East, the positions of Southern Italian immigrants at the lowest levels of the racial hierarchy also matched the menial jobs in construction work and the garment industry that were open to them. By contrast, in the economically and racially more diverse California, Northern Italian immigrants had comparatively better prospects to ascend to whiteness, which they understood as especially dependent on their ability to distance themselves from their darker Southern cousins as well as from Asians and Latinos. This explains the determination of the Northerners to appear in the eyes of Anglos as dynamic, hardworking, and law-abiding new Americans, unlike the irrational, hot-blooded, and insular Southerners.13

Further, unlike what happened in the East, the early Italian business leaders of California (mostly Ligurian merchants who had migrated from Peru to join the Gold Rush of 1848–1849 as miners’ suppliers and investors) had participated from the very start in the construction of a white society in the territory the United States had taken from Mexico. Indeed, a relatively solid, mostly Northern Italian business and financial community had already been established by the time the great wave of Northern and Southern Italian immigrants hit California after 1900. This meant that recent immigrants could take advantage of an ethnic leadership that was more influential and dynamic than back east. Of special importance were the greater opportunities to work for other Italians in Italian businesses—in olive oil, pasta, and chocolate factories, fisheries, canneries, and dairies, as well as in fields, groves, and vineyards.14 This condition resembled that often enjoyed in Eastern cities by Jewish immigrants—a group that, because of similarities in time of arrival,
number, and place of residence in the United States, has frequently been compared to underperforming Italians to prove the existence of a direct correspondence between ethnicity and social mobility.\textsuperscript{15}

Italian and in particular Piedmontese immigrant workers in California thus navigated a complex landscape of racially structured labor markets and regional economies. They constantly tested the boundaries of their racial identities within a social system that had largely preestablished different chances for upward mobility for different groups. Their social identity as Piedmontese was constantly being created and recreated in relation to some other social group. Being non–Southern Italian qualified them as workers familiar with viticulture and other specialized agricultural tasks, seen as relatively disciplined and culturally adaptable to American life. But this status was not enough for them to find occupations in the higher-paid tiers of the agricultural job market. The racial division of labor caused all Italians in California to be placed in what the historians David Roediger and James Barrett have called “inbetween jobs”: unskilled, low-paid occupations in agriculture destined for immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe whose racial identity was disputed.\textsuperscript{16} In its 1911 survey on “The Wine-Making Industry of California,” the Immigration Commission of the U.S. Congress differentiated between white, Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, and Italian winery workers. Italians and Japanese were among the lowest-paid workers in the trade.\textsuperscript{17}

Northern Italian immigrants settled for work at Piedmontese wineries like the Italian Swiss Colony and the Italian Vineyard Company, where jobs were available at any level and fluency in English was unimportant. For these Italians, being non-Chinese, non-Japanese, and non-Mexican was a basic, if mutable, part of their personal identity and sense of self from the day they arrived in California. It was a crucial asset that ensured them minimal competition (at the Italian Swiss Colony nonwhite labor was explicitly banned) or landed them
the most desirable jobs in the trade (at the Italian Vineyard Company, the seasonal, menial, and most demanding tasks like picking were performed by Asians and Mexicans). Italians had access to privileges because they were never at the very bottom of a racially determined social hierarchy, one sanctioned by legalized inequalities in the areas of immigration, naturalization, intermarriage, and the right to property. Being entitled to rights from which Asian immigrants were legally deprived, such as naturalization and landowning, and that were de facto denied to Mexicans by virtue of their colonized status, Italian migrant workers could envision a path of mobility to independent occupations as farmers and winemakers—a social condition so deeply entrenched with the notions of freedom and whiteness in the United States.18

But this was only one part of the racially sanctioned deal on which the development of a Piedmontese winemaking trade niche so necessarily relied. Their fellow Piedmontese employers, who were busy making themselves known as fierce supporters of free white labor and gaining credit as diasporic nationalist leaders, resorted vigorously to paternalism, nonmonetary benefits, and open discrimination against nonwhite workers in order to secure the loyal cooperation of Italian employees. Rossi and Guasti provided their Italian workers with respectable working-class housing, Italian schools, Italian churches, and other amenities in close-knit communities. They always took advantage of the problematic racial status of Italian workers by championing “free white labor” and marking the distance between Italian workers and nonwhite temporary laborers. The Japanese and Mexican pickers of the Italian Vineyard Company (much less so at the Italian Swiss Colony) worked in labor gangs organized and subcontracted to the Italian employer by Japanese and Mexican middlemen (padroni).19 Italian workers were hired individually for year-round contracts, as free wageworkers who received nonmonetary
benefits and the prospect to turn their labor into skilled wage work. In exchange, however, Rossi and Guasti asked their Northern Italian laborers to work long hours for low wages—as the Immigration Commission noticed—and to cease unionization and class conflict. Above all, for Piedmontese immigrant wine workers, not being Chinese, Japanese, or Mexican meant accepting this bargain, and, through it, letting their whiteness define everything from their jobs, wages, social status, and everyday life conditions to their dreams of upward mobility, sense of place, and view of the world.

As ethnic entrepreneurs and cultural mediators, the Rossis, Guastis, and Gallos also managed complex identities and walked a fine racial line in their relationships with counterparts as diverse as Anglo economic and political stakeholders and the Italian government, which saw them as prominent representatives of an Italian “colony” abroad and potential commercial partners. They had to meet the everyday needs of self-identified Italian diasporic consumers and create new markets among other Americans. They played a complex ethnic card with Piedmontese and other Italian workers in order to both foster productivity and discourage unionization. At the same time, they needed to manage relations with Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican workers who served as a necessary transient and cheap labor force and as a threat to Italian workers.

Piedmontese immigrant winemakers acted to both profit from and resist the very real structure of race in California and the United States. They recalled their nationality in order to claim a heritage of high culture and good taste, rooted in an alleged ancient civilization of the grape. They used their *italianità* not only to motivate immigrant consumers and control immigrant workers, but to support further immigration of select “best elements” (Northern Italians) as an alternative to despised Asian and Mexican laborers. At the same time, being aware of the deep suspicion that middle-class Protestant
Americans had toward their tradition of winemaking and the extra lengths they had to go to be accepted in California’s elite economic and political circles, they proclaimed their staunch Americanism as true believers of the gospel of capitalism, technological progress, and the racial hierarchies of U.S. society. Ultimately, Piedmontese winemakers in California were authors of their ethnicity: they carefully constructed an ethnic labor and consumer market by navigating racial margins, creating value by exploiting their transnational culture, and inventing, narrating, and profiting from cultural difference.

A DIFFERENT INFLECTION OF AMERICAN RACE: ITALIAN REGIONALISM

As chapter 9 details, race was also an important factor in determining the success of Piedmontese winemakers over other competing Italians. The histories of the Italian Swiss Colony, the Italian Vineyard Company, and the E. & J. Gallo Winery show how it was in late nineteenth-century California that Italian immigrant regionalism, or the affiliation with a single region of Italy, grew out of the local, village-centered identities that linked labor migrants to their native paesi, and established itself as an alternative to nationalism. Diasporic regionalism arose out of the concentration of different and competing groups of immigrants from several neighboring villages in Italy in particular occupational niches—a Californian development that was only strengthened by the racism internal to the Italian immigrant community. Piedmontese immigrants benefited from this new regional identity to establish and secure their hegemony over wine well into the twentieth century.

The Italian regions that sent most immigrants to California before 1900 had long been autonomous political entities. Piedmont
was the leading region of the Kingdom of Sardinia, the state ruled by the House of Savoy that, through a sequence of wars, uprisings, and annexations known as the Italian Risorgimento, unified Italy in 1861. Liguria, the region from which most early Italian immigrants to California came, had been a republic for eight centuries when it was annexed to the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1815. The regions of Tuscany (especially the province of Lucca) and Sicily also sent many immigrants to California early on, and both had long been independent states. The former was a Grand Duchy from 1569 to 1859 and the latter was part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies until 1860. However, because of the very limited participation of the population at large in the public affairs of these regional states, the latter did not provide their migrants with any sense of affiliation. Mobile Italian workers of the preunification era felt an almost exclusive loyalty to their families and communities based in their native hometowns. Long after Italy had become a nation-state, Italian migrant workers continued to be village-minded and hold on to their local cultures.

Regional identities coalesced around the control of economic niches and a common understanding of racial differences, not politics. In California—unlike elsewhere in the United States—Northern Italians from Piedmont, Liguria, and Tuscany were more numerous than were Southern Italians from areas like Naples, Calabria, and Sicily, and the racially defined differences between North and South were often invoked in the struggles among these different groups over the control of specific trades. Local identities expanded to a larger spatial scale of identification (the region) out of practices of economic and social competition with other immigrant Italians, which racist assumptions encouraged and bolstered. The violent struggles between Ligurians and Sicilians for control of the fishing industry in San Francisco, for example, fueled such racist prejudices. In other cases, however, the high concentration of certain Italian groups in certain occupations
helped peacefully allocate the market along regional lines. Following conflicts over control of the produce market in San Francisco, Ligurians retained control of truck gardening and farming while Lucchesi specialized in peddling Ligurian produce in the city’s markets. Many Lucchesi later became grocers and restaurateurs.\textsuperscript{22}

The Piedmontese grip on winemaking emerged within the same relational system of group economic interests and racial prejudices. Their early takeover of the wine trade provided the Piedmontese with a dramatic competitive advantage over later migrants, and the case of the Italian Swiss Colony was pivotal in the process. The Colony was founded in 1881 by the Ligurian merchant and real estate developer Andrea Sbarboro (1839–1923) as a grape-growing cooperative venture uniting the wealthiest Ligurian businessmen of San Francisco. Sbarboro ostensibly included the term “Swiss” in the name of the company to expand the opportunity to join the new venture to the small San Francisco Italian-speaking community from the Ticino Canton in Switzerland, but the most significant effect of (and perhaps reason for) his choice was to characterize the new grape-growing operation as a \textit{Northern} Italian–only operation.\textsuperscript{23} The company was supposed to thrive on a spectacular rise in the price of grapes that proved short-lived; after a few years, the organization was downright floundering. This was when Rossi came into the picture, called to the rescue by a desperate Sbarboro, and saved the Colony by transforming it into a winemaking operation. In the following years, the Piedmontese directorship of the Colony attracted a chain migration of workers from a number of Piedmontese villages, some of whom later opened their own wineries around Sonoma County and other developing wine regions. These social networks first created a Piedmontese identity and then helped associate that identity with winemaking in both Northern and Southern California. The Piedmontese in turn transformed their dominant position into the cultural capital so often seen in the
“Piedmontese as skilled winemaker” narrative. (Ironically, the historiography of Italian immigration to California has subsequently accepted this narrative as the *explanation* rather than the result of the success of the Piedmontese in the California wine business.) Once the identity was established, the practices of a Piedmontese specialization in winemaking further connected winemakers, workers, distributors, and consumers within a thicker network of trade relationships that from the outside became an ethnic trademark.

**Turning the Stigma of a Foreign Drink into an Economic Opportunity: Temperance, Prohibition, and the Creation of an Italian Winemaking Niche**

Even the determination of Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos to enter the winemaking business in the first place was influenced by the complicated ethnic scenario they encountered on the West Coast. In fact, the making and selling of wine in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America was fashioned out of a crossroads between issues of race, culture, and business, which helps to explain why these Piedmont natives chose a trade for which they had no specific skills or hands-on experience.

Chapter 10 discusses how the stigma of foreignness that the temperance movement and its political supporters attached to the production, commerce, and consumption of wine—which culminated in the national Prohibition of 1920–1933—was a vital factor in the concentration of Piedmontese immigrants in the trade, not to mention, paradoxically, their ensuing success.

When Italian immigrants joined the wine industry of California in the late nineteenth century, wine had never been a drink of choice for
more than a minority of Americans. Despite the fact that a market for wine existed in the United States and attempts had already been made to establish domestic viticulture from the eighteenth century onward, most Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans considered wine an exotic beverage with roots in the Roman Catholic liturgy, Southern European traditions, and Mediterranean foodways. Wine’s foreign image was reinforced by the temperance movement, which mounted during the nineteenth century and conjoined religious, social, and political initiatives. As the United States was transforming into an urban and industrial society, reformers targeted the consumption of wine and liquors as an evil force that jeopardized the morality and soundness of the family, the communities, and American democratic polity as a whole. In response, American-born entrepreneurs and investors increasingly shunned the wine trade as dangerous and inconvenient, leaving the field open to the near monopoly of immigrants. In California, even before the Italians had arrived, Northern European immigrants had already begun developing modern viticulture after having taken over from the earlier experiments of Spanish colonial Franciscan friars.24

Protestant and Republican America’s century-long reform efforts against wine and other alcoholic beverages finally culminated in the early twentieth century by merging with the fear of a white (Anglo-Saxon) “race suicide” and the upsurge of nativist sentiments in the face of the massive influx of poor, prolific, and culturally diverse people from Southern and Eastern Europe. It was widely assumed that immigrant men were blowing their paychecks at saloons, devastating their families, failing as workers and citizens, and becoming easy prey to party machine bosses or, worse, radical agitators. Reform lobbying had already led roughly two-thirds of the United States to ban alcohol by the time the United States entered World War I. During the war, rural and Protestant America’s battle for temperance became the final battle against anything that reeked of un-Americanism—modern
urban culture, Catholicism, radicalism, and immigrants’ alleged wartime disloyalty. The common association of wine and other alcoholic beverages with “alien forces” in American society, not incidentally concurrent with the racist Immigration Acts of 1921–1924 that excluded Italians and other Southern and Eastern European national groups, led to the National Prohibition Act of 1919.

In a context in which competition was relatively low and waning, then, Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos were encouraged to enter an idiosyncratic market like winemaking, even as incompetent latecomers, because of their status as immigrants. As new as they were to the trade, Rossi and Guasti were able to cater successfully to the overwhelmingly immigrant consumers of their wines on the East Coast because their names proved they had the cultural capital necessary to know the tastes and needs of other immigrant Italians. Indeed, they came from a place that had been known as the cradle of viticulture for centuries, with only the French to rival them in terms of winemaking traditions, skills, and producers. But what truly created opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs like Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos was the stigma attached to wine as a foreign alcoholic beverage as well as its wavering legal status. Not only could these Italians assume the extra risks involved in the trade, but they were racialized as being fit to operate in a largely informal economy.

The Eighteenth Amendment was passed in December 1917 as a wartime measure to ensure that grains were used for feeding GIs rather than destined for distilleries. This was easily read as patriotic for how hard it hit German Americans, the leading ethnic group in the brewing industry at the time. Prohibition was finally effected on January 17, 1920. By scaring away German Americans and other important ethnic competitors, Prohibition essentially helped Italians take over the wine industry—as shattered as it was by then—and consolidate a distinctive Italian niche in viticulture. Because the
act allowed the domestic production of wine for private consumption, Piedmontese winemakers turned into grape growers and shippers and relied on a wide commercial network of ethnic distributors to flood the markets of immigrant consumers in the Eastern cities. Much of the wine produced from the grapes they shipped eventually entered the illegal market. The high prices Italians in the East would pay for grapes that could be made into illegal commercial wine allowed Piedmontese growers not only to survive Prohibition, but also to gain even more shares of the market. By the time Prohibition was repealed in 1933, they had emerged as the top players in the wine business.

Italian immigrant winemakers’ experience of Prohibition shows how the Italian taste and talent for winemaking was far from effortlessly transplanted to the ideal environment of California’s “soft soil.” On the contrary, it was largely a product of the social and economic conditions these immigrant entrepreneurs encountered on the Pacific Coast. The stories of Rossi, Guasti, the Gallos, and their winemaking companies, which span a hundred years and several historical turning points, allow us to ground theories of race and culture about the relative success of ethnic entrepreneurship and ethnic economies in the United States in the living experience of the immigrant actors themselves, both the entrepreneurs and the workers, as well as the settings in which they made their decisions. Compared to the more widely known stories of Southern Italian immigrants in the industrial East, the stories of Rossi, Guasti, and the Gallos illuminate the contextual power of race in determining the relative success of American ethnic and immigrant groups. These Piedmontese stories show how such power is also multidimensional, working in many interacting terrains—the labor market, the workplace, the marketplace, business and financial operations, and even the transnational narratives about the quality and value of goods and products.