

In the year 1001, Leif Ericsson pushed his Viking long boat off the Greenland shore and sailed west. He landed on the northern coast of what we now call Newfoundland. Ericsson and his crew split up to do some exploring and, at the end of the day, Tyrker the German reported that he had found wild grapes.

Considering how far north Ericsson and his boys were, it is highly unlikely that Tyrker was looking at grapes. What he probably found were cranberries. But Ericsson, like most explorers, including Columbus, discovered what he wanted to discover and named the place Vinland. Ericsson assumed that the new land would soon become a major wine-producing area. He wasn't wrong—just off a few hundred years on its estimated time of arrival.

All classic wine grape varieties—from cabernet sauvignon to zinfandel—are part of a species that was domesticated about 7,000 years ago somewhere in the mountains of what is now northwestern Iran.

For centuries, wine had been the beverage of choice for the Spanish, and it was what Columbus' crew drank. The wine he carried was fortified, and was similar to Madeira or sherry. It kept well during long sea voyages and had a solid kick.

When the Spanish arrived in the Americas, they were surprised to find that Native Americans, who lived in a land filled with wild grapevines, did not make wine. The natives made fermented drinks from the agave plant and from corn, but they never developed a taste for fermented grape beverages.

Some Spanish priests concluded that if God had not provided the natives with the ability to make wine, he must not have meant them to become Christians. Less theologically inclined settlers ignored the question and attempted to make wine from the local grapes, but the results were dismal.

Grapevines in America had evolved without human intervention. They were smaller than the fruits in Europe, didn't taste the same, and sometimes grew in clusters like cherries, rather than in bunches. They were too sweet, or too sour, or too bitter to make the wines that Europeans preferred.

New Spain needed wine, and since settlers couldn't depend

on the local grapes, they brought in replacements from home. In 1524, at the settlement that would become Mexico City, Hernán Cortés, New Spain's commander, imported vines from Europe and ordered the Spanish settlers to plant 1,000 grapevines for every 100 native laborers.

But Cortés' plan didn't work. Mexico's climate was too harsh, and the settlers never came up with a significant harvest—at least not in the 16th or 17th centuries. The Spanish government shelved its plans to expand the Mexican vineyards and instead concentrated on South America. By the middle of the 1500s, a thriving wine industry existed in Peru, Chile, and Argentina. South American vineyards were a big business by the beginning of the 17th century, and were exporting so much wine to Europe that Spanish vintners back home felt threatened.

## NEW WORLD WINEMAKING

Meanwhile, at the end of the 1500s, the English began building settlements in North America. Their new colonies were overrun with native grapevines and it seemed obvious that with a little work, good wine would be as near as the next harvest.

England and its American colonies got much of their wine from Spain and the Spanish vineyards in South America. If the English colonies in North America could produce their own wine, then England's dependence on Spanish imports could be broken. In terms of the wine business, North America might do for England what South America did for Spain.

As early as 1609, Jamestown colonists were doing their best to make wine from the local grapes. But it was not an easy task. America's first vintners expected to make the dry, acidic-style wines of Continental Europe, but the *labrusca* grapes they were growing tasted more like grape jelly than European wine. When they used it to make wine, the result was frightening. If you've ever tasted the sweet kosher wines made from Concord grapes, you will have a general idea of what they were producing. The settlers called the *labrusca* the "fox grape," because of its heavy, musky scent.

Frustrated by the failure of the Jamestown settlement to produce drinkable wine, the British government passed a law requiring the settlers to "plant and maintain ten new vines each year until they have attained the art and experience of dressing

a vineyard." In spite of the new law, the English suspected that the colonists still didn't know what they were doing, and in 1620 they sent the Virginians a group of French wine experts, along with a collection of European vine cuttings.

But Virginia's vineyards continued to fail. In the humid summers, the vines succumbed to a variety of fungal diseases. Most years, there wasn't a grape harvest. After a few more attempts, including the distribution of winemaking manuals by the government, even the most enthusiastic colonial official gave up on the idea of a Virginia wine industry.

The experience was repeated up and down the Atlantic coast. Winemaking in British North America, from the Carolinas to Massachusetts, had been tried and, by the end of the 1600s, abandoned.

"Early attempts to grow wine in English colonies were not very successful. North of Long Island, into New England, they simply had no success whatsoever. In the south, particularly in Virginia and the Carolinas, they tried for 200 years. And by the American Revolution, you've got to say that it was just a lot of very admirable failures." —Charles Sullivan

For refreshment, the colonists drank cider, rum, whiskey, and imported Madeira wine. A few intrepid farmers, mainly German and French immigrants who had some winemaking experience, continued to cultivate native vines, but without much success.



## FITS AND STARTS

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, prospects for American wine remained bleak. But this did not dim the enthusiasm of prominent wine lovers like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. In the early years of the new republic, Jefferson established himself as a one-man committee for the improvement of American winemaking.

Americans had become hard drinkers, and whiskey was the national beverage. Jefferson saw wine as the ideal "democratic drink," much preferable to distilled spirits, and throughout his life he remained confident that his home state of Virginia had a perfect climate for the cultivation of wine grapes. Jefferson repeatedly tried to produce wine on his estate and encouraged experiments by others. Although Jefferson failed as a vintner, his encouragement helped get the American wine industry going.

By the beginning of the 1800s, professional and amateur horticulturists had begun to put together a system of breeding hybrid plants. In 1823, John Adlum finally had some success with a hybrid called the Catawba, from which he produced and sold a reasonably drinkable wine.

## WESTWARD HO!

The early history of winemaking on the East coast is the story

of people trying to make quality wine in a difficult environment. The story on the west coast, however, especially in California, is very different. California's northern valleys are perfectly suited to the cultivation of the European grape varieties—in fact, they might be the best-suited locations in the world.

In northern Mexico and the Baja, Spanish missionaries cultivated European vines without major problems. In 1769, the Franciscans moved north and found California equally hospitable. Its Mediterranean-like environment was generally free of the fungal diseases that plagued grapevines in the east. Within a decade, missions as far north as the San Francisco Bay were successfully producing wine, though not in commercial quantities.

In 1848 the United States took California from Mexico, and adventurers poured into the new territory. When gold was discovered in 1849, the majority of people arriving were prospectors. A few got rich and moved on, but by the end of the rush most of the prospectors were looking for new ways to earn a living.

Agoston Haraszthy, a Hungarian immigrant who'd been a county sheriff, gold assayer, and state representative, believed northern California was ideal for growing wine grapes, and began importing hundreds of European vines. The Buena Vista vineyard he founded in 1857 is still operating.

During the 1870s, California's wine industry centered itself around San Francisco Bay and became the leading wine-producing area in the United States. Larger firms were buying up smaller vineyards, and the state's first large-scale industrial wineries were being established. Many were staffed by Chinese laborers who had built the railroads. California was developing a worldwide reputation and exports were beginning to grow.



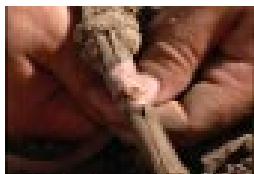
## AMERICA TO THE RESCUE

During the 1840s, a North American fungal disease in the form of a powdery mildew began to afflict European vineyards, and almost destroyed the chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon harvests in the 1850s. Fortunately, French farmers learned to control the fungus with applications of sulfur, and by 1860 the industry had gotten back on its feet.

But during the 1860s, a far more serious problem appeared. Grapevines across Europe began to wither and slowly die, and by the 1880s many of France's vineyards were in desperate condition. French researchers found the source of the disease—a voracious, fast-breeding aphid native to North America which had probably come to Europe in shipments of experimental vine cuttings. The aphid, named *Phylloxera Vastatrix*, was known as

"the devastator," because it fed on the roots of the vines, slowly killing them. The French wine industry was on the brink of total destruction.

Scientists in France discovered that most of the grape species native to the Americas had evolved alongside phylloxera and had developed some resistance to it. Around the same time, an American horticulturist determined that European vines could be grafted to American roots and would still bear fruit. French winegrowers began to import tens of thousands of American vines for use as rootstock. But many of the vines imported from America to save the French vines carried phylloxera.



In the end, the French wine industry was saved. But in the process, French growers spread the aphid throughout Europe, forcing the entire continent and eventually the entire world—including California—to graft their *vinifera* vines to the aphid-resistant American roots.

## THE DRY YEARS

From our earliest colonial days, the idea of temperance had been part of American culture. During the second half of the 1800s, anti-alcohol sentiment became widespread, but even Americans suspicious of hard liquor thought of wine as less of a threat. However, the temperance movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was less selective—wine was condemned as just another flavor of Demon Rum. When the 18th Amendment, which prohibited the production and sale of alcoholic beverages in America, was finally ratified, winemakers were not spared.

Prohibition began in 1920 and ended the careers of many winemakers. But a loophole in the amendment allowed home production of 200 gallons of wine a year. Some California grape growers, instead of selling bulk wine, sold grape concentrate—compressed grape bricks which came conveniently packaged with a yeast capsule and explicit instructions telling the customer exactly how to *avoid* making wine. The kits were a huge success.

Other winemakers rode out the dry years as producers of sacramental or "medicinal" wines. Beaulieu Vineyard of Rutherford in Napa Valley, founded during the early 1900s by Georges de Latour, a chemist from a French grape growing family, was able to prosper during Prohibition because he was under contract to supply altar wine to the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

Churches across the country looked to the Archdiocese of San Francisco for their own altar wine, and San Francisco referred those requests to Beaulieu. Georges was devoted to making the best wines possible, and he saw no reason to lower his standards just because they were being sold for

use in church ritual. He shipped hundreds of boxcars of his best wines to churches in the midwest and along the east coast.

As those boxcars passed through Chicago, however, many of them mysteriously disappeared. Somehow, the fine vintages presented during morning Mass were also showing up in the wine cellars of several speakeasies.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, Beaulieu was producing wines of excellent quality. But Georges was always interested in improving his wine. In 1938, he hired André Tchelistcheff, a Russian-born, French-trained wine expert who had studied at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. Tchelistcheff revolutionized winemaking throughout California and many consider him to be the father of the state's wine industry today.

## GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

After Prohibition's repeal, the U.S. wine industry was in sad shape. Most of the winemaking concerns that survived had little interest in producing quality wines, and once freed of legal restrictions were primarily interested in making their wines a competitive consumer product.

Also, American tastes had changed. The generation that grew up during Prohibition thought of wine as something cheap, sweet, and alcoholic. And the wine industry, struggling to get back on its feet, wasn't about to try and change consumers' minds. A few older Napa Valley wineries went back to making dry wines in the French style, but for the most part California's wine producers sought to give the people what they wanted—or what the winemakers thought they wanted.

After World War II, winemaking became big business. During the 1940s and 1950s, large firms were buying up small wineries and vineyards, and giant winemaking concerns like Ernest & Julio Gallo and Italian Swiss Colony were battling for market share. All of these wineries were making similar products—either sweet, fortified wines that competed with cocktails, or simple table wines. They were struggling to find the fastest, cleanest, most efficient ways of growing,



harvesting, making and marketing their production.

This search for efficiency sparked a renaissance in winemaking technology. California firms needed qualified staff to run their winemaking operations, so they funded the century-old Department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of California at Davis. That department, in turn, became a center of research and was able to identify the grape varieties best suited to the state which, in turn, allowed growers to produce the best quality grapes for their area.

By the beginning of the 1960s, American tastes were changing again. Consumers were clearly beginning to develop an interest in classic European-style wines. During the late 1960s

and early 1970s, hundreds of small boutique wineries were founded in California's Napa Valley and neighboring Sonoma County. In the process, California became synonymous with premium American winemaking.

Young winemakers, many of whom had been educated at Davis and had started their careers at the larger California wineries, became interested in growing premium grapes. They were joined by an increasing number of wealthy hobbyists who had turned to serious winemaking as second careers.

These boutique winemakers explored various European styles and defined Napa Valley as the home of artisanal winemaking in the United States. By the mid-1970s, many of them believed their wines could compete with the best European wines. And soon they were able to prove it.

## THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS

In 1976, Steven Spurrier, an Englishman who ran an influential wine shop in Paris, organized a blind tasting of California wines. The judges were a group of leading French critics. Until the day of the tasting, Spurrier neglected to tell them that for comparison he had included a number of French wines. To everyone's surprise, when the labels were revealed, a 1973 Cabernet from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars in California took the prize for reds, beating out the best of the French, including a 1970 Château Mouton-Rothschild.

*Time* magazine called the tasting "The Judgment of Paris," and it proved that American wines could compete successfully against the best wines of France. More importantly, it illustrated the fact that in just a few decades,



American wines had progressed to a point where the California wine industry was raising the worldwide standard for winemaking.

The tasting spurred an explosion of interest in California wines in general, and a special fascination with those produced in Napa Valley. In the late 1970s, some of the top European winemakers began developing joint ventures with American wineries, or started building their own wineries in California.

During the late 1970s and 1980s even more money poured into Napa. Celebrities bought vineyards and wineries, and larger concerns hired star architects to design major new winery buildings. While the new wave of winemaking didn't immediately transform the United States into a wine-drinking nation, it did make wine drinking fashionable.

Today, wine is made in every state except Alaska and Wyoming, and winemakers across the U.S. have turned their talents to producing premium wines. Following the history of major winegrowing areas in Europe, regions in the U.S. have begun to focus on specific grapes: New York State, for example, has become prime riesling territory, while Oregon has focused on pinot noir.

And Virginia, the state which proved so frustrating for America's first winemakers, has become a thriving center of wine production. These days, there is even a winery at Monticello. Thomas Jefferson would be proud—American winemakers have managed to make some of his dreams come true.

## TO LEARN MORE

*A COMPANION TO CALIFORNIA WINE:  
AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WINE AND WINEMAKING  
FROM THE MISSION PERIOD TO THE PRESENT*  
BY CHARLES L. SULLIVAN  
PUBLISHED BY UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

*NAPA WINE: A HISTORY*  
BY CHARLES L. SULLIVAN  
PUBLISHED BY THE WINE APPRECIATION GUILD

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