

California celebrating its rich viticulture history

Publisher's note: *The following is California Gov. Jerry Brown's proclamation declaring September California Wine Month.*

By Jerry Brown

The first vineyard in Spanish California was not planted within the area that would become our state, but rather at the short-lived Misión San Bruno in what is now the Mexican state of Baja California Sur. The Italian Jesuit priest Eusebio Francisco Kino established this mission in 1683 at the beginning of his long career exploring and proselytizing in the region that would become the Southwestern United States.

Although a drought caused him to abandon San Bruno less than two years after its establishment, the vines that Padre Kino planted – optimistically, perhaps – speak to the great cultural and religious significance of grapes and wine in the Mediterranean cultures that produced our state's first European settlers.



Grapes are being harvested in California this time of year. Photo/LTN file

In 1768, King Carlos III expelled all Jesuits from New Spain, and administration of the Baja California missions passed to the Franciscan order. That same year, the Catalan Franciscan friar Junípero Serra, beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1988, embarked on his historic expedition to Alta California and established the first mission in the future Golden State at San Diego in 1769. While there is some dispute as to when and where the first vines were planted, it is clear that California viticulture was flourishing by the late 1770s. The first winery was established at Mission San Gabriel during this period.

Nearly all grapes grown in California at the time were of a hardy, disease-resistant strain that came to be known as the "mission grape," a mainstay of the early commercial industry that is still used in some fine California wines and sherries today.

In the 19th century, Americans and Europeans arriving in California expanded viticulture beyond the missions and brought grape varieties and winemaking traditions from various parts of the Old World.

The "good pirate" Joseph Chapman, who was captured in a raid on Monterey in 1818 and settled in California after his release from prison, founded the territory's first commercial vineyard in Los Angeles in 1824.

The Frenchman Jean-Louis Vignes was first to introduce French vines in the 1830s, and his products quickly surpassed the mission-grape wines in quality.

However, much of the credit for the amazing diversity of *Vitis vinifera* grapes grown in our state today goes to the Hungarian Count Agoston Haraszthy, who introduced scores of varieties that may have included Zinfandel, one of the most iconic California wine grapes. Haraszthy was the founder of the Buena Vista Winery – the oldest winery in the state that still makes

wines – in Sonoma in 1857.

The first cultivated grapevines in Napa Valley are thought to have been planted in 1836 by the early settler George Calvert Yount, in the area that would come to be called Yountville. Noticing a large number of native Californian grapes growing on his property, Yount decided to try his hand at viticulture, setting in motion the chain of events that led to the establishment of one of the world's most acclaimed wine-growing regions. Some of the best-known names in the valley today date back to this era, beginning with Charles Krug, a former employee of Haraszthy, who is credited with founding the first commercial winery in Napa Valley in 1861.

By then, the Gold Rush and subsequent population booms had created a large market for wine within the young state. As the quality of our industry's products improved, foreign markets took note, setting California on the path to becoming one of the world's top exporters of wine. A Frenchman, Capt. Gustave Niebaum, founded the Inglenook Winery in Rutherford in 1879 to produce the state's first Bordeaux, and 10 years later these wines won gold medals at the World's Fair of Paris. By the turn of the 20th century, California wines were already world-renowned and had won medals at numerous European and other international competitions.

The greatest setback in the development of our modern wine industry occurred during the federal prohibition of alcohol from 1920 to 1933. Much of the diversity and quality that the industry's founders had built was lost during this period as growers replaced wine varietals with table grapes. Others shipped concentrated products for the home production of grape juice, accompanied by "warnings" detailing the steps one would avoid if one did not wish the product to ferment into wine.

The industry also returned to its religious roots, in a way, as shipments of sacramental wine increased substantially under the new laws. Some California vintners were able to remain in

continuous operation by shifting production to this market.

After the repeal of Prohibition, the industry did not recover quickly. The majority of Americans drank beer or spirits, and fine wine was still the province of high society on the one hand and, on the other, ethnic and religious groups that maintained their Old World traditions. Even as the industry made great technical strides and the quality of some California wines became superb in the mid-20th century, the bulk of sales were still of low-quality fortified wines.

It is a testament to the pioneering efforts of industry leaders like Robert Mondavi that today, the number of Americans identifying wine as their alcoholic beverage of choice is on a par with the number who choose beer. Our public universities have also played a prominent role in advancing the science and technology that have helped make wine one of the Golden State's most successful and beloved industries.

This month, millions of tourists will come to our state from around the world to sample our vintages and enjoy the many other attractions that our several distinct wine regions have to offer. I hope that many Californians will join me in raising a glass to the pioneers, beginning with Padre Kino, who helped bring this amazing bounty to California, and the many diligent and innovative workers today who help the industry continue to thrive.