

# Opinion: Wine Country triumph

By Joe Mathews

The deaths and damage of this year's Wine Country wildfires are a historic disaster. They are also the product of an epic California success.

That triumph is the wine industry, which has come to dominate our state's land, culture and image. Indeed, it's now outdated to refer to the burning stretches of Napa and Sonoma counties as California's Wine Country. The truth is that the whole state is wine country. These awful fires—and the hotter ones to come via climate change—will only make it more so.



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Californians fight over water, but we connect through wine. It's a passion and pursuit that binds together rural and urban, business and labor, and rich and poor (we produce both \$3,499.97 Screaming Eagle varietals and the \$2.99 Charles Shaw wines they sell at Trader Joe's). Wine defines us to the world (only three nations on earth—France, Italy and Spain—produce more wine than we do), and is our leading home remedy, the best available balm for a state that inspires the sweetest of dreams and the most bitter of disappointments.

California is a state of disaster, and where there is disaster, you will find wine close by. Over the past 40 years, wine has boomed not only in Northern California—from 25 Napa Valley wineries in 1975 to more than 400 in Napa and Sonoma

counties—but also in the Central Coast, the Central Valley, the Sierra Foothills and even Southern California’s Inland Empire. Much of this growth has come at the edges of cities and towns, in the space between human development and our wilder lands.

These are the places where California’s wildfires rage, and so the success of wine has lured many more people to live in riskier places. This era’s giant blazes have hit all our wine countries. In addition to the awful scale and human carnage of the Napa and Sonoma fires, multiple wildfires this summer did damage to the Central Coast, including its vineyards and wineries.

The history of wine in California is a century older than the state itself. California’s saint, Junipero Serra, had vineyards planted in his 18th-century missions. Los Angeles was originally a wine country (“The City of Vines” was an L.A. nickname of the 19th century), and the Napa Valley’s origins as a wine producer coincide with the Gold Rush.

By the late 19th century, wine was a major California export. While wine is often seen as an artisanal exception to California’s newer industries, it actually established the template for the culture and economy that produced aerospace, movies, and software: Bring people and ideas from around the world to California, and then spin them together into new products that are exported back to the world.

California has privileged wine to a degree that might embarrass your local aristocrat. Our state is famous for its high taxes, but makes an exception for wine. Our taxes on alcohol, a legacy of a powerful 20th-century liquor lobby, are so much lower here that Californians have gotten used to getting great wine at low prices—a bit of the Golden State’s largesse in every bottle.

In the aftermath of the fires, wine’s exalted status may come

under pressure. Before the blazes, there had been conflict between wineries and their local governments and neighbors. Wineries often see housing development as encroaching on their land. Homeowners and local governments have complained about the traffic and noise that comes with the thousands of winery events and the 24 million tourists who visit the Northern California Wine Country each year.

Perhaps the tragedy of the fires will inspire new collaborations and smart, resilient planning to buffer wineries and houses. But if the fires create more limits on where structures—be they wineries or houses—can be built, more conflict is inevitable. The wine industry could also see internal turmoil and ultimately consolidation, as newer or smaller players, facing the high costs of rebuilding and insurance, sell out to bigger players. But look for wine to emerge stronger and win most of the battles—Californians like their wine more than they like other people's houses.

The Wine Country fires reflect the unpredictability and cruelty of nature—amplified by any number of human failings in managing our environment. The fires will rightfully force a reassessment of those failings, at least for a while.

But human beings can handle only so much misery, at least by themselves. Eventually, we gather with others and reach for the bottle. And then, as has been practice since an ancient supper described in the Gospel of Matthew, the wine “is poured out to forgive the sins of many.”