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THE HISTORY OF WINE IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

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THE HISTORY OF WINE IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Gustave Flaubert once wrote, "He who plants a vine becomes entangled in its branches." All men involved in wine understand and prove this statement by their total devotion of time, energy and money invested in producing their own roots in the industry. The vineyards and wineries of California have been a continual improving and expanding agricultural industry since 1769. The vineyards have survived the Gold Rush, Phylloxera (an insect that attacks grape vines), depressions, wars, fires, and Prohibition. These factors couldn't extinguish the growing industry which now covers over four thousand acres of the state of California.

Commercial grape growing began and centered itself in 1848 in southern California. Vineyards gradually expanded themselves up the coast where different climates produced different kind of grapes. The region included the Santa Clara County, which from 1860 and 1900 was overrun by many hundreds of acres of grapes and vines. Many of these sites have still survived today, but were forced to expand due to recent heavy urbanization in the area. The expansion stemmed from the many new European types of grapes brought into the country by the eager settlers of the 1700's. The big success of these vines in Santa Clara County were the first roots of California's historical wineries.

Vineyards in Santa Clara County have dwindled from its peak of 8,000 acres to just 2,000 over the last sixty years, yet the district has not lost its reputation of popular fine wines. No other county in California ever has bred so many winegrowers as Santa Clara County continues to do. The success of the area is largely due to the various climates of the region which together makes the county supply very diversified wines.

Northern Santa Clara County is cooled by the ocean air, which has led to such "elegant" varieties as Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay. The southern end of the county does not have the advantage of cool air so instead produces country style wines. These wines include Chasselas, Grenache, and Zinfandes which are all bottled in jugs. In this area, sprinklers are needed not only for irrigation, but also for protection of winter frosts.

There are four major wineries included in different climate zones that are located within the Santa Clara County boundaries. The largest vineyard owner in the world is Almadén Wineries, with only its ancestral building and a few vines included inside the Los Gatos property. The majority of the vineyards are located in San Benito County, but the center of Almadén is still considered Santa Clara County.

The second largest winery is Paul Masson of Saratoga, and shadowed beneath them are two very respectable vineyards; Mirassou Winery of San Jose and the Novitiate of Los Gatos. Each of the four wineries are located in different climates. The Novitiate and Paul Masson are in the northern part of the county and found up on hills where it is cool. Almadén and Mirassou are located in more dry areas of the region.

Each major winery emphasizes different types of wines, as the climate expects them to. Each have their own wine specialty. One observations of the unique similarity between the wineries is that each company has struggled desperately to maintain its homeland, and ^{have} succeeded. Through the stubbornness of their ancestries, they have made their 1800's homesites ^{continue} functioning. This is fairly unusual, due to the increasing pressures of the urbanizing society around them, gradually nibbling at their land.

Twenty years ago, San Benito and Monterey Counties only had 1,000 acres of grapes combined. At this same time, Alameda and Santa Clara County were famous winegrowing districts with over 6,000 acres of vines. Then urban crowding made it hard to grow grapes in Santa Clara County and the old wine companies turned south. Paul Masson gained territory in Monterey County, and Almaden expanded to the town of Paicines in San Benito County. The grapes from these distant vineyards are crushed and bottled at the site, or else trucked to the ancestral site to be made into wine. This switch over brought the expansion of Monterey and San Benito Counties' drastically upward as the acreage grew to over 13,000 in 1975. Meanwhile, the historical Santa Clara County continues with approximately 4,200 acres of vines. This turn around is basically caused by the extreme costs of land needed to expand the vineyards.

Steady population growth in the San Francisco Bay Area has done away with several thousand acres of vines in Santa Clara County since the 1940's. The main pressure is for space. The competing demands for the land increases the value and therefore, pushes taxes up.

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The Almadén winery is a good example of a victim of urban pressure *that is being* eaten away at the edges ~~of the vineyards~~. The old property that use to be covered with vines and grapes is now a series of tract homes. Also the increased building of houses takes away from the water supply of the winery until they are forced to relocate, as Almadén did. If Almadén had decided on remaining on the old property, the combination of the high population and cars would create poor crops anyhow. The reason is due to all of the smog that burns both the leaves and the grapes on the vine. *San Joaquin and Monterey Counties only had 1,000*

acres Contrary to the awful things that grapes have to go through to survive today, there is no comparison to what happened to the vines during Prohibition. The 18th Amendment was a disaster for the California wineries. Only a few were able to remain in business by producing sacramental and medicinal wine. Prohibition didn't make it illegal to make wine, so many companies continued to make their wines though they were forced to close their doors to the public.

After thirteen years, the decision was repealed as a failure. Many of the good grapes had been transported and died on the way to help the Prohibitionist bootleggers. What was left over was very average kind of grape, so the industry took years to recover to reach their supreme pro- Prohibition quality. *of land needed to expand the*

The histories of Santa Clara Counties four main wineries are interesting due to the fact that Almadén and Paul Masson *began as* one winery. Everything began in 1847 when Etienne Théé acquired 350 acres of fertile land near Mission San Juan Bautista. He had just sailed around the Horn and wanted to settle down in the Californias. Some neighboring Franciscan friars gave him vine cuttings and

soon his first vineyard began.

Soon thereafter, similar visions drew another Frenchman to plant a vineyard in the area in 1852. His name was Charles LeFranc, a former tailor, who had determination to make wine. He soon fell in love with Théé's daughter, they married, and their properties were joined. LeFranc named the vineyard Almadén ("the Mine") which the Spanish had given the region because of its quicksilver deposits. LeFranc wanted to make better wines than Théé, who grew Mission grapes, and acquired cuttings from good European varieties. This marked the beginning of finer wine-making in Santa Clara County.

The present status of Almadén vineyards as a winemaking giant truly began in 1941, when the Los Gatos property was bought by Louis Benoist of San Francisco. A 1,400 percent increase on land taxes forced Benoist to establish his vineyards in Paicines, where he bought 3,00 acres. Therefore, Almadén Vineyards expanded from its 350 acres in 1852 to 15,00 acres in four different counties today. The original winery has been turned into a bottling plant and aging cellar.

In 1878 Paul Masson emigrated to California because of the Phylloxera devastation in his homeland. He was hired as a bookkeeper with LeFranc. In 1888, Masson married LeFranc's daughter and went out on his own in 1905. He settled in the hills of Saratoga with the intent of making champagne. Masson later planted his "Petit Pinot" vines, which included Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Chardonnay. In 1936, Paul Masson sold the 350 acre property with seventy acres of vines, except for his original winery site, to a stockbroker from Saratoga named Martin Ray. This man launched many

tended vines there. The vineyard has been expanded since it's purely sacramental wine days, and now produces fine table and dessert wines. The wines are moderately priced, with all profits going to the support of the Jesuit priest's education and training.

Though Almadén and Paul Masson wineries are so large, Mirassou and Novitiate are right up with them in quality. Santa Clara County, once beautiful and fertile land covered with vineyards, unfortunately has been taken over by civilization. Luckily, however, there are other areas in California that can continue the tradition of making some of the best wine in the world, and we know they can be trusted because they all root back to Santa Clara County, where it all began.

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