

Viticulture's Promised Land: A Brief History of Napa Valley

Two hours north of Silicon Valley lies a pastoral landscape that at first glance appears a throwback to the nineteenth century – cows and sheep grazing on expansive fields of grass. Then, without warning, a large bronze statue mounted on a stone platform comes into view: a fifteen-foot sculpture of a man, his right foot pressed against the deep barrel for extra leverage, turning the crank of a grape crusher. This is Napa Valley. Very quickly the landscape changes, its hills and hollows now scored by row after row of grapevines. The sun casts a warm and mellow golden light on the plants and, before the harvest, bunches of grapes in hues of deep red, blue, and black hang ready for the picking.

An area about thirty miles long and five miles wide, Napa Valley lies roughly between the Mayacama Mountains to the west and the Vaca range to the east. The City of Napa, the county seat, lies immediately north of Carneros, the valley's southernmost region. To its north lie Yountville, Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena, and Calistoga.

Between the towns, buildings are relatively scarce; unlike its neighbors to the south, Napa Valley has strenuously resisted development. As the bronze sculpture suggests, this region has built its economy not only on the grapes it presses and ferments but also on the rural landscape that vine production preserves. Both agriculture and tourism are important businesses in the valley.

For more than a hundred and fifty years, people have come here from all over the world to make wine. Some had made vast fortunes elsewhere and invested in vineyards for years without turning a profit. Others of more modest means simply grew grapes or set up a wine press, in an effort to make a living. The region's early history as a vintner's promised land came to an abrupt end, however, at the turn of the nineteenth century, when Napa, like many rural communities across America, faced repeated threats and hardships. What has made its evolution unusual is that its peculiar mix of constituencies and its boom-and-bust history eventually served to preserve its agricultural character rather than destroy it.

When gold was discovered in the Sierra foothills in 1848, the first grapes had already been planted in Napa Valley for ten years. In 1834, when the governor of California ordered Mariano Vallejo, then a young lieutenant in San Francisco, to secularize the missions, George Yount, a native of North Carolina, made himself useful to Vallejo. The lieutenant subsequently became a general, and Yount, in exchange for his services, received 12,000 acres in what now constitutes the heart of Napa Valley. He planted the first grape cuttings,

which he acquired from Vallejo, in the dormant season of 1838 to 39. They were mission grapes and, although not the best for producing wine, their cultivation changed the valley's landscape forever.

Napa was favorably situated, not far from the sheltered harbors of Oakland and San Francisco to the south. The weather was temperate and the valley largely unpopulated; its former local inhabitants, the Wappo Indians, had been almost entirely wiped out by smallpox and cholera. As soon as the new frontier opened up, settlers from the East Coast rode in to lay claim. With the Gold Rush, the valley became a popular recreational destination for miners – in fact, the first public building in Napa was a saloon – but its appeal for farmers also quickly became evident. Cognizant of the opportunities around him, Yount continued planting into the 1850s, eventually becoming one of the leading wine producers in the area. His wealth made him famous, and after his death in 1865, the town where he lived took his name.

Many of Napa's early settlers were from the East Coast like Yount, but others came from Europe. Germans, with their strong wine making tradition, were particularly attracted to the region. In 1858, a highly enterprising Prussian named Charles Krug came over from Sonoma and made local history by producing 1,200 gallons of wine using a borrowed cider press. In 1861, after receiving hundreds of acres of land in Napa as part of his wife's dowry, Krug began planting his own grapes. More important, he built his first crude cellar and produced his own wine, using grapes imported from Sonoma. This became the first commercial winery in Napa Valley. Another pioneering winemaker, Jacob Beringer, came to California from Germany in 1869. After working for Krug, he went into business for himself, building his own winery in 1877.

The 1860s were good for winemakers. Wineries increased in number and new vinifera from Europe found their way into California soil. Wheat, oats, and fruits were the main local crops, but grapevines had been planted on more than 2,000 acres of land by the end of the decade. Chinese laborers were hired to sow grapes and build structures. A telegraph line was laid in Napa and extended subsequently to Calistoga, at the northern end of the Valley. And as wineries developed and their owners gained influence, railroad tracks were set down to serve them – not only to carry their fruit and

wine out to the world but also to bring visitors to their wineries. Thus began the Napa Valley Railroad, which later connected Napa to the rest of the country. (The track continues to be used by the Napa Valley Wine Train to this day, although freight ceased long ago.)

In a sense, the towns in Napa Valley were similar to those around the country, with a central square, library, post office, and then a high school, their gradual expansion determined by the needs of the population. More and more people came into town with wine-making dreams, tilling the land for grapes, building wineries if bank balances allowed, or using the facilities of others to make their wine. From the very early stages, however, the fact that so many of the settlers' livelihoods depended on the soil helped to preserve the rural nature of the valley.

In the 1870s a German immigrant named Christian P. Adamson took his savings from years of seafaring and working in the mines around Napa and bought a sprawling farm on which he grew grapes and grains. As the success of his grape-selling business grew, he devoted more acreage to the fruit. Then in 1884, with the help of Hamden McIntyre, a



Gustave Niebaum

native of Vermont, he built a wood structure known as the Red Barn, in which he housed a gravity-flow winery. The design was sheer common sense: grapes were hauled to the third floor to be crushed, fermented on the second floor, and aged in barrels on the first floor.

Like Adamson, McIntyre, a veteran of the Civil War, had tried his hand at several disciplines before arriving in Napa. Trained as a piano and organ maker, he was also a winemaker and a civil engineer. McIntyre built several other gravity-flow wineries along the same principles as the Red Barn, and he is credited with popularizing this design in the valley. Typically, the footprint of one of his wood structures would measure 120 by 60 feet. Some of them were quite grand, others merely functional.

In 1886, McIntyre designed a winery on the 280 acres of Eschol Ranch. At the time, about 150 acres were under grape cultivation. The planting style – long, parallel blocks separated by sixteen-foot avenues – gave Napa its distinctive look. The layout, not unusual in wine-growing regions, was nevertheless new to Northern California, as wine making had been a Southern California activity.

Another commission came from McIntyre's former employer, Gustav Niebaum, to build Niebaum his dream winery. A Finn of towering ambition and exceedingly deep

pockets, Niebaum had earned millions running the Alaska Commercial Company. Now he was ready for a new enterprise. He bought Inglenook, in Rutherford, in 1880 and, against the backdrop of Mt. St. John, set out to build both a winery and a home in which to raise his family. During this period, California wines were known for their fraudulent labeling and adulteration practices. Niebaum was determined to make a California wine under hygienic conditions that could measure up to or even surpass European standards.

Work on the winery, which was made of hewed stone, began in 1883 with the help of McIntyre and William Mooser, an architect, and was completed in 1888. Grapes at Inglenook, unlike those at Eschol, were planted in high density to lower yield and enhance the quality of the wines. To the unpracticed eye, the landscape would look the same, but the closeness of the vines was an attempt to rival the growing trends of France. Niebaum, with his love of fine things, also designed a Victorian-style garden around the mansion. It comprised a vast stretch of lawn, a pond, gravel pathways, and a rose cottage, all of which incorporated the mature oaks that had come with the estate.

As the wine-making business grew, it began to attract a different sort of entrepreneur – men like Niebaum, who had already made their initial fortunes elsewhere. Just as Inglenook was nearing completion, another man from New England entered the Napa wine enterprise a few miles to the north. Having found success in his cordage business in San Francisco, Alfred Tubbs, a native of New Hampshire, bought 254 acres of land at the northern end of Calistoga to build a winery and a mansion for his family. (Tubbs' winery would eventually become Chateau Montelena.) In 1888, work started on the winery, which resembled an English Gothic castle, complete with slivered windows, merlons, embrasures, and an arched doorway – a substitute for a portcullis. The winery's cave, with its fieldstone walls, was built into the hillside to keep barrel temperatures regulated naturally.

Stone structures, more expensive than wood buildings, were popular among businessmen who wanted to try their hand at something new and had the means to use the best – and most impressive – materials. In 1888 William Bourn designed Greystone, a 2.5-million-gallon wine and brandy facility



in St. Helena, which was completed the following year. It was built entirely of stone quarried locally and, like so many wineries of the time, relied on gravity for the production of wine. The thick walls kept the temperature steady at 57 degrees. “The first wine people were often wealthy men, frequently Germanic, hoping to live the grand life of European nobility,” says historian Lin Weber. “The next generation of immigrants were generally poorer.”

Napa's wineries were unique in that they combined in a single property a place for the fermentation of wine and brandy and its storage. “The great estates we see on the labels of European wines were not production facilities,” the historian Charles Sullivan has pointed out. “They were magnificent residences which might have had a fine cellar for the owner.” No other place in the world, he explained, “has such an abundance of grand production facilities.”

The high point of the decade was the 1889 World's Fair in Paris, at which several Napa Valley wineries, including Niebaum's Inglenook and Adamson's winery, won prizes. Of the more than thirty awards won by California wines and brandies, twenty went to Napa wineries. It appeared that a new era in the reputation of American wines was dawning.

But even as vintners were refining their rootstock and expanding their properties, phylloxera, a root louse that had devastated Europe's vineyards, was gaining ground in California. In the following decade, vineyard after vineyard fell victim to its ravages, and by the turn of the century, the acreage under grapes had fallen to one-fifth of the levels seen in the 1880s.

Even so, the wine-making business in Napa might have eventually recovered from the phylloxera outbreak if a series of other misfortunes hadn't followed in quick succession. In December 1917, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol. Two years later, in January 1920, Prohibition became a federal law.

Prohibition threw wineries into disrepair: Most stopped production, and owners, facing ruin, looked to other means of survival. Then, by the time it was repealed in 1933, the Great Depression was under way. It was not until the 1960s – when vines planted after the end of the Second World War had matured, old equipment had been replaced, and the political situation appeared more stable – that the valley was once again poised for a renaissance, more than fifty years after the phylloxera blight. Since 1966, the acreage in grape cultivation has grown steadily to its present level of 45,000, representing 9 percent of the 504,000 acres in the county.

As the wine business in Napa Valley saw an upswing, a consortium of vintners became concerned about the possibility that developers would find a foothold. The catalyst was the state highway commission's proposal to run a freeway bypass through the valley; suddenly, Napa's environmental future looked precarious. Alarmed by the population growth and runaway development that was transforming the agricultural landscape in neighboring counties, not just the vintners but

Inglenook Wine Cellar, c. 1888, Rutherford.

The Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, St. Helena. Courtesy of The Culinary Institute of America.

also other residents wanted the county to change its zoning laws. Some farmers disagreed, considering their ability to sell their land to the highest bidder a constitutional right – one they were hoping would guarantee a comfortable retirement. In the end, the winegrowers prevailed by acting together, and in 1968 the county passed the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve, a zoning ordinance designed to safeguard the rural nature of Napa by designating land that must be maintained as open space.

The success of the legislation in spurring the growth of grape farming in Napa Valley led to the establishment of the Land Trust of Napa County in 1976, which receives conservation easements from landowners guarding against development of their land. In exchange, the owners receive tax breaks. Overall, various laws protect 444,000 acres of Napa land. And through further legislation, county voters have limited the population growth of Napa Valley to 1 percent per year.

As the wine business flourished once more, new entrepreneurs moved in and bought the old, boarded-up properties. The Trefethen family acquired the historic Eschol winery that now bears their name and set about restoring the building and vineyards. Around the family home, they built a beautiful English garden, with dogwood, redwood, and citrus trees. A long driveway to the tasting room is lined with maples and olives, and visitors may encounter a cypress covered in climbing roses. At Chateau Montelena, new Chinese owners threw zigzagging bridges across Jade Lake to connect to the pavilions; even today, long after they have moved on, golden bamboo and peonies continue to define the landscape. On the site of a well-known nineteenth-century vineyard, Robert Mondavi established a new winery whose architecture is reminiscent of Spanish Colonial-style missions.

In 1975 Francis Ford Coppola and his wife, Eleanor, bought a part of the Inglenook estate. They moved with their children into Inglenook, restoring the property and the quality of the wine, both of which had suffered in the intervening decades. Several years later at Frog's Leap the Red Barn was rebuilt, using 80 percent of the original wood that C. P. Adamson had employed with such pride. The new construction, however, included a barrel room and a tasting room which were insulated with denim and T-shirt scraps to keep them cool. Greystone ceased to be a winery at all, housing instead the Culinary Institute of America, which makes use of the fresh produce grown at the Charles Krug winery across the street.

Napa might have had a longer road to recovery had not the Tasting of Paris in 1976 confirmed its position as a pre-

mier wine-making region. In a blind tasting, two California wines – Chateau Montelena's Chardonnay and Stag's Leap's Cabernet Sauvignon – won first place.

In the last quarter century, more players have come into the business, bringing with them a variety of artistic predilections. The eclectic mix of their wineries' architectural styles continues to shape the landscape of Napa. William Turnbull built his winery in the late 1970s with a low building for a tasting room and a barn – complete with vented cupolas reminiscent of wood buildings from McIntyre's time – housing a permanent collection of photography by famous artists. The Groth winery is Spanish Colonial; Domaine Carneros is a replica of a French chateau; and Clos Pegase blends postmodern architecture with Mediterranean influences. As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, other styles shifted Napa's appearance away from a European paradigm. In 2004 Darioush, a modern-day Persepolis – complete with tall pillars marking the entrance and a dazzling reception area – added Persian grandeur to the mix.

New trends and technologies continue to emerge. Solar-energy panels increasingly rebuke fossil fuels; energy-efficient buildings are gentler than their predecessors in their environmental impact; and winemakers use new techniques to extract more flavor from their grapes.

In 2012 wine-grape production in Napa was valued at more than \$650 million, a 55 percent rise from the previous year. In 1960, only twenty-five wineries operated in Napa Valley. Currently, there are 430 physical wine buildings and 800 licensed producers. The Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve currently protects roughly 38,000 acres, up from 23,000 acres when the legislation was first passed. The Land Trust protects 55,000 acres.

Trefethen Family Vineyards, Napa.
Photograph by Andy Katz, 2013.

Napa has moved beyond simply producing and storing wines and catering to the private fantasies of wealthy investors. Today many wineries are open to the public, offering art galleries, concerts, food and wine pairings, as well as picnic areas with stunning views of vineyard-braided hills. Anyone who can afford to participate in a wine tour can get a taste of the good life – if only for the afternoon.

Although some people complain about how the valley has become a domain for the wealthy, it is perhaps more striking that so many vintners have managed to act in concert to preserve the region's agricultural identity. Now they are facing the region's gravest challenge in decades, the aftermath of August's earthquake. Early reports paint a grim picture of the devastation: thousands of gallons of wine pouring through broken barrels and crushed glass. Some wineries have been hit especially hard, and it is too early to predict their future. But, given Napa's history, the contemporary players have always been aware that complacency is dangerous. In the end, a rural economy depends on both natural and economic forces that can wreak havoc at a moment's notice. Although the valley's stakeholders cannot control such crises, they appear determined to work together to rebuild what they have lost. – Suruchi Mohan

