

American Wine Heritage

Almost every name and settlement in the earliest days included some reference to wines. The Pilgrims from the Mayflower fermented the native grape juice for their first Thanksgiving dinner. The Virginia Company of London which sponsored the Jamestown colonists in the 17th Century, hoped to lessen the English dependence on French and other European wines and encouraged the early colonists to cultivate the vines and produce wine.

The wild grapes which were the foundation of the eastern American wine industry are from the *Vitis Labrusca* family and differ in taste and finished product from the *Vitis Vinifera*. The latter vines are used in European wine viticulture, and the colonists soon tried their hand at growing them.

One of the most dedicated growers was Thomas Jefferson who planted his lands around Monticello with the European varieties. However, the *Vinifera* vines rarely survived in the cold winters more than a few years. William Penn had had the same disheartening experience in Philadelphia in the early 17th Century. With Penn and Jefferson as well as many others recognized was the preference for the taste of wine made from *Vinifera* grapes. Even as the American Revolution was forming on the east coast, another event was taking place across the continent that would revolutionize the wine industry. Father Junipero Serra and his missionaries brought *Vinifera* vines into California as early as 1770. The first were planted at San Diego. It was a successful harvest, and was repeated up the coast to northern California.

Today, some excellent wines are also produced in New York, Ohio, and Michigan, as well as the southern states. However, California's vineyards are responsible for more than three quarters of the wine consumed annually in the United States and its wines and brandy are exported throughout the world.

Remarkably enough, the youngest wine growing land saved the oldest of man's beverages. During the late 1800's, the Phylloxera vine louse wiped out the great vineyards of Europe. Disease resistant vine root stocks were grafted with cuttings from California of the choice *Vinifera* varieties and replanted. Even today, root stock grown in California is used for planting and grafting throughout Europe.

The Napa Valley region, some 60 miles north of San Francisco, is the acknowledged premier vineyard area. During the summer growing season, the climate is ideal for many varieties of the noble *Vinifera*. Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Pinot St. George, Chenin Blanc, Pinot Chardonnay, and Joannisberg Riesling are just a few that have found a perfect home here.

The Christian Brothers, a teaching order of the Catholic Church, have been making wine in California since 1882, and were among the first major vintners to recognize the superiority of the Napa Valley. Mont La Salle, their monastery and winery is high in the hills above the town of Napa. Their "portfolio" of land holdings spans the warm to cool area and gives the Brothers great flexibility in matching rare wine grape varieties to soil and climate. The ability to produce premium wines is matched by the patience and café after the harvest. For years the Brothers have held one of the most extensive collections of oak cooperage in the world. These are used in aging the wine – until Brother Cellarmaster puts his final approval on them.