

## INTRODUCTION

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# *The Makers of American Wine*

A RECORD OF TWO HUNDRED YEARS

THIS BOOK TELLS THE STORY of American wine through the lives of thirteen people—twelve men and one woman—who made a difference in that history, or who represent a significant change in the direction of things, or both. The more recent names are probably familiar to all who take an interest in wine—Mondavi and Gallo certainly are—but other names will be unknown. To give them their deserved recognition is one of my aims in writing this book. I start with Jean Jacques (or John James) Dufour, a Swiss, who did not make the first commercial wine in this country but who made it possible for others to do so. Nicholas Longworth, a man of wealth, used his fortune to produce the first popular American wine; the German immigrant George Husmann became the Johnny Appleseed of the grape, urging every American to plant the vine and make wine. Charles Kohler brought the wine of California to the country at large, and through Andrea Sbarboro the Italians entered into California wine-making, an activity they have seemed to dominate ever since. The era of big business is represented by Percy T. Morgan of the California Wine Association; Paul Garrett showed how wine-growing in the South, the East, and the West could be profitably combined. The others in my select company had equivalent roles to play, as each chapter undertakes to show. In the rest of this introduction I give a summary account of the fortunes of wine in this country to place my subjects in a general scheme.

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It has been about two hundred years since the first commercial wine was produced in what is now the United States. The exact date is not known, and even if it were, this is an anniversary not likely to be much observed, if it is at all, for our historians write very little about such things. But the fact is that one of the interesting and not insignificant themes of American history is the quest for wine. North America first appears to European awareness as “Vinland”—the land of wine. Every one of the early explorers reported that vines abounded in the new country, and every early settlement had wine making as a part of its purpose. The Pilgrims might have had religious freedom as a main motive for their emigration, while the gentlemen of the Virginia Company were simply looking to make money. But both agreed that making wine was one of the first items on their different agendas. The idea was reasonable. North America, as those first explorers saw at once, abounds in wild grapes—more species of grape are found here than in any other region of the world, and it was not just in certain parts of what is now the United States that these grapes were to be found. They were everywhere, north and south, east and west.

Wine-making trials began immediately. And all of them immediately failed. The first trials were naturally made with the native grapes that flourished around every new settlement. But, as was quickly discovered, they were utterly unfit for wine. The European species of grape, named *Vitis vinifera*—the wine-bearing vine—by the great Linnaeus himself, has grown for millennia in association with human settlement and, by a long process of selection, has been brought to yield a juice fitted for wine making. The many American species of grapes had grown unrestrainedly in their own wild way. No Native American community made any alcoholic drink from fruit, and wine was as unknown as the horse on this continent. None of the many native American grapes would yield a decent wine: the fruit was too low in sugar, too high in acid, too loaded with strange and unpleasant flavors; typically, the berries were small, with large seeds and meager flesh.

So the early colonists, having at once discovered the defects of the native vines, immediately began to import cuttings of the European grape. This was done over and over again, all up and down the coast of the country, by every sort of settler—Puritan, Pilgrim, Dutchman, Swede, German, Greek, Frenchman, Englishman; by syndicates, by religious communities, by exiled soldiers, by uncounted numbers of scattered individuals. *Vinifera* cuttings by

the tens of thousands were planted on islands, along the riverbanks, among woods, in pastures, and on the slopes of hills, from Maine to Florida. Every single one of these plantings failed, though the effort was renewed again and again. The vines would grow for a time; then they sickened and died. Sometimes they endured long enough to yield a tiny harvest of grapes, but no wine in anything close to commercial quantity was made in this country for two centuries following the beginnings of sustained settlement.

North America presented a paradox, for it was just *because* native vines abounded that the European vine would not grow. In South Africa, in South America, in Australia, when these regions were colonized the European grape flourished at once, for there were no indigenous grapes there. In North America, however, native pests and diseases had grown up with the native grapes, and, over the long periods of undisturbed cohabitation, the surviving native vines had come to terms with the pests and diseases. Chief among these were fungal diseases known as powdery mildew (*Uncinula necator*), downy mildew (*Plasmopara viticola*), and black rot (*Guignardia bidwelli*); a bacterial infection known as Pierce's disease (*Xylella fastidiosa*); and an insect pest called phylloxera (*Daktulosphaira vitifoliae* Fitch). Add to this the severe winters of much of the continent, and the high humidity in most of the eastern United States, and you had a recipe for disaster for *Vitis vinifera*.

Why, in these conditions, was the same dismal story tediously repeated over and over again? Why did it take so long to give up on the European vine and turn to something else? Part of the answer, of course, lies in frontier conditions: there was no organized means of collecting and disseminating information about what had been done and was being done, so each new hopeful could proceed in ignorance of what had gone before. There are stories of fresh trials of *vinifera* being made and fresh disappointments produced as late as the mid-nineteenth century, 250 years after the first failures at Jamestown.

Another, and important, part of the answer lies in the fact that finding the reasons for the failure necessarily took a long time. The early settlers knew nothing about many of the conditions they were working in, and the scientific understanding of plant pathology hardly existed in the first two centuries and more of settlement. So there was no limit to speculation about the causes of the failure and to the invention of fanciful and futile solutions. Only gradually, and only after the development of a genuinely scientific understanding of the forces at work, did effective measures appear. Until then, repeated failure followed repeated failure, for, as one of the pioneers put it, "none had the least idea of what a new country is."<sup>1</sup>

## OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

How was success at last achieved? First, by the discovery of chance hybrids between the European vine and one or more of the American natives. If a vinifera vine survived for a few seasons, it might very well cross-pollinate with a wild American vine, and the seedlings produced from such a combination would exhibit some of the qualities of each parent. The fruit quality might be improved and the power of resistance increased. Chance hybrids of this sort were discovered in the eighteenth century, though they were not then recognized for what they are. Once that recognition was made, and the possibilities of hybrid combinations realized, people began the work of deliberate, artificial hybridizing, beginning in the 1840s.

Before the nineteenth century was over, hundreds of new varieties had been created and hopefully introduced, most of them by enthusiastic amateurs. Only a handful have had any staying power, and of that handful most have been chance hybrids rather than the product of art: Catawba, Isabella, Delaware, Dutchess, Lenoir, Norton. The native hybrids—some of them at any rate—possessed a resistance to phylloxera that no pure vinifera vine had, and so were able to survive that devastating pest. But the fungal diseases—particularly mildew and black rot—remained a potent threat, as the destruction of the Catawba vineyards around Cincinnati in the middle of the nineteenth century made clear.

The answer came from Europe. The American diseases had been exported to Europe, with disastrous effect; Europe had a large and important wine-growing establishment, as the United States did not, and so the Europeans had a much more urgent reason to do something than did the Americans. Phylloxera was checked by grafting vinifera scions to rootstocks of resistant American species. Sulfur, the Europeans found, would deal with powdery mildew; Bordeaux mixture, a compound of copper sulfate and unslaked lime, controlled black rot and downy mildew. A program of careful spraying with these fungicides made it possible for wine growing, based on a selection of native hybrid grapes, to survive and develop in the eastern United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Eastern wine growing continued on the same basis down to Prohibition and after, when the introduction of French hybrid vines opened a new chapter in that history. The early successes with native hybrids were in Ohio and Missouri, but New York has long been the leader in wine production among the eastern states. More or less substan-

tial quantities of wine have also been made at various times in New Jersey, Virginia, the Carolinas, Michigan, and Arkansas.

For most of the frustrating history of wine growing in America, the official attitude had been one of encouragement and practical support. Wine growing was a main object in the settlement of Virginia, and many official acts were passed to try to bring it about. Lord Baltimore hoped to grow wine in Maryland; so did the gentlemen who founded the Carolinas. When General James Edward Oglethorpe planned the establishment of Georgia, wine growing was to be a basic part of its economy. These are but a few of many examples that might be cited. After the United States had been formed, Congress supported a number of wine-growing enterprises, including those of Dufour in Indiana and exiled French officers in Alabama. When the Department of Agriculture was created in 1862, it at once undertook research in support of wine making, as its predecessor agency, the Patent Office, had already been doing. Almost all of the founding fathers were would-be winegrowers: Jefferson's interest is well known, but Franklin, Washington, Madison, and Monroe were almost as eager as he was to see wine growing succeed in this country. Perhaps in the future we will have a wine-growing president who will have succeeded in what so many of our earlier leaders hoped to achieve.

This tradition of official support was extinguished by national Prohibition (1920–33). After repeal it was not restored; the prohibitionist power, though defeated, was still formidable enough to frighten the politicians. Instead, wine was subjected to burdensome regulations and restrictions. Only in very recent years have signs of a renewed disposition to be helpful in the cause of wine appeared in the behavior of state and federal authorities.

The story of wine on the West Coast of America is very different from that east of the Rockies. The Spanish who began the colonization of California toward the end of the eighteenth century found that the European grape grew readily there, as it already had in some areas of Mexico and in parts of South America; vineyards were established at most of the Franciscan missions of Alta California and, from there, began to spread to the small towns and dispersed ranches of the province. After the annexation of California in 1848 and the great influx of population produced by the gold rush, the wine industry quickly developed; by the end of the century California was producing 30 million gallons of wine, all of it *vinifera*. The most important obstacles to the flourishing of the industry have come not from nature, as in the East,

but from artificial impediments, of which the fourteen years of Prohibition and their complex aftermath are the most important.

I had hoped to include a chapter in this book about some of the leaders of the Prohibition movement, since they certainly made a big difference to the history of wine in this country; but it was felt that their presence would be seen as incongruous. Perhaps so; in any case, Bishop Cannon, Wayne Wheeler, and Pussyfoot Johnson have been left out of the story.

The recovery from the disruptions of Prohibition was slow and was complicated first by the Great Depression and then by the Second World War. From the 1960s on, however, wine growing in America has expanded remarkably and has generated an interest among the American people such as it never had before. By all measures, American wine is flourishing: there are now more acres of vines planted, more wineries in more states, and more wine produced than the most optimistic booster could have imagined possible in the generation following the repeal of Prohibition.<sup>2</sup>

In this book I have attempted a version of this story through the lives of some of its key figures. From the many, many possible candidates for inclusion, I have aimed to select those whose lives illustrate the various things that needed to be done as the story unfolded; the problems were of more than one sort, and they demanded more than one sort of solution. At one time, it was a matter of learning to use the native vine; at another, the great object was to persuade the American public that an American wine could be any good; at yet another, the question was how to organize the trade in order to survive hard times. And so it went.

In beginning with John James Dufour at the end of the eighteenth century, I neglect the many who had tried wine growing in the two centuries preceding. The only reason for my skipping so much history is that it is largely undocumented. We know many names—Louis de St. Pierre, William Stephens, Robert Bolling, Edward Antill—but do not have enough detail to fill out a history. But the reader should keep in mind the fact of the many early trials in which individuals persisted throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries despite uniform failure.

Since this is an American story, one of the things that appears at once is the variety of origins and callings that figures in it: among my exemplary instances are a Swiss vinedresser, an Ohio lawyer, a German musician, an Italian banker, a Russian viticulturist, and an English businessman. I hope that by telling their stories, and those of my other subjects, I can suggest something of the richness of America's wine history.