



The Fontenay Vineyard, near Santa Valley (c. 1885)

# The Origins of the Santa Cruz Wine Industry

by MICHAEL R. HOLLAND

**T**he emergence of the California wine industry owes much to the generations of grape growers and winemakers who saw in the land a potential for wines of extraordinary quality and strove to produce those wines with dedication and perseverance.

Beginning in the Los Angeles area around 1830, commercial wine production spread throughout the State during the agricultural land boom which followed the American Succession in the early 1850s. Rather than brave the chaos of the Gold Rush in the Sierra Nevada, the early winemakers sought riches in California's fertile valleys from San Diego to Redding.

This quest had two different approaches; the first leading to areas which could produce vast quantities of grapes and wine such as the Central Valley, the second leading toward the areas which could produce the highest quality grapes. Ultimately the search reached the coastal valleys north of the San Francisco Bay, where an amicable balance was struck between production and premium quality.

It was the quest for premium quality that brought the early winemakers to Santa Cruz. For-saking the large-scale production of the fertile central valleys, these winemakers sought cooler

climates similar to those of Europe which produced the wines that the fledgling California vintners aspired to. In the well-drained soils and relatively cool, but sunny climate of the Santa Cruz Mountains, the winemakers found the quality they were after, if not the high production levels.

Although the central valleys produced ten times the amount of grapes that the Santa Cruz vineyards could, the wines that resulted were thin and lacking in complexity. With a long, cool growing season, the Santa Cruz Mountains produced the high acid/high tannin grapes needed for premium wine production.

By the mid-1880s, Santa Cruz winemakers were beginning to produce the premium quality wines they aspired to. As many would learn, however, fine wine does not insure a profit, let alone prosperity. The winemakers found themselves subject to not only the whims of nature in an already light production area, but the vagaries of politics and the economy as well.

The efforts of the Santa Cruz Mountain winemakers, seen within the microcosm of Santa Cruz county, reveal a determined group of people with a common vision of excellence. To this end they succeeded; producing, over the next 100 years, some of the finest wines in California.

## WINEGROWING COMES TO SANTA CRUZ

**A**s in most parts of the State in those early days, people entering the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Monterey Bay area turned to farming, primarily fruit-growing, as a means of livelihood. Between 1850 and 1880, large tracts of land were left barren by logging operations which logged up to 18,000,000 board feet of virgin redwood annually in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Would-be fruit growers laid out their farms on the land left barren by the lumber operations. Grapes became a favorite crop, being suited to the restrictions of mountain agriculture.

The first planting of grapes during this period was very likely to have been prompted by the sight of remnant vines planted by the Franciscan missionaries in Santa Cruz at the turn of the 18th century. This earliest vineyard was located in the river bottom behind the "Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz" mission in what is now Harvey West Park on the north side of the city of Santa Cruz.

The grape planted, now known as the Mission grape, was neither suited to the cool, coastal climate nor did it produce what would be considered a premium wine. It did, however, fulfill the missionaries' need for the strong sweet "Angelica" type wine still favored for use in the Sacrament by the Catholic Church. The "strength" in the wine

was derived from brandy, produced in the mission with a copper still which was later unearthed at the site in 1861.

In 1863, nearly thirty years after the "Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz" Mission was abandoned and ten years after the first American plantings in Santa Cruz, commercial wine growing made an entrance



to the county. That year two brothers, George M. and John W. Jarvis, bought the 300 acre "Rancho San Andres" in what is now the Vine Hill district, above the city of Scott's Valley. While following the standard speculative practice of splitting the land into smaller parcels for sale to other would-be mountain inhabitants, the brothers clearly had winemaking on their minds.

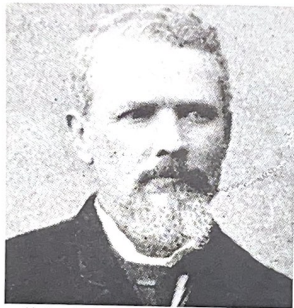
The first Jarvis plantings were done in 1863 and 1864. By 1868, there were 240,000 grape vines in the county, covering approximately 300 acres, 90% of which had been planted by the Jarvisses. That year's vintage consisted of 12,700 gallons of wine; the first vintage on Santa Cruz county records and a product of the Jarvis brothers' labors.

The 1870s found the brothers selling 60 acre parcels near Vine Hill with established vineyards for \$1,000.00 and other acreage of "good vine land, uncultivated" for \$10.00 an acre. The Jarvisses had given the area its present name and claim to fame, setting aside some 250 acres for vineyard and selling the rest as "fruit land."

Although the most ambitious, the Jarvis brothers were not the only people in the county planting grapes. The largest group of people growing grapes were farmers and fruit growers who set aside small plots of their orchards and gardens for grapes; these were mostly table grapes and experimental plots.

One of the first fruit growers known to have planted grape vines in the county was a Scot named John Burns, who set out a small vineyard about the same time the Jarvis brothers were planting Vine Hill. Although Burns' efforts as a winemaker never attracted much attention, he has the distinction of having given Ben Lomond Mountain its name and of having opened the area around Bonny Doon to agricultural development. The area became the most prosperous viticultural district in Santa Cruz County.

During the latter part of the 1860s another viticultural foundation was laid by Pietro Monteverdi and Antonio Capelli. These two Italians hailed from the rugged Piemonte area in Northern Italy, famous for its Barolo and Barbaresco wines. Santa Cruz to Monteverdi and Capelli seemed a home away from home. Together they purchased 60 acres of land just outside of the city in what is now the Ocean Street Extension



John Jarvis, Founder of the wine industry in Santa Cruz county (circa 1890)

neighborhood. Soon after purchasing the property, they planted the flat land along the east bank of the San Lorenzo River in vegetables and the hillside of Graham Hill in grapes. With their income assured from the sale of vegetables to the local community, they provided for their own cultural requirements in the production of wine. This was the beginning of the Italian Gardens neighborhood which formed a prominent part of the Santa Cruz Italian community between 1880 and 1940.

By the end of the 1860s, winemaking was well established in Santa Cruz county. The Jarvisses and others like them approached the production of wine as a business. These people were speculator/entrepreneurs who established relatively large vineyards and built wineries. Also active were farmers and fruit growers who sold grapes to the wineries or made small quantities of wine themselves. This viticultural fervor was assisted by the arrival of European immigrants. Italians, French, and Germans all brought with them the tradition of wine as a necessary supplement to their diet. Unable to find wine that was suitable to their taste, they made their own; setting an example for others around them, also interested in viticulture and winemaking.

The Jarvis brothers' advertisements in an 1875 Central Coast commercial directory

## THE PITFALLS OF A BOOM

The first half of the 1870s was a period of prosperity for the Santa Cruz wine-makers. The Jarvisses' domination of the local wine trade up to the early 1870s was marked by their being the sole wine advertisers in the local papers at the time. By 1874, George Jarvis was making 20,000 gallons of wine annually. John Jarvis was making 13,000 gallons. While the grapes they grew were undoubtedly of the Mission variety, their advertisements listed an astonishing range of wines including port, sherry, muscatel, hock (white wine), claret, and brandy. Such liberties in labeling were common throughout the State at the time.

In 1875, a directory for the Central Coast counties listed Santa Cruz as having 262,275 vines (approximately 300 acres) and an annual product of 70,000 gallons of wine and 1,200 gallons of brandy, the latter produced by George Jarvis at Vine Hill.

In addition to the Jarvisses, there were seven other viticulturists in the Vine Hill area alone. Bonny Doon hosted the burgeoning Burns clan; John, John Jr., and Thomas were all listed as vintners. The directory also listed winemakers on Zavante Creek and in Watsonville. All in all, there were 16 winemakers operating in the county in 1875.

Unbeknownst to the winemakers, however, the impact of a world-wide depression loomed ahead. Coupled with the State-wide problems of over-production and a surplus of poorly made wines, the combination was to prove disastrous.

The "boom fever," in which the industry got its

**SUGAR LOAF VINEYARD,**  
1,500 Feet above the Sea,  
**VINE HILL,**  
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY, CAL.  
**JOHN W. JARVIS, Proprietor**

Grows all popular varieties of grapes without irrigation. Is also engaged in manufacturing the best qualities of

**CALIFORNIA**  
**WINES and BRANDIES.**

The Vineyard and Manufactory are under my own superintendence, and every article guaranteed genuine.  
I have established a depot in St. Louis, Mo., for the sale of the productions of my own vineyard. Office, 504 North-second street.

**VINE HILL**  
**VINEYARD**  
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY, CAL.  
**GEO. M. JARVIS,**  
-PROPRIETOR-

The famous Vineyard is on the back side of the Coast Range mountains, above the hills of the city, and upon the most fertile soil. The climate is the best in the state. The view from the residence of Mr. Jarvis, embracing vines in great and many acres of land, is grandly beautiful, and the soil equal to any other in the State.

The most common fine bottled wines, of which there are bottled and stored in the cellar of this vine, are, the grapes being the most perfect, are, Apple, Plum, Peach, Pear, Strawberry, Quince, Cherry, Fig, Almond, Chestnut, Lemon, Orange, and Orange Juice, and have abundance in the year 1875.

The Proprietor was present at the celebration of the

**WINE & BRANDY.**  
Having the best quality of grapes, and being planted with the finest varieties of grapes, the following are prepared, and bottled and stored.

**GRAPES, APPLE, PEACH AND CHERRY**  
Brandsies, with  
**PORT, SHERRY, MUSCATELLE,**  
**ANJOULEME, CLARET,**  
**BURGUNDY, WHITE WINE AND WINE VINGAR.**

Has written the Proprietor of 1875 and 1876. **TRADE and PUBLIC** is invited to the Vineyard, and to the Manufactory, and to the Office.