



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

The Origins of the Santa Cruz Wine Industry

by MICHAEL R. HOLLAND

The 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

As 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



