

A History of Wine Making in the Santa Cruz Mountains

By Ross Eric Gibson

Santa Cruz was the birthplace of California's temperance movement. But beyond the whiskey-induced revelries of the county alcohol trade lies the more genteel history of the Santa Cruz County wine industry. Its saintly origin was the mission church itself, which planted its vineyards between 1804 and 1807 in what is now the Harvey West Park area.

The fruits and vegetables imported by the mission were considered the best in the world, except for a variety called "mission grapes," which was unsuited to the cool, coastal climate. It produced an inferior, bitter wine, to which the padres added brandy, producing a very sweet "Angelica" wine.

Between 1850 and 1880, loggers stripped 18 million board feet of lumber from the Santa Cruz Mountains, leaving large portions of cleared land. These were well-suited to fruit farmers, who favored grapes as the most adaptable to the limitations of mountain agriculture.

Scotsman John Burns settled in the area in 1851, and in 1853 planted the first commercial vines in the county. Burns named the mountain where his vineyard grew "Ben Lomond" (meaning Mount Lomond), which was the name of an old wine district in Scotland.

Meanwhile, brothers John and George Jarvis established a vineyard above Scotts Valley, in a place they named "Vine Hill." These became the two pillars of the county's wine industry, which by the turn of the century would emerge as dominant in the state. Santa Cruz became a third area, when Pietro Monteverdi and Antonio Capelli from the Italian wine district established the Italian Gardens as a vineyard district on what is now Pasatiempo Golf Course.

The 1870s saw a boom in the state's wine industry, with 16 vintners in Santa Cruz County. But the industry was hurt by vintners who rushed wine to market "before its time," and by a product made mostly from mission grapes. Overproduction followed by a depression brought hard times to the infant industry.

John Jarvis stayed at Vine Hill, but his brother sold his share, and moved his "Jarvis Wine & Brandy Co." to Santa Clara. John Jarvis expanded his operations to Branciforte Creek in 1878.

In 1879, Henry and Nellie Mel bought one of the Jarvis properties at Vine Hill. And because their family's French name was "Mel de Fontenay," they named the vineyard "Villa Fontenay."



Photograph of vineyards from Santa Cruz Venetian Water Carnival, 1895.

Henry Mel had a serious interest in quality grapes. His sister-in-law obtained and introduced the first California vines of sauvignon blanc, semillon, sauvignon vert and muscadelle de bordelaise, and he later became county wine inspector.

By 1884, both Mel and Jarvis had won awards for their wines. As Santa Cruz County vineyards were held up as examples to the rest of the state, vine acres increased fivefold in the Santa Cruz Mountains in the 1880s.

The most serious Santa Cruz County vintner was Dr. John A. Stewart, a Scot who came to Scotts Valley in 1883 and established Etta Hill vineyard. He emulated the best French vineyards and achieved superior quality by blending wines in the French manner—a practice new to California. Stewart became president of the Santa Cruz vintner's society and took over for Mel as the county's local wine inspector. He also wrote articles on California winemaking.

Near the summit on Highland Ridge, German florist Emil Meyer established "Mare Vista" vineyard. That contained the area's first resistant root stocks, which avoided the root-louse infestation that later devastated other grape-growers. Meyer's success was in the longevity of his winery, which survived Prohibition, closing in 1939 when his son died.

The wineries of the Santa Cruz Mountains started to receive awards and recognition at the international level. Ben Lomond Wine Co., operated by William Coope, and Stewart won prizes at World's Fairs in Paris in 1889, Chicago in 1893 and San Francisco in 1894.

Problems beset the wine industry just as it was seeing success. Industry leader John Jarvis died in 1892, and a bank foreclosed on two wineries.

The survivors were Ben Lomond Wine Co. and Mare Vista. Then in 1899, a terrible forest fire ravaged the Santa Cruz Mountains. It threatened the Mare Vista Winery, which firefighters fought to save. Then the water supply was lost. Emil Meyer didn't want to stand by and watch it burn, so he ordered firefighters to hook up their hoses to the wine vats and use wine to put out the fire. This they did and saved the day. But Los Gatos Creek ran red with claret, surprising many residents with this river of blood.

Coope continued to win World's Fair medals, at Paris in 1900 and Buffalo in 1901. In August 1902, Coope got up complaining of a sore throat and by sunset was dead of diphtheria at age 43. He had been the driving force behind quality wines in Santa Cruz County, and no one with similar vision replaced him. Quality Santa Cruz Mountain wines came from the Santa Clara County side as well, but Prohibition soon marked the end of California's first quality wine district of international repute.

Sources

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