



A BRIEF HISTORY OF DRY CREEK VALLEY

by Julie Pedroncelli

Wine and grape growing in Dry Creek Valley have long been an endeavor of its inhabitants. Two important phases in the history of Dry Creek Valley are of interest here: the pioneers who settled the area in the mid-1850's and the innovators who came along one hundred years later to rekindle the heritage that is Dry Creek Valley.

From an 1879 history of Sonoma County comes a description of the Valley:

It lies to the north of Healdsburg and west of the Russian River, is about sixteen miles long and two broad, and is without peer in the production of wheat, corn and staple products while the hill land on its border produces all kinds of fruit, being especially adapted to grape culture.

Dry Creek Valley, interestingly enough, became just that--especially adapted to grape culture. Again and again throughout the descriptions from the early days, this place was destined to become a prime wine and grape growing valley.

I came across what could possibly be Dry Creek Valley's first wine review and I thought it would be appropriate to share with you now. It is dated October 17, 1878 and is from the Healdsburg Enterprise:
The wine produced by Bloch and Colson has finer flavor than from almost any other winery in the country. It has none of the bitter taste found in many wines (of the day).

Business boomed for the winegrowers in the valley for the next 40 years. As early as 1864, Zinfandel grapes were thought to be planted in the valley and the first documented planting was by George Bloch in 1869. Mission, Burger, Golden Chasselas and Riesling were among the other varietals planted at this time. European varieties made their way to the valley by the early 1880's.

The region had 54 separate vineyards totaling 883 acres by the early '80's. Well over half of the acreage was Zinfandel. If we can look forward 100 years from this time, we can see that Dry Creek Valley received formal recognition as an American viticultural area in 1983.

One historian, in 1888, noted that "the foothills lying along the valley have been cleared of brush and undergrowth and planted to vineyards, which produce an abundance of vintage. The land being of a red, gravelly nature, so well adapted to the culture of the grape."

The market was in a state of flux during this time due to the unsure U.S. market. At one point, editorials in local newspapers (in 1888) pleaded with growers not to rip out their vines. A measure of confidence was restored a year later when we find that growers were proud of the high quality of their wines, as reported in the Healdsburg Enterprise of August 14, 1889:

A spirit of enterprise is being displayed by the winegrowers and winemakers of Dry Creek Valley. (The article talks about new wineries and vineyards here.) But this is only one of the steps which are being taken by the wide-awake



men of Dry Creek to improve the condition of their industry. It is their intention to.... make every improvement possible in the quality of their wines in order that they may compete successfully in the foreign market.

To back this growth up, the growers took the initiative to send a representative to Europe to sell Dry Creek Valley wine. As you can see, they were an enterprising group instilled with the pioneer spirit.

The next decade brought more settlers to the area and many were of Italian descent. The wine and grape industry became sprinkled with names like Stefani, Gaddini, Capelli, etc. The boom was bigger than ever and looked like a great market for Dry Creek Valley.

Phylloxera entered the picture and brought good and bad along with it. Sales were brisk at the onset, which was attributed to the devastation of European vineyards, followed closely by Napa County's. It caught up with the valley in the early 1900's. An interesting footnote was that new vineyards were planted on resistant St. George rootstock and we are the recipients of the "old" vineyards today, thanks to this foresight.

In a 1912 article saluting the Sonoma County wine industry, The Press Democrat printed: "Dry Creek Valley is practically one big vineyard." Business had never been better for the winegrowers. Only one thing loomed on the horizon, one that had been brewing for a few years: Prohibition.

By 1919, 1.5 million gallons of wine were being produced in the valley. County-wide there were 256 wineries in operation. An interesting point from which to compare the 140 wineries in existence today.

Like Phylloxera, Prohibition had its good and ill effects. Wineries closed down, but the growers exceeded all previous prices for grapes shipped to home winemakers. A planting frenzy brought more Zinfandel to the valley, as well as Alicante Bouschet, the highly sought after "red" grape.

In an oral history-in-progress, Ruth Watson, whose family has been here for seven generations, remembers packing the Alicante in crates lined with white paper. She recalled getting nervous about getting any of the red juice on the paper because the foreman was standing over her, watching her as she worked.

In a similar oral history project, Al Glaser, whose family came over in the late 1890's, remembers several prohibitionists who did raise grapes so they could sell them. Stories of stills tucked away in the "back forty" abound.

My uncle, John Pedroncelli, recalls being awakened by a man whose truck, filled with illegal spirits, became stuck up in the hills across from the winery. He wanted John's father to get his team of horses and help him out of the mud so that he could make his delivery.

Prohibition did finally end and so did the major production of grapes and wine in the valley. Just four wineries survived. Most of the land had been turned over to prunes. But growers still planted grapes and the market turned around, and by 1937 four more wineries had joined, and had a production total of 500,000 gallons.



With the onslaught of World War II, production went down to three wineries and the valley entered a quiet time for the winegrowing industry. John Pedroncelli notes that the people who fought the war in Europe came back for a taste for wine. This took some time to work into the fabric of the American culture.



Grapes began to be planted again in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Cabernet Sauvignon was re-introduced, along with Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc. Statistics from agricultural records showed increased growth around the state in wine grape production. Growth in Sonoma County during the years 1969 through 1978 more than doubled.

By 1970 a rising interest in wine, particularly in the European varietals, began to make its presence felt in Dry Creek. Prunes gave way to grapes; the land that once was saved for the orchards were being prepared for Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Eight wineries opened in the decade. A little more than 50 years had passed since the great pre-Prohibition wine boom.

The new vintners/growers were, for the most part, new to the valley and the next decade saw 10 more wineries open for business, and numerous growers take an interest in planting more vineyard. The diversity of lifestyles and grapes is reflective of the industry a hundred years ago.

Resources for A Brief History of Dry Creek Valley:

- 1) History of Sonoma County. By J.P. Munro-Fraser. 1879. P. 20
- 2) Healdsburg Enterprise. *Dry Creek Valley. A Brief Outline of Its Beauty, Productiveness and Capabilities*. July 4, 1988. P. 1

I am indebted to the following people for their oral histories (in progress): Ruth Watson, Al Glaser and Gene Cuneo.

Thanks also to my uncle, John Pedroncelli, and father, Jim Pedroncelli, for their input.

A Noble Heritage. By Jack Florence, Sr. This was a boon to understanding some of the fluctuations in the industry and a good read.

The Wine: Grape Heritage of the Dry Creek Valley. By William F. Heintz. A great history of the valley with quite a bit of information.

And the great wealth of information at the Sonoma County Wine Library, with thanks to Bo Simons, Librarian. I could not have done without his expertise.