“A History of Wine in Southern California”

Presentation to Pace Setters

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The history of wine in Southern California begins with the Missions. It was at the missions that wine grapes were first planted to provide for the sacrament of communion. San Gabriel Mission was the largest, and Los Angeles was the first early center for winemaking in California. The Missions were the teachers and nurserymen for the lay people.

In the 1950s, there were over 60 wineries in the Cucamonga area. Most were small “Mom & Pop” operations. We have documentation about many of these kept in the Special Collections room as part of our Wine Industry Collection. We also have a collection of oral histories documenting local area wineries. It has been fun to go out and personally interview local vintners and others who were part of our local wine history.

Winemakers are a tenacious bunch and we are happy to acknowledge our currently existing local wineries. J. Filippi Winery is located on Base Line Road in Rancho Cucamonga and has been growing grapes since 1922. Galleano Winery is located in Mira Loma (which used to be named “Wineville”). Galleano Winery has been growing grapes since 1927. Don Galleano deserves credit for saving wine grape plants from the de Ambrogio Ranch in Rancho Cucamonga that were more than 100 years old. Those plants now live on here at Cal Poly Pomona and are the
source of our Horsehill Vineyards Zinfandel wine. I think it is very exciting that our
campus has preserved this legacy of living history

Also, another local winery is the Rancho de Philo Winery is located in Alta Loma It
was established in 1973 when vintner Philo Biane retired as President of
Brookside Vineyard Company, which was huge and had tasting rooms throughout
California. Rancho de Philo Winery specializes in making an award winning Triple
Cream Sherry. They win Gold Medals every year!

When Prohibition started in 1920, it created all sorts of crazy contradictions in the
wine industry. It lasted until December 1933 when it was repealed. Prohibition
shut down the regular operation of wineries, but it did not necessarily put an end
to them. One surprising contradiction during Prohibition was the provision that
each head of household was permitted to make up to 200 gallons of wine each
year for use at home. America was a nation of immigrants and many had come to
this country with a tradition of home wine making and were used to drinking wine
with each meal. Also during Prohibition, there were many wine tonics made, but
you had to request a prescription from your pharmacist. Wine could also be used
in cooking.

So surprisingly, during Prohibition, with the provision for home winemaking, the
sale of wine grapes skyrocketed. Vineyard acreage doubled during Prohibition.
The result was that growers in California and other states could hardly plant
vineyards fast enough. Many grapes were shipped to the east coast to supply the
home winemakers there. In fact, shipping grapes provided a great source of
income to wine makers. Some winemakers continued making wine during
Prohibition. They just were not permitted to sell it! Also, there was provision for
making sacramental wine for use by churches and synagogues, and that wine
could be sold. When Repeal came in December 1933, there were some 35 million gallons of wine in storage in California, most of it made during the dry years.

Prohibition ended with the passage of the 21st Amendment to the Constitution. It had become increasingly unpopular during the Great Depression. At the end, states were allowed to set their own laws for the control of alcohol, which has led to many complicated situations for wineries, when it comes to shipping wine out of state.

A number of California’s early settlers made wine. Especially, as I mentioned, when immigrants began to arrive in California – the French, Italians, Dutch, Germans, Yankees, and a variety of others -- brought with them their own personal experience of winemaking and grape growing. Two important names from the early days are Jean Louis Vignes (whose last name translates as “Vines”) and William Wolfskill. They both arrived in Los Angeles about the same time.

The earliest wine growing was not just confined to Los Angeles. The first vineyards in the Cucamonga Region, go back to 1839. The same year marked the beginning of wine in Riverside. Thus some start on viticulture and winemaking had been made along the entire length of the Los Angeles basin before the end of the 1830s. But most of the activity was in Los Angeles.

William Workman and John Rowland planted vineyards at La Puente. Hugo Reid, a Scotsman, made wine in 1839 at Rancho Santa Anita, where the race track and county arboretum now stand. By the early 1850s there were more than 100 vineyards in Los Angeles and its outskirts. Since Los Angeles then had a population of only 2,000, the vineyards must have been a very prominent and visible part of the landscape. Another prominent early winemaker was an Irishman named
Matthew Keller, who started winemaking in 1851 in Los Angeles, and became a “Winemaking Millionaire” and one of the city leaders.

The Gold Rush did not transform Los Angeles the way it did San Francisco, however it did create a new market for wine. Now people making wine in Los Angeles could ship it north in large quantities.

But the big development was in Anaheim, now in Orange County, but at that time it was still part of Los Angeles County. Anaheim was the invention of two German musicians Charles Kohler and John Frohling, who set up a wine business in 1854. They sold their wines in San Francisco, but they chose to grow the wine grapes in Los Angeles. They sold shares in the Los Angeles Vineyard Society (we have documentation on this in the Special Collections room) and with the capital raised, bought land along the Santa Ana River. They installed an irrigation system and planted 400,000 vines. In the next twenty years there were as many as fifty wineries in Anaheim, with production reaching over a million gallons each year.

It was from Southern California that the rest of the country learned about California wine, beginning about the time of the Civil War. Up to that time, Americans were only familiar with local wines made from native grape varieties. And those native grape varieties were not at all good for use in wine making!

In 1867 Wilson was joined by his son-in-law J. DeBarth Shorb, who transformed the business. Within 15 years Shorb was building what he called “the largest winery in the world” at Alhambra, between Pasadena and Los Angeles. What had happened was the devastation of the European vineyards by phylloxera. At its peak in the early 1880s people seriously thought that wine grape growing in Europe might be coming to an end. Shorb went ahead on the construction of a
winery with a storage capacity of over a million gallons. Around the turn of the century part of the property that had belonged to Benjamin Wilson and to Shorb was bought by Henry Huntington. The Huntington Library, Art Gallery and gardens now stand on what had been among the most important vineyards of the San Gabriel Valley during the mid-1800s.

There were other ambitious people as well. Shorb’s neighbor in the San Gabriel Valley, L. J. Rose, developed a winery called Sunny Slope. Rose’s neighbor, Lucky Baldwin, produced wine and brandy from his Santa Anita Ranch. In fact the San Gabriel Valley was the most extensive vineyard in the state in the 1870s and also one of its glamour spots.

Disaster struck in 1883. The vines in the Anaheim vineyards that year withered from an unknown disease, and again in the next year. By the end of the decade Anaheim was almost extinguished as a source of wine. The disease was not restricted to the Santa Ana Valley but ranged through much of the Los Angeles Basin. Since no one knew what the disease was, it was called the Anaheim disease. We now know it to be Pierce’s Disease. And there is still not much defense against it. This disaster seriously interrupted the progress of winegrowing in Southern California. Los Angeles County then turned to oranges, and when a new county was formed in 1889 from a part of Los Angeles County, it was called Orange County.

Winemaking persisted and around the turn of the century had a renewal in the Cucamonga district. The deep sandy soils of Cucamonga made it more or less immune to the attack of phylloxera, at a time when vineyards nearly everywhere else in California were being rapidly destroyed. Secundo Guasti in 1900 began planting his vineyard called “the largest vineyard in the world” since it eventually
reached 5,000 acres. We have plenty of documentation about this in the Special Collections room. There were other substantial developments in the Cucamonga region, such as the Post and Klusman winery (later taken over by the Garrett Company to become the Virginia Dare winery), the Padre Vineyard Company developed by the Vai Brothers was even larger. Also the Swiss Elena Brothers in 1901 founded the Regina Winery which grew to a two-million gallon capacity.

A number of the old wineries did come back to life after Repeal—the Padre Vineyard Company, the Italian Vineyard Company at Guasti, Garrett and Company, and the San Gabriel Winery. There were also some large new enterprises as well. The Cucamonga Pioneer Winery was a co-op and built a million-gallon winery. Another cooperative, The Cucamonga Growers Cooperative had a half-million gallon capacity. There were also many little “Mom and Pop” wineries that sprang up. The Cucamonga Valley region had around 50 of these. Cucamonga area Zinfandel was known to be particularly outstanding. Also outstanding were the area’s sweet fortified wines.

By 1936, the third year after Repeal, there were 163 wineries in the southern region, from Santa Barbara to San Diego. By the end of the 1930s, Southern California vineyards were producing around 12 million gallons of wine. Many of the region’s grapes were still shipped fresh to cities in the East, where home winemakers continued to buy them as they had done during the Prohibition years.

The war years that followed the great Depression put most development on hold in Southern California. But after the war years, came the real scourge of the vineyards, something far more devastating than the Anaheim disease. It was the
influx of new settlers wanting to buy land for homes and businesses. Agricultural land was quickly taken over by new homes, new businesses and asphalt.

The number of area wineries steeply declined over the years. The land became too valuable to keep for agricultural purposes. By 1950, wineries decreased to 68 from the high of 163 during the mid-1930s. Things diminished drastically by the 1970s and were practically invisible by the 1980s. San Bernardino County, where the Cucamonga district lies, had 23,000 acres of grapes in 1960. But by 1997 there were just 1000 acres left.

Southern California wineries have also moved south to the Temecula area. In Temecula, they have created an agricultural preserve to protect their vineyard land from development. Currently in Temecula, there are over 30 wineries.

At this time I would like to acknowledge the distinguished wine scholar, Dr. Thomas Pinney as author of most of the information in my talk today. Dr. Pinney has written the two volume *History of Wine in America* and has given us his research files, his book collection, and many framed artworks relating to wine.

I also would like to invite each of you to come visit us in the Special Collections room. Special Collections preserves our campus history and is also the place our campus sends its most valuable and fragile treasures for safe-keeping. We are on the 4th floor of the Library. We will be happy to show you many of our interesting artifacts.