Decked out in red, white, and blue bunting, the pavilion of the Napa County fairgrounds provided the setting in 1952 when the Napa Valley Vintners Association (NVVA) greeted 2,000 representatives of the General Electric Company. The event afforded the winemakers an opportunity to introduce the visitors to the products of Napa Valley. Formed during World War II, and attempting to overcome the persistent and negative consequences of Prohibition, the NVVA had initiated a long-range public relations campaign to distinguish Napa’s best wines from inferior California vintages and establish new markets for them through special events in the 1940s and 1950s. Hoping to lure sophisticated consumers and to educate them in the finer aspects of wine, the vintners invited San Francisco conventioneers such as the American Medical Association and the Western Conference of Bankers for winery tours. They hosted a luncheon for 600 for the Associated Harvard Clubs, members of the Ivy League standard bearer’s alumnae. The General Electric gathering stands out for neither its logistics nor its size, although it was the largest event in the NVVA’s first decade. In retrospect, it captures our attention because of the nature of the affair - an old-fashioned, western-style barbecue. With neither artifice nor pretension, vintners and guests donned cowboy hats, spangled shirts, bolo ties, and kerchiefs to dine at the plebeian fairgrounds. Napa Valley wines accompanied grub reminiscent of the greater American West.1

1“Napa Valley Vintners: The Early Years, 1943 to 1958,” album, St. Helena Public Library, Napa Valley Wine Library Association (SHPL/NVWLA); and James T. Lapsley, Bottled Poetry: Napa
Some fifty years later, the NVVA hosted a strikingly different gala at the Meadowood resort. The twentieth Napa Valley Wine Auction, held in 2000, attracted more than 1,800 guests who paid $2,500 per couple and 1,000 volunteers who offered their services for a chance to rub elbows with the elite. The event also raised $9.5 million designated for local charities. A retired Silicon Valley executive and first-time participant spent $1.7 million in bids on five auction lots, perhaps buying prestige as much as fermented grape juice. His single largest purchase, $500,000 for an imperial of 1992 Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon, constituted a record for a single bottle of wine. Another guest, a ten-year auction veteran, bid $700,000 for a vertical vintage, or ten 1.5 liter bottles spanning the first decade of the Harlan Estate. Since its inception in 1981, the auction had evolved into a larger phenomenon. By 2003, festivities covered four days and involved more than 100 events including those that required patrons to wear “supper club swank” or “Academy-award glamorous.”

Life in Napa Valley had moved far away from bolo ties and kerchiefs in that half century. Visitors who wandered across the Golden Gate Bridge in the 1950s found a picturesque, slow-moving rural community whose wine industry had been crippled by the persistent legacy of Prohibition. As suggested above, the NVVA and its members adopted a series of direct marketing measures to bring their products and potential consumers together. Starting in the 1940s and 1950s, they opened public tasting rooms and hosted special events, leading the development of American wine tourism. In the

---


---

285 percent of the $9.5 million went to charities in 2000; as of 2005, the NVVA has raised entry fees in an attempt to recoup all overhead costs and return 100 percent of the money to charity. Between 1981 and 2002, the auctions have raised $42 million. Press releases of 4 June 2000, 11 June 2001, and 10 June 2002, [www.napavintners.com](http://www.napavintners.com) (accessed 19 May 2003).
most basic sense, tourism is a form of consumer behavior. Internal motives drive consumer choices. As historian Hal Rothman concludes, “tourism, through which people acquire intangibles - experience, cachet, proximity to celebrity - became the successor to industrial capitalism, the endpoint in a process that transcended consumption and made living a function of accouterments.” Tourists shaped self-identities by visiting places that offered social affirmation. Nowhere was this truer than in the world of wine tourism that began in Europe in the late nineteenth century, but had been thwarted by two world wars. As other scholars have noted, “tourism is fundamentally about the difference of place.”

Significantly, if perhaps implicitly, Napans recognized that fine wine this idea and promoted their wine and their region in equal measure, projecting the sensuous imagery that began to dominate travel guides and food books in the post-war era. Organized tourism became a highly successful part of Napa operations, evolving into an activity for affluent consumers.

By 2005, a tourist’s journey across the Golden Gate Bridge brought him, and 5,000,000 other people each year, to a place defined by fine cuisine, spa treatments, and traffic-jammed weekends as much as by its premium wines and bucolic landscape. The Napa Valley Wine Auction emerged as the premiere event of each season, offering bidders the chance to capture the region’s quintessence and their own self-affirmation within a wine bottle. Even with all Napa’s other luxurious frills, journalist George Taber suggests, the annual auction had become “the apex of valley flamboyance.”

---

To understand the development of Napa’s tourism and the role that the auction played in it, it is important to consider where the wine industry stood in 1944 when Louis Martini suggested the formation of the Napa Valley Vintners Association. Prohibition nearly destroyed California wine.\(^4\) With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1919, more than 100 Napa – mostly small - wineries closed their doors and many winemaking traditions were lost. Under federal enabling legislation, only wineries that produced religious or medicinal wines stayed open (in the Napa Valley, Beaulieu and to a lesser extent Beringer Brothers).

Nonetheless, and while Napa remained home to diversified agriculture, the number of acres dedicated to grapes grew because the law allowed Americans to make 200 gallons of wine a year at home. Growers turned their vineyards over to inferior varieties, such as the Green Hungarian or the Alicante Bouschet. These grapes appealed to home producers because of their bright color and suitability for shipment, but they were inappropriate to the fine wines Napans saw as their signature. Abandoned or pilfered for their equipment, wineries fell into disrepair.

After Prohibition’s repeal in 1933, winery owners found crumbling cooperage and rusted machines. They anticipated new demand for wine, but it did not materialize immediately and overproduction with poorer grapes contributed to a persistent statewide glut in the 1930s. Substandard surpluses exacerbated the weak reputation of most California vintages and their distillation as highly alcoholic dessert wines seemed to


\(^5\) The Volstead Act was the enabling legislation that delineated the limits on the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages under the Eighteenth Amendment. The Twenty-first Amendment signaled the repeal of national Prohibition in 1933.
confirm the association the prohibitionists had made between wine consumption and alcohol abuse. Napa wineries such as Beaulieu and Inglenook produced bulk wines, but also joined a few other California facilities in offering some excellent vintages as well. Americans, however, had lost what little taste they previously had for fine wine. At the same time, the industry’s distribution networks had evaporated, and it was difficult to educate consumers about these better wines. Further complicating matters, the Twenty-first Amendment that repealed the nationwide ban contained a second clause giving the individual states extensive control over the production, distribution, and consumption of alcohol within their borders. Producers faced a labyrinth of fifty-state regulatory schemes. Finally, the Office of Price Administration controlled prices and thus the market during the war, while shortages of materials and labor further stalled a return to premium wine production and its extension across the valley.6

Louis Martini had profited sufficiently in the grape business in the 1920s to build a new winery in St. Helena just before Repeal. He believed that the NVVA could address problems common to all of the valley’s producers. Announced in 1945, it began informally with a monthly luncheon meeting of the principals of each of Napa’s major wineries: Martini, Beaulieu, Inglenook, the Napa Co-op, the Napa Wine Company, Charles Krug, and Larkmead. Beringer Brothers, Freemark Abby, and the Christian Brothers joined one year later. The group focused on technical and regulatory matters and frequently invited guest speakers from the University of California and the Wine

---

Institute, but it saw the promotion of Napa wines. Both the Association and a number of its individual members saw tourism as one of the most important marketing vehicles because it allowed them to avoid complicated and frequently ineffective distribution channels and to reach consumers directly.

Napa had been a tourist destination once before. Wealthy San Franciscans summered there at the end of the nineteenth century, but that version of tourism was not tied to wine and remained tertiary to agriculture in the county’s economy. The Great Depression and World War II had afforded few opportunities for tourism to regain its footing. In the Napa Valley after the war, vintners would profit by introducing tourists to their wines, and tourism would experience its resurgence by tying itself to wine. If, as Raymond Williams suggests, the countryside increasingly was perceived as an ignorant backwoods, then wine tourism provided a means to overcome the negative aspects of rurality. Poets had long evoked the mysterious power of wine. John Gay wrote, “Fill ev’ry glass, for wine inspires us, and fires us with courage, love, and joy.” As strategies slowly developed, Napans hoped to evoke similar passions. Vineyards, they told consumers, combined the lure of a pastoral idyll with the romantic cosmopolitanism of wine. Napa, over time, offered urban consumers a unique, if only temporary, escape; they seemingly left the city behind, but did so for a particular rural landscape increasingly defined by its urbanity.

First launched on a small scale in the late nineteenth-century Europe but inhibited by two world wars, wine tourism became an essential part of the global grape business

---

7 Lapsley, Bottled Poetry, 133.

8John Gay, The Beggar’s Opera (1725); and Williams, The Country and the City, 1.
after 1945. Napans played a major role in developing American wine tourism. In the most basic sense, tourism is a form of consumer behavior. Internal motives drive consumer choices. As Rothman concludes, “tourism, through which people acquire intangibles - experience, cachet, proximity to celebrity - became the successor to industrial capitalism, the endpoint in a process that transcended consumption and made living a function of accouterments.” Tourists shaped self-identities by visiting places that offered social affirmation. Nowhere was this truer than in the world of wine tourism. As other scholars have noted, “tourism is fundamentally about the difference of place, while wine is one of those rare commodities which is branded on the basis of its geographical origin.” Napans promoted their wine and their region in equal measure, projecting the sensuous imagery that began to dominate travel guides and food books in the post-war era. Organized tourism became a regular part of winery operations. It took time for Napa wine to be perceived as a sophisticated beverage and time for Napa tourism to experience a rebirth. Wine and tourism developed in a mutually beneficial relationship, and their promoters (often the same promoters) bathed both in European sensibilities and pitched both to the more affluent segments of American society.

Isolated activities gradually cohered into a comprehensive public relations campaign. The NVVA posted a large wooden sign welcoming visitors to “this world

---


10 Other marketing efforts included wine festivals, viticultural and enology classes, tasting classes, tasting rooms, improved packaging, increased and more sophisticated advertising, and providing locations for moviemaking. See “California Wine Outlook,” Bank of America, September 1973, 6-7, SHPL/NVWLA. In the 1930s, Beringers Brothers had provided the setting for *They Knew What They Wanted* starring Charles Laughton and Carole Lombard. In 1958, individual members of the association
famous wine region” in 1949. The billboard initially identified the NVVA members, but when they later became to numerous for the sign, the organization substituted a romantic phrase – “bottled poetry” – coined by Robert Louis Stevenson for Schramsberg’s wine when he honeymooned in the valley in 1880.11

In the late 1940s, the Charles Krug Winery began a monthly newsletter - *Bottles and Bins* - and hosted concerts with tastings. One newsletter captured what vintners perhaps perceived as their marketing challenge: “Contrariwise Americans are rather ashamed of the undeniable national backwardness in the social arts and graces. They shrink from exposure to this lack of savoir-faire, and by thinking of wine in terms of sophistication, they are inclined to develop a phobia toward it.” In 1949, the Napa Valley Vintners Association (NVVA) sponsored a San Francisco cable car to advertise its members’ wines and to lure visitors to Napa. The association raffled one bottle of wine each day to the riders, covered the car with grape-filled vines, and filled it with men and women dressed in some vaguely European peasant costumes.12 As noted above, they hoped to attract and educate conventioneers in San Francisco.

In a 1954 display of the showmanship that defined his career, Robert Mondavi, then NVVA president, prepared a good-natured declaration in response to a fictional work in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In that story, the Duchy of Grand Fenwick asserted that Napa’s ignoble wines badly imitated the Duchy’s vintages. “With humble

---


recognition of the happiness and touch of ceremony that Napa wines add to dinners and good living throughout America,” Mondavi proclaimed Napa wines to be unique. He volunteered “the men and resources of Napa Valley in the defense of the republic and the glory of our American wines.” The NVVA wooed travel and wine writers as well. Articles focused on the European romance of the local wine industry. One 1952 story noted: “Touring the countryside, over the back roads and the main highways, the tourist is literally fascinated by the picturesque old stone wineries, nestling against the wooded hillsides - reminiscent of the age-old wineries of Germany, France and Switzerland.” Another article that same year in Holiday offered the first of many “lifestyle” piece on the valley. By 1957, Napa and Sonoma wineries centered an essay on the North Bay region in Motorland: “The feature of the region which makes the greatest impression on the visitor, however, is the wine country.” Napans slowly reached their prospective consumers.

They did so just as Americans entered an unprecedented era of widespread affluence that changed consumption patterns. The middle class grew larger and its members became wealthier. More Americans traveled abroad and discovered wine as a courtly aspect of daily life rather than a pompous display of snobbery or a cheap skid-row binge. The Kennedys evoked a continental timbre at the White House. At the same time, changes in production made domestic vintages more palatable due in large part to the

---


contributions of the Viticulture & Enology Department at the University of California, Davis. Better grape varieties and technological improvements in fermentation insured that tasty and stable wines were regularly available. In 1967, for the first time, the sales of dry table wines surpassed those of sweet dessert wines, signaling a profound change in American consumer tastes.15

It had taken time for Napa to overcome the poor reputation of Californian wines in general, but one event put the valley in international wine map. At a blind tasting in Paris, and to many observers’ surprise, French judges selected two Napa Valley vintages as the best. The results conveyed to consumers that superlative Napa wines merited inclusion with the world’s best.16 With American notions of affluence increasingly tied to conspicuous consumption, Napa winegrowers promoted their superior wine and its romantic, European-tinged culture. Joseph Epstein suggests that it is the very “Europeanness” of wine that appeals to American snobs.17 Elite and middle-class consumers, searching for experiences and goods that bolstered their status, readily accepted such conceits.

In the 1960s, Napa’s tourism numbers jumped significantly. By 1968, the


Christian Brothers’ Greystone Winery alone welcomed 150,000 visitors annually. In Napa, tourists found a seemingly authentic, rustic European-style experience. As viticulture succeeded, the county’s orchards and pastures gave way to vineyards. And as a result of the NVVA efforts at home and in tastings across the country, the Napa Valley was raised above other California regions in the minds of writers and consumers. By the 1970s, it dominated media coverage and guidebooks. *The Wine Bibber’s Bible* (1975), for example, identified 51 wineries in nine North Coast counties. Only Napa County merited a separate map, and its wineries constituted 37 percent of all selected. Other California districts produced good varietals, but in wine and tourism, perception was everything. One author noted, “To wine snobs, California vintages grown outside the Napa Valley rank somewhere below Pepsi-Cola.”

While Robert Mondavi was not singularly responsible for the changes in tourism and the wine industry or for the elevated position of Napa in both, his career is particularly instructive on such issues. His father, Cesare, had profited during the 1920s and 1930s by selling Central Valley grapes for home production. Eager to move into the premium wine business, Robert and his brother, Peter, joined Cesare in 1943 in purchasing the Charles Krug winery at St. Helena. After his father’s death and a disagreement with Peter, Robert left the family business in the mid-1960s. He soon opened the Robert Mondavi Winery, one of the first major new operations since Repeal. Mondavi’s labels promoted “a gracious way of life” as much as wines. He later said, “I

---


wanted to have a place where I could hold some cultural events, such as art shows, pop concerts, plays or jazz festivals . . . We were trying to combine winemaking with the cultural aspects of life . . . I also believed very strongly in the association of fine wines with elegant cuisine.”

Mondavi understood how the romance of wine fit could become an integral part of American consumer society.

By the early 1980s, an estimated two million people visited Napa Valley each year; they spent $136 million. (By 2000, the number of visitors reached 5 million annually.) Many Napans celebrated tourism’s contribution to the local economy, but others grew wary of its impacts, as studies of tourism solicited by the city of St. Helena (1983) and the Napa Valley Foundation (1984) revealed. Businesses that served locals closed, traffic grew worst, and it was increasingly more difficult for workers to live in the valley.

As noted in my paper for the meeting of the Society of Quantitative Gastronomy, a divided landscape emerged, typical of many tourist locales, in which workers could not afford the amenities or even the high-priced wines.

---


21 “Study of Tourism in St. Helena,” prepared for the City of St. Helena, California ([San Francisco]: Environmental Science Associates, Inc., December 1983), 11-12; and “Napa Valley Tourism Project,” Prepared for the Napa Valley Foundation (San Francisco: ESA Planning and Environmental Services, November 1984), 5 and 14 and 18, respectively, regarding estimates of visitors and spending.

22 “Napa Valley Tourism Project,” 24; “Annual Planning Information, 1984-85,” 5; “Annual Planning Information, 1994,” 14; “Projections and Planning Information, 2001 Updates,” A-2; New York Times, 12 December 2001, E1, 14; Conaway, The Far Side of Eden, 7. Almost all agricultural workers were Hispanic; few had roles in wineries’ hospitality operations. Kevin Starr notes an irony of California’s Mediterranean character: “At its worst, its pastel nostalgia contrasted mockingly with the lot of
Once bereft of decent restaurants and hotels, the valley became filled with such establishments, primarily in its four towns: Calistoga, St. Helena, Yountville, and the City of Napa. Wine tourism also brought an urbanity to the Napa Valley that seemed antithetical to traditional country living. The presence of such businesses demonstrated how well valley entrepreneurs had synchronized tourism and wine.

Equally significant from the perspective of the valley’s wine industry was the demographic character of Napa’s tourists. Vintners tapped a key group: baby boomers with disposable income. A subsequent study prepared for the Napa County Board of Supervisors disclosed that 56 percent of visitors to Napa County earned more than $50,000 in 1988; the median family income at the time was $42,200. Moreover, almost two thirds of the pleasure seekers surveyed had no children, suggesting fewer demands on their wealth. Napa’s wine producers had increasingly positioned themselves in the super premium and ultra premium market. They expanded tourist operations hoping to attract consumers who would purchase expensive wines once they returned home. The price tags attached to those wines, as well as the gourmet restaurants, Calistoga spas, or hot air balloon rides, were often beyond the reach of the casual visitor and always beyond the means of those earning less than the median income.

At the time of its formation in 1945, and despite its members’ commitment to securing excellence, the NVVA could not have anticipated the phenomenal success that California’s Spanish-speaking people, a despised minority, deprived of their lands, given their only dignity in the realm of gringo fantasy.” Starr, Americans and the California Dream, 396. This discussion does not include migrant laborers who arrive during the harvest. A recent referendum allows growers to provide temporary housing for such laborers within the preserve.

\[23\]

followed. The success brought changes and newcomers eager to cash in on the cachet earned by the Napa Valley appellation, approved by the BATF in 1981. By 1988, some 184 wineries called the county home; twelve years later, the number approached 300. At the dawn of the millennium, more than 40,000 county acres were dedicated to grape production, more land than had ever been under cultivation in earlier years when the valley was home to diversified agriculture.24

Since 1981, much of the NVVA’s attention has focused on the Napa Valley Wine Auction. An annual event held during each summer equinox, it has grown in size and attracted an increasingly wealthier clientele. It initially grew out of charitable impulses and the persistent mimicking of more established European viticultural areas. The St. Helena Hospital had asked Robert Mondavi to raise money by hosting a tasting of his best wines. He and other local wine industry participants saw an opportunity to make a larger statement. The Hospices de Beaune, which had been auctioning wines for hundreds of years, provided the model. The NVVA, bustling with new members, decided to organize the auction. Unlike the Beaune event, Napa’s would be used to promote the new appellation rather than set the prices for current vintages. Vintners recognized that donated and carefully packaged wine would sell for more than its market value, and thus would generate favorable press. Nearly 300 enthusiasts paid $500 for a bidding paddle, the price of entry. An elegant affair at the Meadowood resort, the first

---

24 Wineries of Napa Valley, survey compiled by Irene W. Haynes; and interview of Robert Mondavi by Ina Hart and T.E. Wilde, 29 December 1978, Vol. III, 209-11, SHPL/NVWLA. Also see Conaway, Far Side of Eden, 26. Regarding the value of the Napa Valley appellation and its various subappellations, see the testimony of Jack L. Davies, President, NVVA, and of Andrew Beckstoffer, President, Napa Valley Grape Growers Association, before the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, San Francisco, 13 April 1976; and “Petition to Establish the St. Helena Viticultural Area in the County of Napa, California,” 9 March 1994, SHPL/NVWLA. Regarding crop acreage over time, see Napa County Department of Agriculture, Crop Reports, 1967, 1971, and 2001, SHPL/NVWLA.
What was it that the bidders bought in a bottle of wine? In many ways, they bought a piece of the valley and its very nature. The term *terroir* – the idea that the physical aspects of the place where the grapes are grown will determine the character of the wine - has gained great currency in the global wine trade in the last twenty years. In contemplating *terroir* in the Napa Valley, geologists Jonathan Swinchatt and David G. Howell refer to “all the qualities that characterize place: topography, bedrock, sediments and soils, temperature, and rainfall.” There is reasonable evidence to suggest that these elements influence a wine’s complexion. In the Napa Valley, for example, people speak of “Rutherford dust” in the Cabernet Sauvignon produced in the famous Inglenook vineyard now owned by Francis Ford Coppola and others.

For the humanist, however, *terroir* is an extension of both the physical nature and our constructed nature, and thus, its authority also flows from the human values that have shaped its meaning. “The idea of nature,” literary critic Raymond Williams notably observed, “contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.” We discover there are different versions of *terroir* – “all are cultural constructions that reflect human judgments, human values, human choices.”

---


Most people use the word “nature” to describe things not of their own making. When proponents invoke terroir, they too speak of some fundamental essence superseding human intervention. As noted above, such notions appropriate an almost transcendent moral authority by placing terroir seemingly beyond mortal meddling. Within these meanings of terroir, otherwise disputed values appear inherent or eternal. Under this construct, those who disagree with terroir or take contrary actions within the wine world potentially usurp a pristine nature. The difficulty, Cronon suggests in a similar argument about wilderness, is that “the very thing it seeks to label is too often obscured beneath the presumption of naturalness.” Assumptions of essentiality disregard the reality that humans have manipulated elements of terroir such as soil, water, and exposure in vineyards. In the Napa Valley, for example, winemakers have affected soil through irrigation or the past use of chemical pesticides and, like growers across the globe, through the application of sulfur for powdery mildew. Such assumptions also ignore the fact that our understanding of the physical world always is historically and culturally contingent. To understand the values that have shaped terroir and its growing preeminence, we cannot afford to neglect context or to cling to an unquestioning belief in quintessence.

For many people, a vineyard seems an almost Edenic place. Traipsing along the gentle slopes, running one’s fingers through its soil, touching the vines and their fruit, feeling the heat of the sun – such activities seem far removed from urban life and somehow more natural. In France, for example, natives use the term terroir to create a

---

editions), 34. Also see Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” in Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980), 67.


30 Locke, Vineyards in the Watershed, 28, 115, 123.
mystique that allows them to claim a more keenly felt connection to such land. New World technology cannot overcome intuitions about the earth has passed from generation to generation, they aver, like the color of one’s eyes or hair. Robert Louis Stevenson complained in the late 1800s that Napa lacked “the sacredness of ancient cultivation.” A century later, growers there invoked the idyllic nature of their home. Napa has been called an American Eden. Author Cheryll Aimee Barron writes that she discovered the back roads and wrapped herself “in silence, solitude and vistas of vines in volcanic earth rolling away to the horizon in every direction.” Robin Lail, a Mondavi employee who helped create the idea of the auction and the daughter of John Daniels who owned Inglenook until 1964, writes that Napa Valley, defined by its viticulture and physicality, “is a place of great magic, a great place of rejuvenation.”

Robert Mondavi later recalled his purchase of a historic vineyard:

Walking through To Kalon, admiring its contours and vines, smelling the richness of its soil, I knew this was a very special place. It exuded an indefinable quality I could not describe, a feeling that was almost mystical. The place just seemed to radiate a sense of calm and harmony, of peace and serenity. In its whole expanse of vines and greenery, I could not see a single blemish or man-made intrusion. No winery, no building, not even a shed or electrical pole to spoil its natural beauty.

Yet, despite Mondavi’s observations, his newly purchased land constituted a transformed ecosystem. And whether a viticultural landscape stretches across the

---


33 Mondavi, Harvests of Joy, 63.
millennia as some might in Europe, is 160 years old like To Kalon, or has only been planted in the last decade, it has long since ceased to be pristine. It remains a self-conscious cultural construction. Human imagination and labor formed these lands along with processes of nonhuman nature. The vineyard represents a human vision of how resources should be used. Its design attempts to impose order and direct nature toward a certain objective. In that way, a vineyard is just as much an environmental artifice as a factory or a suburban tract.

For Napans, their adoption of terroir also is a cultural construction embedded in a long-established fashion of embracing European influences. Since the late 1800s, Napa growers have planted *vitis vinifera* grapes in an attempt to create a premium industry in the valley to complement bulk production based on the musty-flavored Mission grape. When post-war technology and the university’s scientific research only took the Napa industry so far, many joined Mondavi in looking toward Europe for models in vineyard and winery management. When Mondavi launched his winery in the sleepy vale, he hoped to combine U.S. technology, management, and marketing with Old World tradition, craft, and sophistication. Ethnic surnames and European-influenced winery designs seemingly gave the valley’s efforts greater authenticity. Partnerships with and investments by noted French firms enhanced the fusion of European imagery into the landscape.

---


In his groundbreaking study on the role of geology, climate, and culture in the making of French wines, Wilson, among others, offers a broader definition that embodies viticultural practices and the attitudes of winemakers and consumers and thus contemplates such self-conscious constructions. Among other things, he mentions, “the writers of Larousse’s *Wines and Vineyards of France* emphasize the mental aspect of terroir, it being the link visualized by a consumer between his wine and the winegrower who produced it.”37 Within the western industrial world, nature and extensions of nature have long been commodities. Cronon contends that such commodifications often produce “an alienation from the natural world – and from the effects that human actions have thereon – that is all too characteristic of modernity.” However, wine seemingly offers oenophiles something of intrinsic natural value that allows them to purchase both the beverage and perhaps a piece of the place where it was grown. With so many experiences of modern life seeming to distance consumers from physical nature, an emphasis on *terroir* allows imbibers to be rooted in place.38 *Terroir* is a quality that can be sold with the bottle of wine, but it is perhaps also a postmodern phenomenon, representing, in part, a response to the alienation from nature associated with the disconcerting shifts of globalization.39

At the same time, industry members have commercialized *terroir*. The Economist

---


argues that French vignerons use the term to counter European Union efforts to deal with wine simply as a brand, or a class of goods, in international trade. Cynics might conclude that the French have promoted terroir to elevate their wines in a more competitive global marketplace and to regain lost market shares over the past two decades. The French, in turn, assert that fine wines can only be produced in certain severely limited environments. Among its other constructions, terroir has been used as a marketing tool to gain a competitive advantage in a crowded international arena, and it is one that other premium growers have proven unwilling to cede solely to the French.

Thus, in purchasing a bottle of wine at the Napa Valley Wine Auction, bidders obtained a bit of nature, but also a piece of Eden and the other cultural values infused in the region’s terroir. As the 1980s moved forward, Napa’s promoters recognized these complexities and discovered that they had much more to “sell” than wine. In turn, the events surrounding the auction became more complicated. Napans had realized that affluent consumers were eager to purchase both goods and experiences, particularly those linked in product complements. Anthropologist Grant McCracken explains that the meaning of consumer goods stem from their place in a system of goods and the relationship of this system to a system of cultural categories. Following his examples, we discover that a premium Napa wine takes its meaning in relationship to other types of

---

40 Wilson, *Terroir*, 56; “Terroir and Technology,” *The Economist*, 18 December 1999, 92; and “In Search of Icons,” 96. Robert C. Ulin, for example, argues that the history and hegemonic components of cultural representations, such as terroir or even the palate, are indispensable to understanding why some wines hold a super-ordinate position in the wine-growing hierarchy. Even within French winegrowing regions such as Medoc and Bordeaux, terroir is an index of privilege; cooperative wines have long been regarded as non-distinct because they blend grapes from different estates. Robert C. Ulin, “Writing about Wine: The Uses of Nature and History in the Wine Growing of Southwest France and America,” unpublished paper, Wine in the World Conference, University of Avignon, March 2004, 4, 25.

wine and wine from other areas. The meaning also is found in how this premium Napa wine is associated with particular cultural categories of class, sex, age, and occasion. By examining what consumer goods fit what cultural categories, we discover product complements.

Napa’s promoters implicitly recognized that certain product complements could be packaged as “lifestyle.” Napa has become “the Hamptons with agriculture,” observes David Graves, the owner of the Saintsbury winery. The association between premium wines and fine cuisine seemed obvious to all, but to highlight wine’s lifestyle components, the NVVA included unique commodities with auction lots and added to the auction “special occasions” that revealed and confirmed the participants’ socioeconomic standing. Opulent vacations, lush spa treatments, and other amenities were found in various lots. One year Warren Winiarski of Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars pledged to match the money raised by their wine with a donation to the restoration of the Star Spangled Banner. Also, as noted above, wineries hosted a series of luncheons and dinners during auction week, catered by chefs from the valley’s leading restaurants. Other events called for fancy dress clothes and evoked luxurious fantasies such as the red carpet at the Oscars or the lost swank of mid-century dinner club.

Cult wines proved particularly important to the auction attendees. As historian James Lapsley observes, “Certainly, the quality of the wine was important, but so was the notion that it was a finite, scarce commodity.” The privilege of imbibing in a rare commodity was itself a consumer good and one that fit within wine’s product

---

42 Interview of David Graves by Kathleen A. Brosnan, 9 July 2004, 6, transcript in possession of author.

43 Lapsley, Bottled Poetry, 213.
complement. Yet more than wines were auctioned as time went on. First, vintners offered etched glass or bottles embossed with spurious crests. The wine often came in gargantuan quantities, bottles so large that required two men to open them. As James Conaway wryly comments, “These bottles were not set in simple wooden crates but in elaborate cases carved from mahogany, walnut, and exotic woods, some the size of baby grand pianos and fitted with thick glass also etched, and with display racks and heavy brass inlaid locks and even thermostatic controls designed to carry this high craft, this art, into the next century and beyond. They were to be auctioned not just as opulent containers for some of the best wine on earth but also as imprimaturs of taste, even of worth.”

Certainly the good of the Napa Valley Wine Auction should not be diminished. The NVVA has raised more than $30 million for local health care institutions and schools over twenty-five years. Profits from the auction have supported Clinic Ole, a free Yountville-based clinic that serves Mexican farm workers. While the popping of the dot.com bubble meant that proceeds of the auction have yet to match those of the record setting year of 2000, the auction continues to raise millions each year. In the end, however, the auction also revealed the class-divided landscape that has come to define the valley in the last five decades. Most Napa residents could only afford to participate by volunteering to work at the auction. Many of workers required a free clinic. Yet, for those who bought tickets, the auction offered a place where “the very rich and fashionable compete with one another to astound the simple bourgeois by the

44 Conaway, Napa, 328.
extravagance of their behavior and their spending.” 45 Napans had sold the essence of their nature to tourists in a bottle.

45 Pinney, *A History of Wine in America*, 245. Other authors have been critical of the auction for its materialism and elitism. Cheryll Aimee Barron, *Dreamers of the Valley of Plenty*, 293-94.