

VINEPAIR

YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO LEARN WHO'S MAKING YOUR WINE

Courtney Schiessl | Published: February 10, 2017



Today's number one hot-button issue may very well be immigration policy. As opinions from both sides abound on a daily basis, at least there's [wine](#) to get us through it all. But the funny thing about our favorite beverage is that immigrants actually play a huge role in American agriculture, an umbrella that covers winemaking and grape growing. In fact, if you set aside matters of legality, discrimination, justice, and right or wrong, you're left with a simple truth: Both historically and currently, the American wine industry owes its existence to immigrants.

“Without immigrants, there would be no wine in the Americas, North or South,” Christopher Howell, wine-grower and general manager of Cain Vineyard & Winery in Napa, tells me. He's referring to the arrival of the first *vitis vinifera* plantings with the Spanish and Portuguese settlers.

“Our industry owes its very existence to immigrants, considering the wine most of us reach for is from European varietals,” agrees Ann Kraemer, vineyard manager of Shake Ridge Vineyard and Yorba Wine.

While many attempts were made to grow these grapevines on the East Coast in those early years, it was the Gold Rush that brought a large wave of European immigrants to the West Coast of the U.S. Most didn’t find the fortune that they initially sought. But many of these immigrants were German and French; they came from winemaking regions and brought with them to the modern heart of American winemaking country not only native vines but the techniques used to make wine. Ever wonder why there are so many Italian-sounding winery names in Sonoma? Immigrants from Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Hungary helped the industry to persist over the next decades as well.

But even more than the nuts and bolts of winemaking, these immigrants brought something more to the burgeoning American wine industry. “The role that these immigrants played in developing wine growing in America was far more than simply labor,” Howell tells me. “It was these Europeans who brought their culture with them, who taught us to grow and share wine at the table.”

Fast-forward to present day, a time when the U.S. produces nearly 3 billion liters of wine annually, [according to](#) the Wine Institute. While the idea of winemaking seems romantic, the fact remains that at its core, growing grapes is agricultural work, and making wine requires manual labor. So who is responsible for carrying out this manual labor, jobs that are typically viewed as “blue collar” positions? “Manual labor, even gardening, is devalued in our culture,” says Howell. “Today, immigrants from Mexico and Central America are our *paysans* – our people of the earth, our gardeners.”



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Some may argue that these jobs should go to unemployed Americans, that by hiring immigrants, employers are taking jobs away from citizens. But because our culture has placed a stigma on the kind of work required in a winery, most Americans do not have the desire nor the skills to sign on for these jobs.

“It is difficult, if not impossible, to recruit non-immigrant workers to do the vineyard or cellar work,” says Kathleen Inman, proprietor and winemaker of Inman Family Wines in Sonoma’s Russian River Valley.

While the topic of immigration may have come to the forefront of the country’s conversation recently, this certainly isn’t a new subject for many U.S. wineries and vineyards. The Obama administration also enacted stricter policies for the deportation of undocumented workers, and many regions noticed the strain.

“Immigration is already restricted,” says Kraemer. “The agricultural community and the wine industry have felt the lack of labor these past years, regardless of rising pay rates.”



California Historical Landmark 621 – Italian Swiss Colony (via [California Historical Landmarks](#))

Not only does this affect illegal workers, who some might argue don't deserve the same protection, but legal ones are affected as well, due to an overarching sense of fear. "Even legal workers became afraid that their undocumented spouses might be deported and their children, many of whom are American citizens," Inman explains. As a result, she says, many legal workers decided to move back to Mexico. No matter which way it's viewed, immigration restrictions equal a labor shortage for agricultural industries, the wine industry included.

So what does this mean for the U.S. wine industry as a whole? Those who view wine merely as a commodity, focusing on quantity over quality, may not see huge changes, as huge wineries largely depend on machines. The bigger issue at hand is the sustainability of the American fine wine industry.

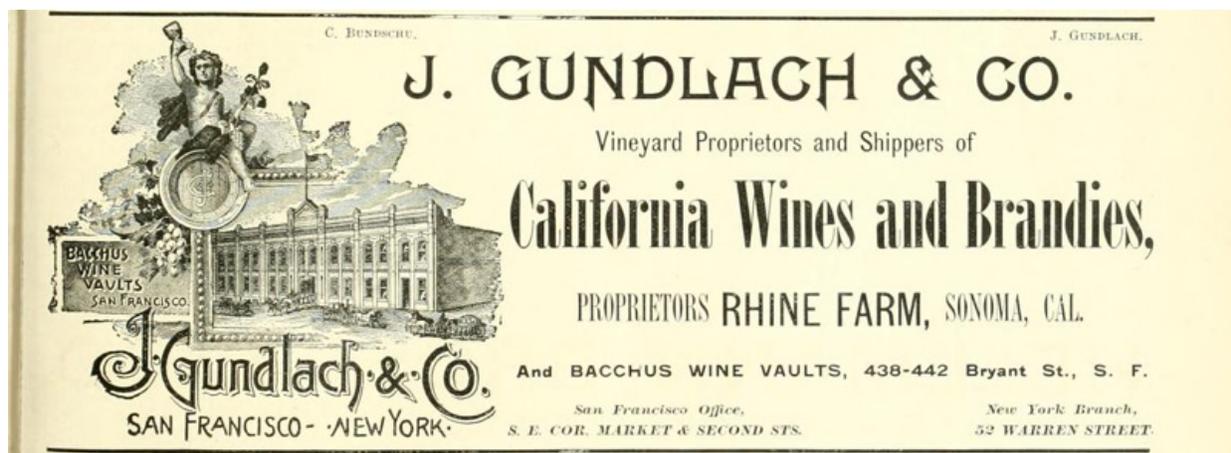
"Fine wine, as we know it, depends essentially on a great deal of skilled care in the vineyard," says Howell.

The time and manpower it takes to care for each vine individually throughout the year, from winter pruning through harvest, not to mention all of the steps that go into vinification, aging, cleaning, maintenance, bottling, and more, requires a large amount of labor at a price that these small-production wineries can afford.

If the labor isn't there, there are only two ways to go: mechanized winemaking, which is typically unaffordable for small wineries and often results in less-characterful wines, or higher prices for finished wines.

“With few workers, picking crews have had to increase the hours they work,” Inman says. “Night picking has become the norm.” Plus, she goes on, “prices for picking crews have also gone up as workers can demand more money because of the shortage of skilled workers. This translates into high prices for grapes and therefore higher prices for wine.”

Our modern wine culture, which has elevated and emphasized the value of small, family-owned wineries and artisanal winemaking, could be lost in the U.S. without immigrant and migrant workers, with these small wineries unable to survive in the global wine market.



And ad from the 1890s for Gundlach Bundschu, which was founded by German immigrant Jacob Gundlach in 1858.

Regardless of political, social, or religious beliefs, it's difficult to argue that the American wine industry has not been dependent on immigrants throughout the years. Winemakers and grape growers are already seeing the effects of detrimental changes in U.S. fine winemaking as a result

of recent immigration policies under the Obama administration. Beyond the feasibility of a wine industry without the presence of immigrants, we must also consider the cultural ramifications. As Ramey aptly put it, “Our wine industry benefits and advances from exposure to other countries’ experimentation and advances.”

The question isn’t whether American fine winemaking would change under even more radical immigration policies; the question is whether it would survive.