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**The Formation and Future of Regional Identity in  
California's Wine Country**

Master's Thesis

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Tartu, 2026

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the formation of the *wine country* identity in California's Napa and Sonoma counties and investigates how that identity is negotiated today as the wine industry slows. Through archival research tracing changes in land use and marketing narratives over the past 200 years, this study finds that Wine Country was the product of placemaking efforts based on the selective heritagisation of winemaking in the region. Further qualitative research, including interviews with viticulturists and a community survey, suggests viticulture may serve as a vehicle for an identity more deeply rooted in a broad attachment to small-scale agriculture and access to nature.

**Keywords: Wine Country, regional identity, placemaking, landscape, heritagisation**

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## **Acknowledgment**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Aet Annist, for her willingness to undertake the supervision of this thesis and her valuable insights and input. I am also grateful to Kristel Kivari and the other faculty as well as my peers for their engaging discussions. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, especially my parents and Carolina, for their unending support through this process and always.

## **Introduction**

California's Napa and Sonoma counties are collectively known as Wine Country. Their reputation for producing quality wine is recognized across the United States and by wine enthusiasts worldwide. With over 600 wineries between them, vineyards are a prominent part of the landscape, and the wine industry is the backbone of the economy, with roughly one quarter of all local jobs related to it. As such, the regional identity of wine country is often taken for granted and seen as an inevitability. Yet as recently as the mid-20th century, this identity did not exist here. Far from an inevitability, Wine Country is the product of a complex process of identity formation, shaped by cultural, economic, and political choices.

Regional identity as a core facet of the relationship between people and place, is a topic of interest in both anthropology and cultural geography, which examines the intricate relationships between humans and their environments, including how human activities shape the landscape and community identities (Hahn 2024), and the analysis of it necessarily draws on concepts from both. The Napa-Sonoma Wine Country provides a strong case for an analysis of this kind, because of its commonness and recency. The Wine Country label has been designated to numerous wine-growing regions worldwide, including others in California. In Napa and Sonoma, it's an identity that emerged only in the last 60 years, yet one that has been so fully embraced that many visitors and locals do not know it any other way. The recency of its emergence makes the process more easily traceable, while the apparent fluidity of the region's identity makes it a particularly interesting case study. Prior to becoming known as Wine Country, the region was represented as an untouched wilderness Eden, the Wild West, and a horticultural paradise in marketing materials at different points in its history. Today, as wine sales decline and financial pressures are exacerbated by environmental concerns, the region is renegotiating its identity once again.

While existing scholarship on the region has examined the historical development of viticulture through key milestones and the economic impact of the industry, less attention has been paid to how residents relate to the landscape and negotiate the regional identity today. This thesis follows in the tradition of cultural geography and anthropology to address two overarching goals: the first is to determine how the regional identity of Wine Country emerged in Napa and Sonoma counties, and the second is to examine how that identity is being negotiated by the region's inhabitants today. To address these questions, the thesis combines archival research with fieldwork conducted in Summer 2025, including interviews with local viticulturists. It traces the region's evolution over two centuries, paying close attention to the role of landscape as well as processes such as placemaking—through which space gains meaning—and heritagisation, whereby aspects of the past are selectively preserved and commodified to determine how wine and vineyards came to be at the center of the local identity, and how the community negotiates its relationship to the land.

## **1 Theoretical Framework**

There are many studies on historic and contemporary viticulture in California through the lenses of social politics (Klein 2018), (Ornelas-Higdon 2023), agricultural history (Amerine 1969), (Geraci, 2004), (Jacobs 1975), (Hira 2015), and business studies, but little attention has been paid to how the region's history has influenced its relationship to the land today. This thesis examines the construction and maintenance of Wine Country as a regional identity and the values that underlie it. This chapter introduces the concepts that will be used in the analysis, while establishing the broader academic context preceding this research. The concept of a regional identity, as broad as it is, must encompass social, political, economic, environmental, and individual elements. As such, this thesis utilizes a combination of theoretical lenses pulling from the disciplines of anthropology, geography, critical heritage studies, and planning. Drawing from such a diverse range of perspectives on place, I contend that the roots of the wine country identity extend far beyond the apparent placemaking efforts, emerging from the confluence of the landscape itself, shaped by geological and climatological processes, and the emotional and embodied experiences of the region's inhabitants.

### **1.1 Heritagisation, Placemaking and Place-making**

Heritage studies emerged with the rise of nationalism in 19th century Europe and took off following WWII as efforts to protect monuments eventually spurred the creation of UNESCO. The 1980s saw the birth of heritage studies as an academic discipline in its own right, pioneered by scholars such as David Lowenthal (Gentry and Smith 2019). Throughout the 21st century, critical heritage studies has become an increasingly prevalent approach to heritage, recognizing a pattern of cultural reproduction in heritage making that upholds hegemonic voices and values (Gentry and Smith 2019). Rather than treating heritage as the objective preservation of the past, critical heritage scholars

argue that heritage is actively produced in the present through social, political, and economic processes (Smith 2006).

This argument builds on the concept of heritagisation, or the process through which certain landscapes, traditions, and objects are reinterpreted as heritage and incorporated into a cultural identity. Heritagisation is not a neutral process, but one in which specific elements of a community's history and culture are singled out as significant and valuable, often by only one or a few individuals in power. This results in what Smith coined the *authorized heritage discourse* (2006). This concept highlights the historic tendency among heritage professionals and organizations to favor Eurocentric and built heritage over other forms, and challenges them to consider how power is distributed and whose voices are heard.

While heritagisation may apply to both physical and intangible elements of culture, including cultural landscapes, another concept is often used to describe a similar process applied to place. Place making is an interdisciplinary concept that is central to the studies of both geography and planning, yet its definition varies between the fields, making discourse around the topic somewhat murky. The ambiguity of the term is added to by the variation of spellings used. It can be found written as placemaking, place-making, and place making in scholarship across disciplines with no pattern of differentiation (Lew 2017). The term and concept have been problematized by a number of scholars in the past decade in attempts to establish a common definition. Ellery, Ellery, and Borkowski suggest that the inconsistent use of the term alludes to a general lack of understanding of the process of place formation (2021, 57). In cultural geography, place-making generally refers to the natural process through which space gains meaning, through emotional attachments and cultural associations. Only in the last few decades has the concept of placemaking been adopted as a core principle by planners and urban designers. In this context, placemaking is a goal to be executed, something that happens by design. I will be adopting Lew's model in this thesis, using 'place-making' to mean the organic construction of place and 'placemaking' to refer to the intentional shaping of place by planners and other interested parties (2017). Like heritage, placemaking involves the intentional production of meaning around specific landscapes. Tourism boards, local governments, and businesses in wine regions often present narratives of luxury and sophistication or quaint authenticity. These narratives

draw on the landscape and existing sense of place, but also begin to mould both how the region presents itself, as well as how it sees itself and evolves.

## **1.2 Sense of Place and Landscape**

Sense of place is a broad and widely studied topic which encompasses landscape, place identity, and more. Scholars across disciplines including geography and anthropology have long sought to understand how humans perceive and relate to their physical environments. One of the foundational texts in this field is Yi Fu Tuan's 1974 book *Topophilia*. In it, he uses the eponymous concept of topophilia, or the human love of place, to explore the various ways people relate to and attach meaning to particular landscapes. Tuan describes several bases for humans' affective ties with the material environment, ranging from aesthetic appreciation—fleeting without a grounding affiliation—to emotional bonds tied to memory, and practical relationships like those of farmers.

Another influential scholar in this field is anthropologist Tim Ingold, whose book *The Perception of the Environment* (2000) distinguishes between land and landscape by emphasizing the experiential aspect of landscape. He has coined a core aspect of this as the *dwelling perspective*. The dwelling perspective suggests that landscapes emerge through the continuous activity that occurs within them, forming “an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it” (Ingold 2000, 189). The landscape and our interpretation of it are continually being shaped by our activities on it. These activities and their impact on the landscape comprise what Ingold calls the *taskscape*. All of our actions, from walking the dog to farming the land, continually form the taskscape, but it is not limited to human activity. The taskscape also refers to the activities of plants and animals in the environment. In his view, it is the interaction of all beings and things within a space that forms the landscape. This also makes landscapes temporal, as the activities on the land evolve, so too does the landscape, both physically and symbolically. From this viewpoint, humans do not only live in and imprint upon the land, but are themselves an active part of the ecosystem, equally imposing and imposed upon.

While Tuan frames landscape through the emotional ties humans associate with space, Ingold understands landscape as the co-creation of humans and the greater ecosystem, produced through ongoing interactions. These are but two of many ways of thinking about landscape. Meinig, in fact, outlines ten ways of seeing the same view in his oft-cited essay *The Beholding Eye* (1979). He contends that “any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads” (Meinig 1979, 1). In other words, the landscape emerges in the mind of the viewer, shaped by their own values, motivations, and experiences. Different groups and individuals will inevitably have differing perceptions of the landscape, what it symbolizes and how it should be managed. It is the subjectivity of landscape that leads Tilley and Daum to name contestation as a key element of landscape discourse (2020). Expanding on this idea, Ellery, Ellery, and Borkowski contend that “Placemaking as a process occurs along a continuum ranging from environmental change that is imposed upon an individual through to environmental change that is created by the individual” (2020). The authors distinguish between “facilitated placemaking” led by governments and developers and “lived placemaking” enacted at a small scale by members of the community. They assert that contestation often arises from a conflict of interest between communities deriving “use value” from their environments and governments or business entities prioritizing “exchange value” (Ellery et al. 2020).

*Place identity* can be defined as “a cultural value shared by the community, a collective understanding about social identity intertwined with place meaning” (Harner 2001, 660). The elements of subjectivity and contestation, though, ensure that place identity can never be truly shared and representative of all inhabitants of a given area. This is especially true when applied to larger or more densely populated areas. Throughout this thesis, I use the term *regional identity* rather than place identity to describe this phenomenon within the geographic confines of my research area. Place generally exists within the boundaries of experience rather than physical size, and while Sonoma and Napa counties are unified by the wine country identity and often lumped together as a single destination in travel plans, they contain a multitude of places within their borders. I use the term regional identity with the recognition that such an identity cannot reflect the values and experiences of everyone within the research area, and that those not represented by it are more likely to belong to disempowered minority groups within the region.

In this thesis, I take a middling approach that considers landscape as a record of both human and natural history, and the outlet for human-land relationships to occur. This view falls along the lines of Ingold's dwelling perspective, seeing landscape as something which both exists of its own accord and necessitates the activities and emotional attachments of other beings to acquire meaning. In other words, land becomes landscape through the co-occurring acts of inhabitation and perception.

### **1.3 Terroir and The Anthropology of Wine**

The identities of industrial and agricultural regions are often built around their most dominant commodity. This is especially true in wine-growing regions where vineyards visually characterise the landscape. As a cultural product deeply embedded in the lifestyles and identities of communities around the world, wine has been extensively studied by anthropologists. The terms New World and Old World are often used to distinguish between heritage winemaking regions and those that have emerged largely as a result of immigration from the Old World, and more recently, the influence of Western trends and globalization. Many anthropological studies of winemaking focus on its spread and role in colonization (Klein 2018), while others focus on the social role of wine consumption (Crenn, Demossier, Pétric 2021). Yet, it must be the concept of *terroir* that dominates discourse.

Terroir is a concept with its roots in French winemaking practice, literally translating to soil, region, or locality. Terroir was originally used to refer only to the specific environmental conditions of an area, but over centuries the word developed a dual meaning (Trubek 2008, ch 1). The second definition of the word, "the special character that a wine is thought to get from the particular place where grapes were grown to make it" (Cambridge Dictionary), is the one that interests many researchers. This meaning is often referred to as *goût du terroir* in French, but such differentiation isn't common in anglophone scholarship. Terroir, as the taste of place, is a concept that has been interrogated by many scholars. Trubek asserts that "The natural environment influences the flavors of food and beverages, but ultimately the cultural domain, the foodview, creates the *goût du terroir*" in her book *Taste of Place* (2008, 26). Building on this line of thought, Demossier, in her analysis of the *climats de Bourgogne*, a UNESCO cultural

landscape, argues for an understanding of terroir as socially constructed through the act of representation (2018). Others recognize terroir as a product of individual winemakers' interactions and interpretations of a vineyard and its fruits (Skinner 2016). And yet others, still, aim to validate terroir as a physical-biological reality in the hard sciences.

There are two distinct ways that terroir interests me in this research. First is the deployment of terroir to elevate the region on a global scale. Demossier's research in Burgundy (2018) illustrates how terroir has long been drawn on as a marketing ploy to distinguish and advance agricultural products from specific regions in a globalizing market. The second manifestation of terroir that interests me is terroir as a philosophy. Viticulturists embracing the concept of terroir focus their efforts on caring for the land, with the belief that wine is foremost an expression of the land. This attitude positions the viticulturists as servants of the land more than masters of it, and indeed most of the viticulturists I spoke with identify as stewards of the land.

#### **1.4 Affective Relationships with the Land**

A key aspect of the relationship between viticulturists and the land they work is *care*. The study of care, as both a verb and a noun, has focused primarily on the realms of the home and the hospital. However, in recent years, following the more-than-human turn in anthropology, care has found a new home in conservation discourse (Schroer, Gruppuso, Whitehouse 2025), (Bellacasa 2017).

“As an affective state, caring is an embodied phenomenon, the product of intellectual and emotional competencies: to care is to be affected by another, to be emotionally at stake in them in some way. As an ethical obligation, to care is to become subject to another, to recognise an obligation to look after another. Finally, as a practical labour, caring requires more from us than abstract well wishing, it requires that we get involved in some concrete way” (Dooren 2014).

To care is to both feel and to act. Anyone can feel affection for a landscape, but it is reflexivity demonstrated in the farmer's relationship to the land that constitutes care. This aligns with Tuan's suggestion that “The farmer's topophilia is compounded of this physical intimacy, of material dependence and the fact that the land is a repository of memory and sustains hope” (1990, 95). This conception of care emphasizes the

reciprocity of these relationships, which are both sentimental and practical, and formed through ongoing practices of maintenance, dependence, and responsiveness to environmental conditions.

In the context of viticulture, this often leads us back to the concept of terroir. Skinner's research with winemakers in McLaren Vale, Australia, exploring the role of the sensing body in developing a sense of place, suggests that terroir is as emotional as it is biological. In his chapter in "Emotions, Senses, Spaces" (2017), he argues that terroir is very much real and the product of emotional meaning-making through sensorial experience. Drawing on his fieldwork, Skinner posits that "It is through the sensing body's direct, lived experience of the world that spaces and places can become imbued with specific feelings and emotional attachments and thus granted meaning" (2017, 177). From this perspective, a sense of place is developed through the winemaker's intimate knowledge of their vineyard, which is intrinsically linked to their embodied experiences of the landscape.

## **2 Methodology**

I used a combination of several different methodologies to complete this research. First, I conducted traditional ethnographic fieldwork with viticulturists in California in June and July of 2025. This included participant observation and interviews. Later, between September and December, I supplemented this data with an online survey and extensive archival research. These methods served distinct purposes in the research, each with its own strengths and challenges.

I originally intended to limit my focus to Sonoma County, but soon found it indivisible from Napa as the two together are both essential components of the region known as Wine Country. While mutually influential, the two counties vary greatly in size, both geographically and in terms of population. Sonoma County boasts a population of over 489,000, roughly four times the size of Napa's 132,000. Despite their size differences, Napa is home to more wineries, with roughly 475 to Sonoma's 425. I attempt to represent both counties fairly in this research without relying on generalizations or comparisons, but given their differing levels of accessibility, it was impossible to give them equal attention. As a Santa Rosa local, my network was much stronger in Sonoma County, which resulted in a significantly larger portion of survey responses. My interviews are proportionate to population sizes, but not winery distribution, with three wineries and corresponding participants located in Sonoma, and one winery with two participants in Napa. While my archival research addresses both counties, the repositories I drew from were primarily located in Sonoma, with no comparable options in Napa. With these inequalities in mind, this research attempts to represent Wine Country as a whole while also acknowledging the differences within the region.

## 2.1 Ethnographic Fieldwork

### 2.1.1 Interviews

I chose interviews as a primary methodology to gain insights into the perspectives and decision-making processes of individuals directly involved in viticulture and other land-based practices. I began my research with an interest in whether winemaking was or should be considered a heritage practice in California and how the answer to that question impacted viticulturists' work. I was also keenly interested in the adaptability of land-based heritage practices, particularly as the effects of climate change had been felt acutely in recent years throughout the region. However, our interviews revealed that neither heritage nor climate change were pressing concerns for the participants from a professional perspective. While my initial questions were oriented toward heritage and climate change, participants consistently redirected conversations toward issues of economic viability and their stewardship of the land. Over the course of my fieldwork, the ideas they shared spurred a redirection for me as I began to question why wine was at the center of the region's identity and economy, and what would happen to the region if or when the industry failed.

Before this shift, it was important to me to engage both intergenerational and newer wineries to determine whether a personal familial history was an important aspect of the heritagisation of winemaking in the viticulturist's mind. Despite the large presence of the wine industry, the decision makers I was interested in speaking to belong to a somewhat exclusive inner circle not easily broken by emails alone. Even as a local and someone who had worked adjacent to the industry at local breweries and distilleries, my connections didn't get me very far. I found on-the-ground networking to be an essential part of my fieldwork process. Ultimately, I conducted in-depth interviews with viticulturists from three different wineries and one with a tasting room manager from a 5th-generation winery. All the people I ended up interviewing were separated from me by 2 or 3 degrees, friends of friends, and friends of friends of friends.

My positionality played a significant role in both arranging these interviews and in shaping the outcomes of them, as interviews are, by nature, relational encounters. I used a semi-structured approach that allowed the participants to speak freely about what was most important to them while also ensuring specific topics were addressed. This

flexibility turned out to be crucial, as it enabled the participants to bring forth matters that concerned them most—namely economic viability and stewardship—that ultimately guided a redirection for the rest of the research. My familiarity with the region and adjacent industries allowed participants to move past introductory explanations quickly, and engage more deeply with the complexities of their work and relationship to the land. At the same time, gender dynamics and age difference influenced the flow of the interview, as a young woman in conversation with older men, some participants were perhaps more inclined to overexplain some things and steer the conversations themselves. These dynamics, rather than being obstacles, illuminated how these participants positioned themselves as knowledgeable stewards of the landscape. Throughout the interviews I often found my questions were answered before they were asked, allowing other topics to surface.

#### 2.1.2 Online Survey

While the interviews were full of rich qualitative data, I realized that they only represented the views of a very specific profile. All of my participants were white, male wine industry professionals, and my interest in human-land relationships had broadened from a narrow focus on winemakers to encompass the entire community. The interviews and subsequent archival research had also drawn my attention to some interesting themes that I wanted to explore further, particularly the concepts of stewardship, terroir, and place identity. As such, I decided to supplement my interviews with a survey. The purpose of the survey was threefold: to gauge how common the sentiments held by the viticulturists I interviewed were, to determine how the locals perceived the regional identity of “wine country”, and to better understand the values and sentiments behind changes and continuities in the regional culture and land use.

I published a 30-question survey on locally-focused social media platforms, including Nextdoor, three Reddit forums, and my personal Facebook page. Of the 30 questions, 20 focused on regional views, were asked of all participants, and an additional 10 were asked only to respondents who indicated they were currently or previously involved in winemaking. While most questions were multiple-choice, all offered an opportunity to write in an alternate answer or elaborate further. In addition to the offered answers, I received 17 written responses to multiple choice questions, and a further 84 written responses across four open questions.

The format and distribution of the survey inevitably shaped the data it produced. By circulating it online, the audience was limited to individuals actively using those social platforms, and, further, self-selection likely skewed responses toward more opinionated individuals or those already engaged in local community discourse. Drawing from my own social network, and the geographically limited range of Nextdoor, meant that the overwhelming majority of responses, 29 of 36, came from residents of Sonoma County. 33 of the survey respondents provided elective demographic data, which yielded some surprising themes: notably, 38% were aged 65 and older, and an additional 20% were aged 55-64. Another peculiarity was that of the four participants who indicated they were involved in viticulture, three were Napa County residents. With such a small sample and Sonoma County far over-represented in the general regional views segment of the survey, and Napa over-represented in the viticultural views segment, the results of this survey cannot be used to generalize, but rather serve as individual anecdotes akin to those from interviews.

## **2.2 Archival Research**

One of the primary goals of my research was to explore differing conceptualisations of viticulture in California as a heritage practice and as an industry. To do this, I had to first understand how the region came to be known as “wine country” and the historical importance of viticulture in this region. While there is existing research on the local wine industry, the origin of the accompanying nickname has not been studied previously. As such, I decided to turn to the archives in an attempt to find the earliest occurrence of its use in reference to this region. Prior to my archival research, I knew that viticulture was introduced to the region in the mid-19th century, but I was unsure of the early prominence of the industry within the region and the reputation of local wines on a national and global scale prior to the late 20th century. This left a wide window of time during which the region’s wine-centric identity could have been cemented. Beyond pinpointing a specific time in the region's history when the name came into use, I was also interested in determining whether it came about through vernacular use or by design.

My archival research was conducted remotely from Tartu during the fall semester of 2026, after my fieldwork in California. When I first decided to incorporate archival research into my process, I was only aware of one digital collection from my undergraduate university, the *Sonoma County Agriculture, Land Use, and Tourism Collection*. However, as I began my exploration of digital archives, I found there were at least two vast publicly accessible repositories aggregating hundreds of digital collections from both public and private institutions throughout the state of California. The majority of my research was focused on collections from the Sonoma County Library and Sonoma State University, with significant additions from San Francisco State University's Bay Area Television Archive. While my main archive sources are both from Sonoma County, their collections often included items from and relating to Napa County.

Harris describes two common approaches that could be taken to the archives and the pitfalls of each (2001). First is the scholar without a plan, who may spend months overwhelmed and absorbing all of the materials, taking from the archive a percentage of its data, and creating a new, smaller archive. They may learn a lot, but accomplish little over extended periods of time. Second is the scholar who knows exactly the point they wish to make, and approaches the archives specifically seeking data to support it. They come and go from the archive quickly, learning nothing new. My experience in the archives may have skewed closer to that of the first scholar, but ultimately ended up somewhere in between. Because I was exploring the historical process of identity creation in the region, my research in the archives was broad—encompassing dozens of collections comprising over 100,000 items ranging in dates from 1765 to the present day. There were, of course, some collections that warranted closer attention than others. Among these were collections relating specifically to wine and viticulture, land use, agriculture, and tourism. From these collections, I selected 96 items for a short list to be included in my background chapter. The list includes news articles, radio and television clips, personal diaries and correspondences, postcards and marketing materials, and official government reports. Some of the most valuable items for my research were brochures marketing the region to prospective homebuyers, business owners, and tourists over the years. The wide variety of materials and topics helped me develop a holistic understanding of the historical processes that contributed to the formation of our regional identity, which could not be gained from reading a historical account alone.

Archives can be a powerful resource for research, and even a necessary one for exploring the history of a place beyond the reaches of living memory, but it is impossible to develop a full picture of the past from archives alone. The materials included in archives have undergone the process of selection and thus have been subject to biases of the past and present. The items saved were those deemed worthy by someone and often exclude the voices and experiences of marginalized groups and the ephemera of aspects of life deemed insignificant. In the archives I explored, there were many special collections dedicated to documenting immigrant life and the local histories of specific ethnic groups, but within the less specialized collections, and even those focused on agriculture, the vast majority of voices preserved were those of white Americans. While race and ethnicity have not been central to my research, this is an important distinction to make, as the history of viticulture in California was inextricably linked not just to Italians and other European immigrants, but also to Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, and other immigrants whose roles in shaping the region are often downplayed. It is also worth noting that materials from the 19th century often mention Native Americans but come exclusively from the perspectives of American settlers, even before California became a state. One of the books cited in the following chapters (Menefee, 1873) offers a rare firsthand account of the pre-statehood era of California, but represents a problematic colonial viewpoint. The author calls the indigenous people of the region savages (Menefee 1873, 31) and heavily critiques the Californios' intelligence and use of the land for ranching (Menefee 1873, 46). Archival materials, like any materials, must not be taken at face value, but critically examined.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

As this chapter has illustrated, the methods used to conduct this research have undeniably shaped the outcomes of it. My intention in using varied methodologies was to address my research questions holistically. Each method allowed me access to a different knowledge base, revealing many sides of the topic and encompassing a broad range of perspectives. And yet, the time and resources needed to travel the vast distance between Tartu and California limited my fieldwork to a single visit in the early stages of my research. This, paired with the necessity of in-person networking, limited my ability to engage more participants. Despite my best efforts, many voices remain unheard in

this research. Perhaps most notably, there are no agricultural or viticultural laborers among my interviewees or survey respondents. These absences aren't just gaps in scope, but also reflect the unequal distribution of influence in shaping narratives about the region. My position and perspective as a local supported my work in the interviews, where I gained the majority of my qualitative data about contemporary viticulture and human-land relationships within the region today. My research would not feel complete without those insights or the historical ones gained through archival research. Both sides of this study are essential to developing a holistic understanding of the relationship between the region's identity, its landscape, and its heritage.

### **3: History of Napa and Sonoma Counties: Becoming ‘Wine Country’**

This chapter dives into the history of the region to trace how the cultural identity of “wine country” was forged over time through a dynamic process of place-making that was deeply intertwined with economic and political developments occurring over 200 years of time. This chapter charts the history of land use and regional marketing of Napa and Sonoma Counties from the introduction of viticulture with early European settlers to its present-day reputation as a popular destination for wine tourism. The history of this region is very well documented and many of the dates listed in this chapter are considered common knowledge locally, but this chapter was guided by a timeline published by the Sonoma County Historical Society (Torliatt, nd). The deeper information contained in this chapter was sourced primarily from archival materials.

#### **3.1 19th-Century Land Use and Tourism**

Napa and Sonoma Counties were well known long before they ever bore the name ‘Wine Country’. Their histories, and the history of winemaking in them, are very international. For an estimated 12,000 years, the land was inhabited by indigenous tribes who hunted and gathered within the means of their environment. Before the arrival of European settlers, Sonoma County was home to the Wappo, Pomo, and Miwok tribes, and Napa the Wappo and Patwin. Sonoma County has seen more flags raised than any other county in the state of California, six in total in the 19th and 20th centuries alone, each nation leaving an impact on the land.

Russian fur trappers established the first permanent foreign settlement in Sonoma County in 1812 and are credited with planting the first grapes in the region. They lived on the coast with some of the local indigenous tribes until 1941, when they had exhausted the local sea otter population and were forced to sell their property and return to Russia. During their time on the coast, Alta California was ruled by the Spanish, who

were forced to expand their presence to the North Bay to prevent the Russians from taking any more hold of the land. Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821 and shortly thereafter, the northernmost mission and only one built under Mexican rule was established in Sonoma in 1823. The region's winemaking tradition began here in 1825 with the production of sacramental wine. When Mexico ordered the secularization of all missions in 1835, General Vallejo continued winemaking, winning several prizes for his viticultural work.

In 1836, George Yount was the first American settler in Napa to receive a land grant from the Mexican government, and planted the county's first grapevines in 1839. Sonoma became the birthplace of California with the Bear Flag Revolt in 1846, which claimed California's freedom from Mexico and established California as an independent republic for 25 days before its annexation into the Union. Prior to California's annexation, Napa and Sonoma mostly drew Mexican and Californio ranchers from the south, with only a few enterprising Americans settling in the region. An early account of the history of the region critiques the state of agriculture during the *ranchero* era, when fruits and vegetables were only grown for personal use, and beef was the primary industry. (Menefee 1873, chap 4). The *ranchero* era continues until gold was found in California in 1848. The promise of fortune and opportunity drew thousands from across the US and the world to California, prompting its statehood in 1850. The massive westward surge of settlers continued, and many found opportunity in the region's rich soils rather than its mines. This marks the beginning of the agricultural era of the region.

Lumber also emerged as one of the big industries of the region in the mid-19th century. As construction around the newly-founded state boomed, the redwood forests became an essential resource and were heavily logged. The construction of the Redwood Branch of the San Francisco and Northern Pacific Railroad in 1876 made transportation of goods and passengers easier, drawing greater numbers of tourists to the Russian River region on the West side of Sonoma County. A promotional lithograph (Sonoma County Library Photograph Collection) for the Redwood Branch of the San Francisco and North Pacific Railroad illustrates the region's reputation for logging and recreation along the river in the area. Of note in this image is Korbel's Sawmill.<sup>1</sup> While the

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<sup>1</sup> The Korbel brothers, whose mill and picnic grounds are labeled in the image, made their fortune in lumber and shipping in San Francisco before relocating to Russian River in 1872.

onymous trees and the river are still prominent attractions in this region today, so is Korbel, not for its role in the logging industry, but for its highly renowned sparkling wine.



Figure 1: A lithograph promoting the Redwood Branch of the San Francisco and North Pacific Railroad

Source: Sonoma County Library Photograph Collection

Courtesy: Sonoma County Library

Recognizing the region's potential for viticulture, Hungarian immigrant Count Haraszthy imported thousands of cuttings of European vines and opened the first commercial winery in 1857, finding great success.<sup>2</sup> Just one year later, John Patchett followed suit, opening the first commercial winery in Napa. Viticulture in the region grew exponentially from there. "In 1872 the Assessor returned 2,324,545 bearing vines in the county. This number will be very materially increased the present year by large numbers of vines previously planted coming into bearing. New cellars are being projected and the business of viniculture in Napa is indeed assuming wondrous

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Inspired by the success of viticulture around them, they built wine cellars on their property in the 1880s and began producing french style sparkling wine in the 1890s. They remain one of the top 5 best-selling producers of sparkling wine in the US today (Khalid 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Haraszthy's Buena Vista Winery is recognized as the first premium winery in California and still operates today.

proportions” (Menefee 1873, chap 13). By 1900, Sonoma County was one of the leading wine producers in the state with 69 vineyards.

Towards the end of the 19th century, following the rapid settlement of the state, the region became a vacation destination with tired and retired miners drawn to Napa and Sonoma’s mineral springs which were claimed to be endowed with healing properties. Menfee describes some of the springs in his 1873 book.

“The beautiful town of Calistoga, situated in the Northern part of the valley, and at the terminus of the Napa branch of the Pacific Railroad, has become famous on account of its medicinal springs and fine scenery. These Springs, though known to the Indians and Mexicans long before, seems to have attracted little or no attention till about the time Samuel Brannan, in 1859, purchased the extensive tract of land on which they are situated. They were known to the native Californians, Mexicans and Indians as the aguas calientes, hot springs, and their curative properties were by these early inhabitants occasionally used .”  
(Menefee 1873, chap 12)

In the same chapter, he describes several other mineral springs and attractions in Napa County, including the petrified forest. In a later part of the book on Sonoma, he names The Geysers as the main attraction, but suggests tourists should enjoy the fishing and hunting offered by the county only if “the heart must be nerved to the possibility of a tussle with a bear, or a jaguar” (Menefee 1873, chap 2). The picture he paints of the region is one of great natural potential, but still largely wild.

### **3.2 Early 20th Century**

While viticulture was one of the notable crops of the era, it was but one of many. Grapes shared their success with a number of other crops, with wheat being the most prominent in the region. (Menefee 1873, 273). At this stage in the region’s development, Sonoma County was renowned for its agriculture, but each town was dominated by different industries, still viticulture was one of many avenues. A [real estate advertisement](#) from 1905 for 800 acres in Kenwood, a small town on the East side of the county, calls Sonoma the best county for poultry and farming in the state and extols the suitability of the land for a wide variety of crops. “There is 500 acres of the finest valley land, 300 acres of foothill and hill land finely timbered and watered ; 200 acres of the valley land

is fine hop, alfalfa, corn, mellon and vegetable land; the remaining 300 acres of the valley land is first-class grain, vineyard, orchard and general farm land, dotted here and there with elegant large oaks” (Leopold Justi Digital Collection).

Despite its established reputation as an agricultural production region Napa and Sonoma are still considered the final frontier of untouched land and opportunity as exhibited by this passage from a brochure about the North Bay Counties from Southern Pacific Railway in 1909.

“Much of it is practically unknown, most of it undeveloped, even where the region has shown itself of great richness. There is so much room for all, such diversity of choice that the chief difficulty of settler, tourist or healthseeker is selection amid such bewildering promise and variety.” (Sonoma County Agriculture, Land Use, and Tourism Digital Collection).

The late 19th-century touristic focus on the redwoods, river, and hot springs as destinations for health and recreation continued into the 1910s. The region was advertised to visitors as a wilderness Eden full of natural spectacles like geysers, trees wider than houses, and a petrified forest.

It seems there was a concerted effort to attract homebuyers to the region at this time with a number of informational brochures and pamphlets produced by various state, county, and city boards as well as railroad and travel companies. These brochures and pamphlets contain great detail about the breadth of industries, environmental conditions for agriculture, and infrastructure services in the counties. A [Brochure](#) from 1912 claimed “The diversity of interests is so great that no one crop failure can affect the community adversely”(Sonoma County Land Use, Agriculture and Tourism Collection). While the wine industry in Napa and Sonoma had already achieved great recognition, its success was equalled by that of the poultry industry centered in Petaluma, which was known as the egg basket of the world and closely followed by several other crops. The same brochure illustrates the broad success of the County’s agricultural endeavors.

“Sonoma County is the first in California in the production of dry wines and grapes: it is the largest dry wine district in America. It is first in California in the production of eggs and poultry, the city of Petaluma and the county forming the largest chicken center in the world. It is one of the principal hop producers of America and a leader in the quality and output of prunes. As a

dairy county, it is one of the most important. It is the chief supplier of berries in the state, and for the general horticulture or general farming it is in the front rank.”

Not mentioned in the passage above, but heavily present in the archives, is the success of the Gravenstein Apples in Sebastopol. The apples were commonly referred to in conjunction with Luther Burbank, the famed American horticulturist who declared Sonoma County the finest land for his experiments. Burbank’s fame was such that he was mentioned in nearly every piece of promotional literature for the county and its towns. His presence was considered the ultimate compliment to the land and soil itself and drew the attention of many farmers and students of agriculture.

It is thanks to the widely advertised diversity of crops that the region was not devastated by the compounded trials of the phylloxera infestation around the turn of the century and the passing of the prohibition amendments shortly thereafter in 1919. Phylloxera is a deadly root louse that spread through Europe’s vineyards in the mid-1800s. The decline in European wine production during this era contributed to California's early success in global distribution before the pest arrived in the West (Unwin 1991, 268). But before the production and distribution of alcohol was banned by the 18th Amendment in 1920, 80% of Napa Valley’s vineyard acreage was lost to phylloxera.

While prohibition heavily reduced the number of wineries in production in the region, it did not eliminate them entirely. A number of wineries survived by making wine for sacramental and medicinal purposes, while others survived by selling table grapes for home winemaking. When the amendments were repealed in 1933, there were fewer than 50 wineries left in Sonoma and even less in Napa. Despite the industry's resilience through these troubling years, the vineyard acreage in production continued to decline into the 1960s.

### **3.3 Midcentury Reinvention**

There were several factors contributing to the continued decline in viticulture. First was the economic state of the country. Following the Great Depression, wine became a luxury item that didn’t begin to regain popularity amongst average Americans until the 1960s. The other reason for the continued decline of viticulture was more political. The

years between the beginning of WWI in 1914 and the end of WWII in 1945 demanded careful management of resources, agricultural and otherwise. One pamphlet distributed by the National Wholesale Grocers Association of the United States in 1917 (Leopold Justi Collection) instructed Americans to reduce their consumption of a number of foods, including wheat, sugar, dairy, and red meats. The pamphlet used inflammatory language to stress that the conservation of these foods was the American's patriotic duty, and failure to do so would result in loss of the war and loss of their freedoms. As one of the major agricultural hubs of the country, Sonoma County, in particular, felt the pressure to feed the troops. One news article proudly declared that the region's prune jams were popular among soldiers on the front. The region's wheat, poultry, dairy, and fruit industries were deemed far more valuable to the country's war efforts than its viticulture.

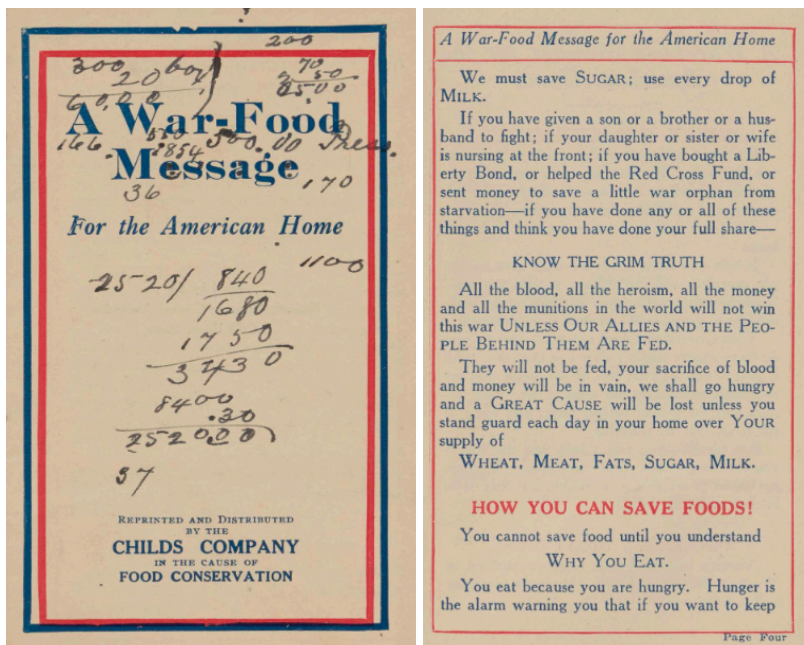


Figure 2: A pamphlet encouraging food rationing during WWI

Source: Leopold Justi Digital Collection

Tourism to the region continued throughout this era, even as the wars waged on, and the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, connecting San Francisco to the North Bay in 1937, made travel to the region easier. Throughout the 1940s, the region was primarily recognized as a part of “The Redwood Empire”. With the height of the logging industry behind them and the scars hidden behind veils of green, forested regions of Northern California were once again advertised as untouched escapes into nature. Napa and

Sonoma, in particular, continued to promote their resorts as destinations for health and well-being.

It's in the post-war era that the region began a concerted effort to rebuild the success and reputation of viticulture locally. In 1947, Sonoma reintroduced the annual Valley of the Moon Vintage festival, celebrating the wine harvest. Although the festival was held intermittently from 1897 to 1920, an event program from 1949 calls it the 3rd annual festival (Sonoma County Agriculture, Land Use, and Tourism Digital Collection). The program contains a letter on the aims of the festival association “setting forth its principal objectives: The first item being ‘To produce, manage and direct an annual Festival to be known as the Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival’; and the second item being, ‘To sponsor and encourage the development of an historical environment where such a festival is to be held.’” The letter goes on to clarify the association's interest in the preservation of the town’s historic architecture and the promotion of its viticultural history. This appears to be the beginning of the region’s interest in wine as a symbol of its cultural identity, rather than a purely economic interest in it as a business.

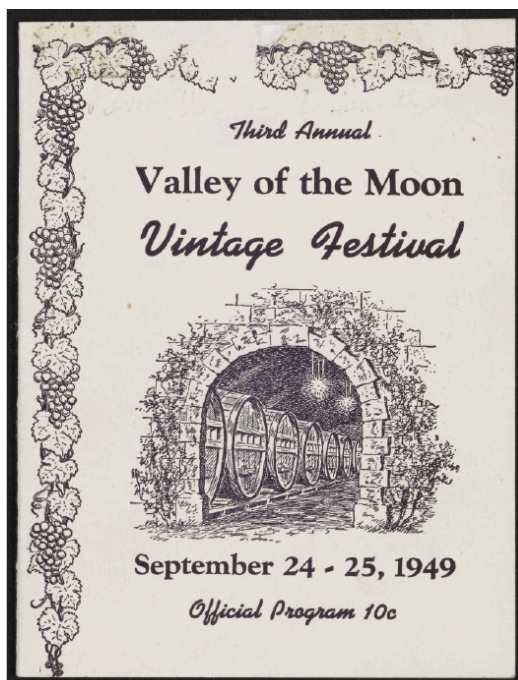


Figure 3: A program for the 1949 Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival

Source: Sonoma County Agriculture, Land Use, and Tourism Digital Collection

The resurgence of wine festivals coincided with the post-war economic boom of the 1950s, and another bout of rapid population growth in the Bay Area. In the years during and after WWII, California experienced unprecedented growth, swelling from 6.7 million residents in 1939 to 19.95 million by 1970 (US Census Bureau). This growth extended far beyond the state's urban centers ultimately leading to broad suburban expansion in formerly agricultural areas. Sonoma County's population grew from 69,052 in 1940 to 147,375 in 1960. Situated only 45 miles from San Francisco and surrounded by the redwood forests and the Pacific Ocean, the region, Sonoma County in particular, benefited from its proximity to the city while retaining the down-to-earth character of rural America, and attracted those seeking the idyllic tranquility of the countryside. Napa remained considerably smaller, but grew proportionally from 28,503 to 65,890 in the same period. This influx of new residents and the rapid development of the region began to spark fears of urban sprawl. In 1968, Napa County passed a series of zoning acts that established the nation's first agricultural preserve. While these acts don't explicitly favor viticulture over any other crop, the county's wine growers were the main driving forces behind them. The creation of the preserve signifies a deep commitment to an agricultural lifestyle by residents of the region, but at some point in the previous decade, agriculture had come to mean viticulture. In an interview with a local news station after the zoning acts were passed, Louis Martini, an influential vintner, remarks that the aim of the ordinance was to "preserve the agricultural character of the valley, and to preserve the wine and grape industry of the valley" (Bay Area Television Archive). By this time, the rurality of the region was deeply intertwined with, and considered to be dependent upon, the production of wine.

### 3.3.1 Distinguishing American Wine

Coinciding with the rise of suburbia was an increased access to luxury. During the Great Depression and wartime, wine went from a fairly regular sight at the dinner table to being something used to mark special occasions like weddings or New Year's. But in the 1960s, Americans began to develop a taste for wine again, often inspired by an admiration for European elegance. In a lifestyle [radio clip](#) from sometime in the 1960s, radio host Marjorie Martin, describes her first experience winetasting at a Danish neighbor's home and recommends the activity to listeners looking for new and sophisticated ways to entertain (California Wine Advisory Board and Wine Institute Collection). In a [televised interview](#) from 1968, Jeanne Bernie describes her role as an

ambassador for California wines in Washington DC and talks about the growing role of wine in American social life (California Wine Advisory Board and Wine Institute Collection). Like Martin, she suggests that hosting a wine tasting is a great way to gather with friends. These examples illustrate a significant change in American consumption. Wine was reentering the sphere of everyday life as a symbol of middle-class refinement and worldliness.

Seizing on the nation's growing appetite for wine, it was the vintners of the 1960s and 1970s whose avid dedication to their land and businesses shaped the region's emergence as 'wine country.' The exact origin of the term and its use to refer to Napa and Sonoma specifically is unknown. The earliest occurrence of its use in the region that I have been able to find was in a 1962 documentary (Bay Area Television Archive) titled *Vines in the Sun*. Whether the nickname arose organically through vernacular use or was adopted by marketers after the film aired, it was certainly the result of intentional placemaking by actors within the region, such as those who organized the return of the Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival and proponents of the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve. Among the most influential players of the time was Robert Mondavi, owner of the historic Charles Krug winery, and one of the original seven vintners in the Napa Valley Vintners Association, alongside Louis Martini. Mondavi is credited with not just the establishment of Napa Valley as a wine destination, but in growing America's appetite for wine as a whole. He recognized that with no demand for table wines, he needed to sell the experience of place to create a market for his product. Seeing a need for consumer education, he opened his winery to tours for weekend visitors, eventually establishing Tasting on the Lawn modeled after the professional tastings offered to his production teams. This became the model for wine tourism and by 1962 the tasting rooms at the Italian Swiss Colony in Asti in the north of Sonoma County were drawing in more tourists than any other destination in California with the exception of Disneyland (Dyer 2015).

By the 1970s, the wine culture of the region, particularly in Napa County, was drawing hundreds of thousands of tourists to tasting rooms each year. A TV news clip, filmed in 1972, reveals mixed feelings about the growing tourism in the region (Bay Area Television Archive). One unnamed interviewee remarks that it's good for the business and reputation of the valley, but is nearing the point of unsustainability for the wineries

and the region's infrastructure. The host states that he expects to see a continued rise in wine tourism, adding that "Nationally, wine sales have nearly tripled in the last six years as America goes through a boom in purchase of and interest in wine" (Bay Area Television Archive). His expectation would prove to be true, especially after May of 1976. In a blind tasting of French and American wines in Paris, nine French judges chose Napa Valley wines over wines from Bordeaux and Burgundy. This event, now known as the Judgment of Paris, dramatically changed the global perception of Californian wines and the California wine industry and shaped the futures of Napa and Sonoma (Veseth 2022). At the time, California and the rest of the "new world" wine-making regions were regarded as less than their European counterparts, but this event established California as a region not only keeping up with, but rivaling the best of Europe in quality.

Following this success, vintners in the region shifted their focus from producing sweet wines that would be popular with the average American buyer to producing high-quality wines on the drier side. This transition was led in large part by a few influential winemakers and critics who introduced European methods to the region. With the new techniques, they also brought an old concept: terroir. By the end of the 1980s, many of the region's vineyards had been replanted with varieties better suited to the unique climatic and soil conditions of the land. The cultural rise of wine as a symbol of sophistication also led to a sharp increase in investments in the wine industry, with a number of celebrities purchasing wineries in Napa and Sonoma. The growing market and increased investment accelerated the recovery of the local wine industry, and by 1985 there were as many wineries as during the 19th-century peak.

In 1981, Napa was named the first American Viticultural Area in California and the second in the US. The creation of American Viticultural Areas, referred to as AVAs from here on, was a natural step following California's success in the Judgment of Paris. After distinguishing themselves on the global stage, the Napa Valley Vintners decided it would be to their benefit to market their wines collectively, leaning on place as an indicator of quality. According to the US Tax and Trade Bureau, "An AVA is a delimited grape-growing region with specific geographic or climatic features that distinguish it from the surrounding regions and affect how grapes are grown." Today, there are 17 nested AVAs within Napa Valley and 19 independent AVAs within Sonoma County.

In 2000, the Napa Name Law was passed in California legislation, requiring any wine using “Napa” on its label to contain no less than 75% Napa-grown grapes. Five years later, Napa and five other wine-growing regions in the US and Europe, including Champagne and Porto, signed the International Declaration of Place Agreement, forming the Wine Origins Alliance. The alliance, which now includes 34 regions from four continents, fights to protect wine region names and to eliminate trade barriers. In 2007, Sonoma County was added to the alliance and its name protected under the same conditions as Napa. The same year, Napa Valley became the first non-European wine region to be granted geographic indication status, gaining protection of the name throughout Europe.

### **3.4 Contemporary Agricultural Heritage & the Dual Reality of the Region**

The Judgment of Paris was a turning point in the region’s history, catapulting this then still-rural area into the spotlight and cementing its identity as ‘Wine Country.’ The rapid growth of the American wine industry continued well into the 21st century. “Between 2000 and 2018, US per-capita consumption increased by 50%, and total table wine consumption increased by more than one-third.” (Siegel 2025). This growth increasingly shaped the landscape and economy of Napa and Sonoma, but not necessarily equally. Throughout this chapter there has not been much distinction made between the two counties as their historical development had always been shaped by the same events, and their relationship was one of mutual impact up to this time. After The Judgement of Paris, however, the identity and development of the them began to fork. Napa became known as the epitome of luxury with Michelin restaurants, exclusive wineries, and high-end boutiques on every corner, while Sonoma became her bohemian younger sister.

Today, there exists a dual reality in the region, not just between Napa and Sonoma, but between its public-facing image, centered on wine and luxury, and the locals' experience of it, built on over a century of agricultural tradition. Even though vineyards make up the majority of farmed land in the counties now, there is still a deep connection to its more diversely agrarian past, especially among older residents and families who have been in the region for several generations. 85% of the vineyards in Sonoma and 95% in

Napa remain family owned. Many of today's intergenerational family vineyards began as farms of other crops.

In Sonoma, this rural history isn't just confined to the memories of these families, it's manifested in various ways throughout the region's culture. One of these ways is through the continuation of a wide variety of agricultural festivals. In addition to its numerous wine festivals, Sonoma County also celebrates the Apple Blossom Festival and Parade, the Cloverdale Citrus Fair, the Bodega Bay Fisherman's Festival, and Butter and Egg Days Parade and Festival, to name a few. Each of these events pays homage to an industry that was once more prominent in the individual towns of the county. The Apple Blossom Festival and Parade has celebrated the annual apple harvests in Sebastopol since 1910 and once drew in large crowds from across the Bay Area. The Cloverdale Citrus Fair began in 1892 as the first fair in the state. Agriculture is still the largest industry in Cloverdale, and although wine grapes replaced citrus as the dominant crop long ago, this festival celebrates the city's agricultural heritage. The Butter and Egg Day Parade began in 1918 to both celebrate and market Petaluma's booming poultry industry. This encompassing dedication to the region's agricultural past is also exemplified through organizations like Farm Trails, which in addition to organizing Sebastopol's Gravenstein Apple Fair, publishes an annual map and guide connecting the public with local farms.



Figures 5 & 6: A flyer for the 1923 Sonoma County Fair and Egg Day produced by the Petaluma Chamber of Commerce (Left), and a photo of Egg Day Celebration in 1920 (Right)

Source: Sonoma County Library Photograph Collection

Courtesy Sonoma County Library

Despite the local attachment to a broadly agrarian past, the region is very much known for its viticulture alone. While this identity may have been carefully crafted at one time to draw tourists to the region, it is now an economic necessity. According to the Sonoma County Vintners organization, one in four jobs in the county is related to the wine industry, accounting for \$3.2 billion in wages annually. The county department of agriculture named winegrapes as Sonoma's leading commodity worth over \$600 million in 2024 and bringing in an additional \$200 million in tourism (Sonoma County Crop Report 2024). This is down 12% from 2023, a trend that's expected to continue in the coming years, a fact that has many in the industry on edge. Since its peak at 4.5 million tons in 2018, the California grape crush has steadily declined, falling to 2.6 million in 2025, reflecting a decrease in wine sales by volume. One Forbes article lays out the state of the industry, estimating that 30% of grapes grown in Sonoma County and 20% of grapes across the US went unsold last year (Thach 2025). Over 38,000 acres of vineyards have been pulled out since late 2024 with a number of winegrowers selling their land or transitioning to other crops. While this has been devastating for some vintners, others are seizing the slow down as an opportunity to make long-term plans for

their vineyards and implement changes to adapt to the country’s evolving relationship with wine.

Faced with a decline in wine consumption, particularly among young adults, Sonoma County is seeking to diversify its image and appeal. This is made abundantly clear through the county’s tourism board’s campaign “This is Wine Country” which features images of ziplining, redwood hikes, vegetable farms, and fine dining alongside the slogan. Perhaps even more striking is their collaboration with a local craft brewery to produce an ale called “Beer Country.”



Figure 7: Collage of screenshots of Sonoma County Tourism’s 2025 “This is Wine Country” campaign

Source: [sonomacounty.com](https://sonomacounty.com)



Figure 8: YouTube thumbnail image for Sonoma County Tourism’s video promoting their collaboration with Old Caz Beer “Beer Country”

Source: [sonomacounty.com](https://sonomacounty.com)

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has traced how Napa and Sonoma came to be known as “Wine Country” through layered historical processes shaped by political, economic, social, and environmental forces. It established the broader regional, national, and global contexts for the emergence of the wine country identity in an attempt to demonstrate how a narrative of heritage emerged from the historical significance of viticulture, the community’s deeply rooted agricultural values, and the intentional choices of business owners and city planners. Wine heritage in this context is simultaneously a local truth, an incomplete story—curated to elevate a single narrative, and a powerful marketing construct. Archival materials bring to life this rich history, revealing both the region’s gradual development and moments of rapid transformation over more than two centuries, while also exposing the deliberate choices that shaped its journey. The result is a region at a crossroads, rooted in a rural past, yet bound by necessity to urbanite tourism.

#### **4. Contemporary Views in Wine Country: Fieldwork Insights**

This chapter presents data from the interviews I conducted with wine professionals in the region as well as the online survey. Reflecting on the information gathered, I analyze how viticulturalists and the broader community see themselves and their relationship to the land. Each interview presented a unique perspective on winemaking practices and the role of wine production within the region. The participants' perceptions on winemaking as a heritage were varied and generally of little to no importance to them. There were, however, two common themes that emerged across all interviews. First, there was a feeling of stewardship and devotion to the land that equaled and sometimes outweighed the participants' dedication to winemaking. Second, there was concern about declining wine consumption and the future viability of the local wine industry. I used the subsequent survey as a chance to explore these themes further and to question how the greater community—those not involved in the wine industry—identified with the region. The results suggested that the “wine country” place identity was both contested and interpreted in many ways by locals. The ways residents viewed the landscapes they inhabited and the values that shaped them varied greatly, but some perspectives proved more common than others.

##### **4.1 Stewardship: Care for the Land and Community**

The concept of stewardship first arose in my interview with a father and son duo who run a small third-generation winery in the eastern mountains of Napa County. As the father gave me a tour of the 42-acre grounds, he commented that it was rather primitive as wineries go. His father, an entomologist, purchased the land in 1977. At the time, it included a small plot of grapevines, a walnut orchard, a dilapidated house, and a cellar cave dating back to 1890. In the early days of their winery, the vineyards were tended by just the landowner and one employee. The father of this duo began helping out at the age of 12, but didn't officially join the family business until many years later, following

the premature death of a sibling. It was at that time that he left his job in the mountain biking industry to join his father in the vineyard to mend family wounds. His son also began a career in the outdoors, working as a trail builder before he joined the family winery.

All three men are united by their love of nature, expressed in various forms, outside of their profession. Underlying all three generations' decision to pursue viticulture was a desire to work closely with the land and an attachment to this specific plot, even as persistent problems with pests and diseases necessitated replanting vines every 10 to 30 years. This affective relationship with the land has also manifested as a drive in each of them to tend the land in the most sustainable way they can, seeing themselves as stewards of the land. The father spoke of his experience in viticulture as a process of constantly learning and adapting, and it appears that with each new generation, the winery has become progressively more experimental and proactive in its approach. Despite their commitment to sustainability, bound by circumstantial and financial constraints, some of their practices haven't always aligned with their values, such as their history of replanting when vines become infected rather than preemptively implementing different pruning techniques and more effective pest management. The son reflected on this in our interview.

“We have some guilt [...] ancestral guilt [...] about [...] managing the land use and the human way. I think there's a little bit of [...] shame around that, maybe. And that's kind of [...] why [my grandfather] is so into [...] preserving land. That's why my dad really wants to be eco-friendly.”

The founder compensated for this guilt by making large financial contributions towards land preservation off-vineyard. His son poured his focus into soil health and carbon sequestration, and today, the youngest generation focuses on transitioning to more biodynamic farming methods. But the guilt the youngest member speaks of extends beyond the scope of the family's own practices and encompasses what he thinks of as the human way of exploiting the land. He remarked that his grandfather is often called a hypocrite because, despite having planted vineyards himself, he hates to see more land being converted to vineyards and often advocates for land preservation. In regions like this, viticulture can be seen as both the final defense against urban sprawl and as exploitation of the land. This family, like many others in the business, sees both sides of the argument and feels conflicted in their role as stewards of the land. The youngest

member sees the family's stewardship responsibility holistically, extending from how they farm their property to their broader role in viticulture and the local community. He noted that viticulture presented a special opportunity, because with such a high profit margin, it was uniquely suited to test new techniques and technologies in sustainable agriculture that would later trickle down through the wider industry. Still, he advocated for more biodiversity and claimed the small garden where he grew vegetables for the vineyard's employees as his current passion project.

My second interviewee was the owner of a small first-generation winery in Sonoma County. While he does sell his wines, he makes most of his income consulting for other wineries, and his own winery is more of a passion project. We met at his processing facility, a warehouse he shares with several other wineries on the industrial side of town in Santa Rosa. The grapes are grown at a second location on the outskirts of town on a small plot of land. While my interviewee was a local to the area, his family had not historically been involved in viticulture, though many of them are today. His brother was the first in the family to get involved in wine, and he later encouraged this participant to transition from his career in biotech. Later, their parents planted a small vineyard on their residential ranch as a means of supplemental income in their retirement. His family's move into viticulture was a common one over the past few decades, and he reflected on the changes he'd seen in the landscape.

“The big difference for me in Sonoma County, born and raised, growing up here and being, you know, part of it my whole life, is that when I was really young, there were a lot fewer grapes and a lot more cattle.”

Like the father and son from the first winery, he had come to viticulture as a second career, unlike them, he pursued a formal education in enology, eventually earning a master's degree in it. Despite this difference, or perhaps because of it, he had a much more romantic view of viticulture than my earlier correspondents. Alluding heavily to the concept of terroir, he said:

“That's the [...] thing that I think is really unique and special about wine in general, is that making wine from a specific place, from a site, expresses that site. [...] I can't think of any other product that does it to that degree. [...] People have embraced—and rightfully so—this [...] farm-to-table movement for food; the wine has always been about that. It's always about site, and that specific site, also it's a time capsule, because it's not just about site, it's about vintage.”

This philosophy is evident in his practice. When asked about his personal winemaking style, he stressed a philosophy of grapes over process, preferring to ferment the fruit using only native yeasts without any additives because he sees it as, in his own words, “a more pure expression of the vineyard.” Terroir is often reduced to a social construct, yet in cases like this, it more closely resembles an ideology that privileges the natural environment, giving agency to the vines. As a guiding principle in viticultural practice, terroir positions the viticulturist as a servant and translator for the land, more than a producer or artist in their own right. Such a dynamic encourages pro-environmental behaviors in land stewardship. The only way to improve the wines with this approach is to improve the care for the vineyards.

A third interview illustrated a different way the concept of stewardship manifested among viticulturists. This participant works as the Senior Director of Winery Operations for one of the leading wine brands in the US. In his current role, he spends more time in an office than outside among the vines, though he spent decades doing just that for a number of smaller wineries. His long and varied career gave him a broader perspective of viticulture and its role in the community. We spent a lot of time in this interview discussing the ambiguity of the word “sustainable”. It became clear that he was a very big-picture thinker, with a nuanced view of the topic, looking at it from both an economic and environmental perspective. While he strives towards environmentally friendly practices in his work, the aspect of sustainability that he stressed the most was the financial power of viticulture to preserve the rural character of the region. When asked what he hoped for the future of the region, this was his response:

“What I would like to see is just the ability to sustain, to stay relevant, to stay local and loyal, and to be able to give jobs to locals. I think that's the most important part. [...] I want to see it stay viable for the farmer, for agriculture, so we just don't become a bunch of subdivisions, yeah. And so we can [...] keep that agricultural element of California alive.”

He felt that, however the industry evolved, it would be preferable to the alternative of the impacts of its absence.

These sentiments were echoed by my final interviewee, a member of the fifth generation of a family winery who works as a tasting room manager. Like the father and son from the first interview, he was motivated to join the business for family, not wine. While he

appreciates wine, he believes the true value of their winery lies in its connection to the region's historical development. Located in a small "unincorporated community" with a population under 1000, the winery has played a big role in the community for over 100 years as more than just an employer. He emphasized his pride in the pivotal role his family has played in fostering community and practicing sustainable land stewardship. He told me about a number of initiatives the winery had introduced, including environmental education programs for local school kids and adoption events where visitors can hike to the mountaintop on the winery's property with shelter dogs.

The survey, similarly, illustrated multiple interpretations of stewardship. However, responses suggest that while many locals value stewardship, most do not see it as a significant part of the regional identity. 58% of survey respondents indicated that, to them, stewardship meant "caring for the land and the environment", 16% selected "preserving the character of the region", and 11% "supporting local farms and businesses". In response to the question "Which values best represent the region's identity?" a whopping 50% of respondents selected "luxury and tourism," this was followed by 19% "tradition and craftsmanship," and 13% "environmental stewardship." While it is impossible to come to any generalizing conclusions without conducting further research, this data could indicate that it is the intimate working relationship with the land that instills a sense of stewardship in locals.

#### **4.2 Anxiety, Adaptation, and the Future of Wine Country**

The second theme that emerged across all interviews was a concern about the decline in wine consumption. For the past couple of years, I have seen newspaper article headlines predicting the downfall of the industry on a nearly weekly basis. Some blamed Covid-19, others climate change and wildfires, and yet others political instability and economic uncertainty—what all of these authors agreed on, however, was that wine consumption was down and the local industry wouldn't survive long. Every person I spoke to, mentioned the decline in wine consumption, particularly among young adults. The issue is exacerbated by a bottleneck in the industry, driven by an oversupply of grapes and of grape growers relative to grape processors. Many wine labels employ in-house winemakers, but purchase their grapes from independent vineyards. However, due to the boom in popularity of wine around the 1980s and high prices for quality

winegrapes, many farmers transitioned their less profitable crops to vineyards, but as the industry plateaued and now faces decline, there are more growers than there are processors. With an oversaturated market, many grapes are left to shrivel on the vine, while yet others are fetching lower prices than just a few years ago. This dilemma weighs heavily on the men I spoke with. In fact, it trumped concern over environmental pressures in most cases. Each of them responded to this threat differently, guided by their distinct perspectives and circumstances.

The corporate winemaker had many insights into the current state of the market, noting that throughout his career, he's seen the “big get bigger and the small get smaller” as more and more wineries are consolidated into large corporations. Like the participants before him, he also noted that wine is ebbing in popularity, particularly among young adults, but he confided that the company he made wine for was also (secretly) the producer of a popular hard seltzer brand. The same business entity also owns a gin brand that the small boutique distillery I formerly worked for produced. While diversification was how large conglomerates like his coped, he suggested that for smaller wineries, carving out a niche was important for survival.

The fifth-generation winery represented in my final interview is a prime example of the phenomenon of consolidation taking over the industry. While this winery had the longest history of the bunch, dating back to 1904, it had been purchased by another wine conglomerate, the world's third largest, a few years earlier in 2015. Despite this, the founding family remained in charge of operations. Still clinging to their central role in the tiny community, the winery is trying to appeal to younger audiences by shifting the focus from product to experience, with offerings like mountain-top tastings. They hope that grounding wine in experiences with nature and family will help it find its place in today's cultural landscape.

The first family winery I interviewed in Napa appeared to embody the niche-oriented strategy the corporate winemaker described. Producing almost exclusively Cabernet Sauvignon with relatively low alcohol content and emphasizing their sustainable farming practices and family values, the winery positioned itself within the super-luxury tier of wine producers, with their bottles selling in the \$100 to \$400 range. As a small producer in this tier, the family appeared less affected by market anxieties, seeming

more concerned about long-term environmental impact than immediate financial stressors. Despite this, the younger generation still imagined change ahead. Although he described a sense of fulfillment from working with the land and hoped that future generations would have the same opportunity, he envisioned a future where winegrapes were not their sole crop. His comments suggest that adaptation and diversification may increasingly characterize the material and cultural landscape of Wine Country.

Paired with the idea that the economic success of the wine industry has been paramount to the preservation of the region's rural character, the downward trend in wine sales has prompted anxieties about the future of Wine Country itself. Consolidation had already played a role in the careers of two participants, and while the majority of wineries in the region remain family owned, market pressures loom large. While most wineries have responded with changes in their price structuring, some have closed their tasting rooms to focus solely on distribution, and others have experimented with diversification, unique branding, or experience-driven tourism in order to remain viable.

When asked whether they thought the region would be known mainly for wine 20 years in the future, 44% of survey respondents answered affirmatively. There was no consensus among the other 66% of respondents about what the future might hold for the counties, with some speculating they would blend into non-distinct suburbs of San Francisco, serving as a commuter hub for tech workers, and others suggesting a return to other agricultural crops or a shift toward cannabis. Together, these perspectives and concerns suggest a growing uncertainty about the viability of regional identity built on viticulture and what Wine Country might look like if wine is decentered.

## **5. Analysis**

### **5.1 How the Regional Identity was Formed: Landscape, Place-making, and Placemaking**

This section examines how the regional identity of Wine Country was formed through the intertwined processes of landscape transformation and meaning-making. While it is clear and undeniable that landscape and regional identity are inextricably linked, their relationship is difficult to describe, and becomes even more so when the practice of placemaking enters the conversation. Regional identity is understood as a collective understanding of place shared by the inhabitants of a region. Because place, in this context, extends beyond the realm of embodied experience, landscape offers a more useful framework for examining identity at a broader geographic scale. The landscape, as a material record of both human and natural history, exists independently but requires the activities and emotional attachments of other beings to acquire meaning. As Meinig puts it “any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads” (1979, 1), and yet the land is not as Schrodinger’s cat, in an unknown state. Rather, the material landscape exists independently and influences the activities of its inhabitants regardless. The regional identity is shaped not just by the physical landscape, but even more so by the narratives we tell about it. These emerge through everyday place-making, informed by personal experience and memory of the land. Placemaking efforts simultaneously alter the physical landscape and the narratives surrounding it. These developments, in turn, influence the ongoing negotiation of regional identity.

Archival materials showcased not only changes in the region’s landscape over time, but also shifts in how the region was discussed and marketed. The formation of Wine Country reflects both changes in land use and evolving interpretations of the

environment. Following the region's journey from untouched wilderness to horticultural haven, the Wine Country identity emerged largely as a result of institutional placemaking. The Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival Association, formed in 1947, was explicit about its intentions "to capitalize on their major assets—History, architecture, climate, location, and leisurely atmosphere of well-being" (Sonoma County Agriculture, Land Use, and Tourism Digital Collection) through the production of the Vintage festival celebrating viticulture as an integral part of the local heritage. The association's decision to elevate the viticultural history of the region at a time when winemaking was down roughly 80% from its peak is a clear example of the curatorial and retrospective tendencies of heritagisation. By singling out wine as the highest symbol of the region's heritage and privileging it over other forms of agriculture while simultaneously working to preserve historic architecture, this association began to shape the development of the town and the surrounding county.

While they were leaning into the heritage of winemaking in Sonoma, the recently formed Napa Valley Vintners were working hard to strengthen and promote the modern wine industry in the valley. What began with a marketing campaign in 1944, led by seven industry professionals, grew to impact the local landscape and legislation in unprecedented ways. Following the vintners' immense success and the growth of the industry, the local governments embraced winemaking as a cornerstone of the regional identity and economy. By 1968, the organization had grown in both size and influence, evidenced by its success in pushing the creation of the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve through legislation. The controversy around these zoning laws illustrates the dimension of contestation that Tilley and Daum consider an inevitable part of landscape. Many farmers and landowners fought the restrictions placed on their land, but ultimately, the county voted in favor of the preserve, cementing their desire to maintain the rural character of the region in legislation. At the same time, the NVV's outsized role in the region positioned viticulture as the primary means of defense against urbanization. The fact that many of the biggest proponents of the preserve were successful and prominent vintners, and many of their opponents were struggling farmers, highlights the way wealth and power shape the landscape. Placemaking, even when led by the local community, rarely reflects the values of entire diverse communities. That this act of placemaking favored use value over exchange value is anomalous, as the opposite is often true. The Agricultural Preserve did not just protect

rural character, it institutionally aligned the landscape with the interests of commodified viticulture, revealing placemaking as an uneven exercise of power rather than a neutral collective effort.

The prominence of vineyards is not the only visual evidence of placemaking here. Even before the region became known as Wine Country, symbols of viticulture marked the landscape. While a visitor driving through the region through much of the 20th century would see a patchwork of orchards, grazing pastures dotted with cows, and towns they might call ‘quaint’, their attention would likely be drawn toward the flashier symbols of viticulture on the sides of the road. These include one of Napa’s first tasting rooms housed inside a 25,000-gallon wine cask and the now-famed “Welcome to Napa Valley” sign erected by the Napa Valley Vintners in 1949. In 1988, a 15-foot-tall statue, titled the grape crusher, joined these landmarks along the highway marking the Southern entry into the valley, clearly alerting visitors that they were entering wine country. “As the bronze sculpture suggests, this region has built its economy not only on the grapes it presses and ferments but also on the rural landscape that vine production preserves.” (Mohan 2014) These symbolic markers visually reinforced wine as the defining feature of the region, distinguishing viticulture from one form of agriculture among many to the dominant feature by which the landscape itself was identified.



Figure 9: The Grape Crusher sculpture on the Napa landscape

Source: Trinita Cellars <https://trinitascellars.com>

These landmarks, paired with the success of the preserve, followed by the onslaught of vineyard investments in the 1980s, transformed the generic rural landscape into something else entirely. “A landscape devoted largely to commercial vineyards becomes a ‘vinescape.’ When it produces grapes used in wine making but also features structures connected with that activity—including visitor centers that welcome customers—it can be

called a ‘winescape.’” (Marinacci 2014) A winescape is thus the product of the heritagisation and commodification of viticulture for placemaking.

Within the winescape of the region, there are 36 distinct AVAs, that is 36 wine growing regions with legally distinguished terroirs. Whether the geological and climatological conditions of a place can be tasted in the final product of a wine remains contested, but the material reality of terroir is less relevant in this discussion than the use of the concept for place branding. The designation of distinct terroirs through AVAs transforms geologic traits into a marketable cultural identity, allowing particular landscapes to be differentiated, valued, and consumed, further linking them to wine. Utilizing place designation on food and beverage products to increase the visibility of a region is not a new practice. Trubek contends that terroir was originally applied to the flavor and quality of food and beverage products with the intent by French tastemakers in the 19th century “to champion certain practices (small farms, regional dishes) and values (tradition, local taste) in order to make sure that they did not disappear” (2008). The use of terroir as a marketing device inextricably links product to place, not just signifying wines as belonging to place, but also places as belonging to wine.

The result of these intersecting forces is a single selective narrative for which the region is known. Actors like the Napa Valley Vintners shaped the landscape through marketing and legislation, thus altering the identity of the region. The Valley of the Moon Festival Association didn’t just uplift the viticultural heritage of the region, but selected it as a distinguishing element of the region. Napa and Sonoma were thoughtfully transformed into a winescape, through a wide range of actions that tangibly transformed the landscape and shaped how the region would be imagined and experienced.

## **5.2 How the Regional Identity is Negotiated Today**

The first part of this chapter established how the regional identity of Wine Country was coproduced through place-making, placemaking, and landscape. It illustrated the fluidity of regional identity as both the landscape itself and the meanings attached to it continuously evolve. This section examines how that identity is interpreted, experienced, and contested by viticulturists, institutions, and the broader local community today. We can see the transformation of Napa and Sonoma into a winescape

during the 20th century as a symbol of the region's ambitions on the global stage, as well as a form of local resistance to urbanization. Vineyards triumphed over shopping centers and subdivisions, preserving the rural character of the region while at the same time industrializing it. These simultaneously complementary and contradictory commitments have led to two distinct, but overlapping, versions of the region: one designed for tourists and one grounded in local experience. As market pressures on the wine industry mount and amid a backdrop of concerns about environmental sustainability, affordability, and community identity, these competing experiences increasingly come into tension.

While wine tourism is important in both Napa and Sonoma, they offer different experiences to visitors, their images having diverged since the Judgment of Paris in 1978. Napa presents an image of exclusivity and luxury, while Sonoma commodifies authenticity and quaint charm, but both constitute placemaking strategies that center the exchange value of the landscape. For most, outside of the local community, it remains a destination associated with wine tastings, boutique hotels, leisure, and luxury. Yet, for those living and working in the region, it carries much broader meanings and functions, tied to community, outdoor life, and agricultural heritage. One survey respondent summarized this divide when asked what they perceived to be the pillars of the region's identity and culture, writing, "For locals, outdoor living - parks and open space. For tourists, wine, beer, cannabis, luxury hotels and spas."

Even within the community, there are significant differences in how the landscape is experienced. Fewer than half of responses to the same question, only 13 of 30, mentioned wine including the response above specifying wine only as an aspect of the region's identity as perceived by tourists. Nine responses to the same question suggested other forms of agriculture, and nine identified open spaces or outdoor recreation as pillars of the regional identity and culture, while smaller numbers pointed to tourism or wealth. The wide variation in these responses is suggestive of the subjectivity of landscape. Individuals' perceptions of the region are formed in their mind, grounded in their own embodied experiences in it and their personal values and predispositions. Tuan (1990) might describe these differences as variations in topophilia, shaped by distinct forms of engagement with the landscape. That wine was not the most common answer would likely surprise most outsiders, but it reflects the local attachment to a

broader agricultural heritage demonstrated through the prevalence of farmers markets and the persistence of festivals celebrating a variety of agricultural forms.

As creators of the winescape that has come to define the regional identity, vintners have taken on the role of stewards of both the land, and the community. My interviews with viticulturists revealed the concept of stewardship as a guiding principle in their work. Managing their own small portions of the landscape, they feel a responsibility rooted in care for the environment that provides for them, their livelihoods and some percentage of their personal fulfillment. Their own embodied acts of care, pruning, irrigating, and otherwise improving the conditions for growth, serve as the basis for a reciprocal relationship with the land. Those involved in viticulture, agriculture, and other outdoor occupations may experience the land as a taskscape tied to labor and livelihood, while others relate to it primarily through recreational or aesthetic appreciation. Yet data from my interviews doesn't suggest such a clear divide. Despite their role in creating the winescape, vintners too have complex and varied relationships with the landscape. Going beyond their work, viticulturists also expressed appreciation for the recreational and aesthetic value of the outdoors. At the same time, their accounts revealed a split perception of the landscape in which the vines are one thing and the woods are another. The former exists for productivity and requires ongoing intervention, and the latter functions as a space for recreation and retreat and calls for preservation. Practices of use and appreciation coexist, but remain spatially and conceptually divided. The three-generation winery in Napa illustrated this dynamic particularly clearly, with each generation's love of the outdoors enacted in different ways outside of the vineyard.

Even as they call for different treatments, the boundary between wilderness and tamed earth is blurred. Several of the viticulturists whom I spoke with mentioned a feeling of connection to nature that they get from working cyclically with the seasons as one of their favorite aspects of their work. The same sentiment was echoed by the viticulturally engaged survey respondents, who reported that they would consider switching to another crop if it promised equal or better yields, with one indicating that they were already interested in crop diversification. Survey responses from the broader community also suggested that open space was seen as equally important as viticulture as a defining element of the region. These sentiments suggest that the local community is more attached to the broad presence of, and their intimate relationships with, nature than wine

as a product. Together, these perspectives suggest that attachment to Wine Country may be less about wine as a product and more about relationships to landscape and rurality more broadly.

The community's relationship to the landscape is a complicated one. Contradictorily, preservation of the land is dependent on the exploitation of that same land. Viticulture has provided them with a way to preserve their closeness with nature when it seemed under threat, while at the same time altering the land. Trubek explores this same dynamic in the forests of Vermont, where sugar-making is considered a form of conservation by one of her informants (2008). In regions like these, where much of the land is privately owned, a value-added approach, in which property holders make small profits of small portions of their land, allows them to resist more extractive practices. In Vermont, Trubek found terroir an invaluable tool to emphasize the unique qualities of specific parcels of land, thus incentivizing their preservation.

Increasingly, recognition of the land's active role in shaping products is being extended to products other than wine in Napa and Sonoma counties and beyond, from cheese and beef to whiskey and beer. Building on the region's existing attachment to terroir may provide opportunities for diversification that draw on the region's existing attachment to local production. One example of this is the rise of grain-to-glass distilleries which utilize only locally sourced wheat, grain and water, and similarly, farm-to-table restaurants offering solely hyperlocal fare. As the wine industry becomes less viable as the pillar of regional identity, Napa and Sonoma counties are being forced to reconsider how they wish to define themselves. The regional identity of Wine Country therefore remains under continuous renegotiation, shaped by the competing, but overlapping, priorities of tourism, environmental stewardship, agricultural production, and community values.

### 5.2.1 Sustainable Rural Futures

As the various perspectives revealed by my fieldwork suggest, there are many sides of sustainability. While the wine country identity enabled sustainable development when the rural region needed it, circumstances have changed. The population has more than tripled since 1960, recent wildfires have exacerbated an existing housing shortage, and the wine industry—the biggest contributor to the region's economy—is in decline.

Sustainable placemaking cannot focus solely on the environment, economy, culture, or infrastructure, but must consider all aspects.

The creation of the Napa Agricultural Preserve was undeniable evidence that the local community feared falling subject to the trend of urbanization in the 1960s, and sentiments shared in interviews and survey responses indicate that fear persists today. While it appears there is a general willingness to move—at least partially—away from wine as an identifying product of the region, it seems no one wants to see vineyards traded for concrete. Instead, underlying the region’s viticultural scene has always been a dedication to maintaining its green open expanses. Accordingly, as the region renegotiates its identity, this remains the objective. In addition to wine, the alternatives highlighted in the This is Wine Country campaign are not new offerings requiring further development, but rather signal somewhat of a return to the region’s varied past. Drawing on its agricultural past and present and the fine dining scene that cropped up with the success of its wineries, the campaign promotes the region’s numerous farmers markets and its varied culinary and cocktail experiences featuring local produce. It also spotlights the tourist attractions of its past like the natural hot springs and spas. And for those interested in connecting with nature it suggests coastal hikes, redwood canopy ziplining, bike tours, and paddleboarding on the river. This campaign signals a turn towards diversity and authenticity over luxury and prestige. By commodifying the region’s wide range of offerings enjoyed by locals for tourist appeal, this act of placemaking aligns exchange value with use value. Rather than abandoning the landscape that has long defined Napa and Sonoma, this shift reframes the region’s identity through a broader and more locally rooted understanding of place, one formed through varied relationships with the land tied to agricultural heritage and a deep appreciation for open spaces and outdoor recreation. This long evolution illustrates how placemaking can adapt to economic and environmental changes while continuing to preserve the landscape and reflect the cultural values of its inhabitants.

## **Conclusion**

While I began my research with an interest in the adaptability of land-based heritage practices, viticulture being the most dominant in Napa and Sonoma counties, I became more interested in how the region known as Wine Country related to the practice more broadly. This thesis sought to answer two overarching questions: how was the wine country identity formed in Napa and Sonoma counties and how is it negotiated today amid changing cultural and environmental conditions? Through an in-depth review of archival materials documenting changes in land use and evolving narratives about the region going back 200 years, I have determined that the wine country identity emerged through the intertwined processes of landscape transformation, placemaking, place-making, and heritagisation shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces. Interviews with viticulturists and a qualitative survey of the community revealed a deeper connection to rural character, green spaces, and working with the land than to wine as a product or winemaking as a heritage practice.

This research builds on understandings of the relationship between heritagisation and placemaking and their joint impacts on the trajectory of regional development. Furthermore, this research builds on understandings from critical heritage studies of the limitations that arise from a preservation-oriented approach to living heritage and cultural landscapes. The perceived threat to Napa and Sonoma counties posed by negative trends in the wine industry demonstrates the risks associated with placemaking strategies that center on a singular commodity. As cultural and environmental conditions continuously evolve, so too do the activities and landscape of a region. Placemaking and marketing narratives should strive to reflect the underlying values of a community as much as its current leading industry.

The findings of this research have implications for regional planning, rural development, and sustainable tourism. Regions whose identities become closely tied to a single industry may face significant cultural and economic instability when that industry declines or changes. Sonoma's current transition toward a more locally-grounded and diverse marketing narrative may offer a potential response. In Napa and Sonoma, wine may act more as a symbolic anchor than the actual heart of the region's sense of place, which appears to be rooted more deeply in a broad appreciation for small-scale agriculture and access to nature. Emerging placemaking strategies position wine as one element of an identity more broadly centered on landscape and local production. In this context, extending the concept of terroir from wine to other agricultural goods could support crop diversification while maintaining local production as a priority. Decentering wine after decades of integrating it into nearly every aspect of life and cultural representation of the region poses its challenges, but the current shift in touristic marketing towards a more varied representation of place reflects the enduring values of the local community that have been overshadowed by the region's singular association with wine.

This research has been specific to Napa and Sonoma counties and their unique contexts. Unlike many rural regions facing industrial decline, the Napa-Sonoma Wine Country benefits from a well-established stream of tourism as well as its proximity to the San Francisco Bay Area. As a result, the dynamics and strategies highlighted in this research may not translate to agricultural regions with different demographic and economic situations. While the dilemma of a single industry's collapse posing an existential threat to an entire town or region is not unique, the solutions should be. Future research could explore whether diversified place narratives might support rural regions with less established flows of tourism and those facing population loss rather than development pressures, as well and consider how archival and ethnographic approaches might help identify alternative place narratives.

## Note on AI Usage

This thesis was written with the use of language assisting AI tools including Grammarly for spelling and grammar checks, and ChatGPT exclusively for the translation of the résumé to Estonian. These were used in accordance with the University of Tartu's guidelines for the use of AI applications in teaching and studies.

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## Résumé

Käesolev magistritöö uurib regionaalse identiteedi kujunemist ja säilitamist California Napa ja Sonoma maakondades, mida ühiselt tuntakse Wine Country nime all.

Regionaalset identiteeti kui inimeste ja koha vaheliste suhete keskset tahku uuritakse laialdaselt erinevates teadusharudes. Oma analüüsis ühendan kriitiliste pärandiuuringute, antropoloogia ja kultuurigeograafia käsitlusi, et kujundada holistiline arusaam kohapõhise identiteedi kujunemise ja muutumise protsessidest. Minu uurimistöo juhendus kahest peamisest küsimusest: esiteks, kuidas kujunes regionaalne identiteet, ja teiseks, kuidas selle üle tänapäeval läbi räägitakse ja seda tõlgendatakse? Nendele küsimustele vastamiseks kasutasin arhiivianalüüsi, poolstruktureeritud intervjuusid viinamarjakasvatajatega ning kohaliku kogukonna kvalitatiivset küsitlust.

Kohaloome ja maastiku mõisted selgitavad, kuidas inimesed oma keskkonnaga suhestuvad ja seda tõlgendavad, samas kui pärandistamine ja *placemaking* pakkusid kasulikke analüütilisi vaatenurki regionaalse identiteedi kujunemise uurimiseks. Analüüsides arhiivimaterjale, mis dokumenteerivad muutusi maakasutuses ja turundusnarratiivides, jälgisin piirkonna arengut viimase 200 aasta jooksul alates põllumajanduse jõudmisest piirkonda kuni selle tänapäevase kujunemiseni veinimaastikuks. Kuigi piirkonnal on rikkalik ajalugu erinevate turismivormide ja põllumajandustegevustega, on pärandistamine ja kaubapõhine kohaloome seadnud viinamarjakasvatuse privilegeeritud positsiooni teiste sama ajalooliselt oluliste piirkonna elementide ees. Selle põhjuseks on ebavõrdne mõjuvõimu jaotus piirkondlikes kohanarratiivides, kus jõukusele ja võimule ligipääsu omavad institutsioonid ja indiviidid määravad, millised ajaloo, maastiku ja identiteedi aspektid piirkonda defineerivad.

Edasine kvalitatiivne uurimistöo, sealhulgas intervjuud viinamarjakasvatajatega ja väike kogukonnaküsitlus, näitas, et kohalike elanike suhe viinamarjakasvatusega on märksa keerulisem, kui esmapilgul paistab. Veinitootjad kui veinimaastiku loojad on võtnud endale nii maa kui ka kogukonna hoidjate rolli. Paljud intervjuueeritud viinamarjakasvatajad väljendasid, et saavad rahulolu maa harimisest selleaastaaegade rütmis. Samuti märkisid nad valmisolekut minna üle teistele kultuuridele, kui need pakuksid samaväärset või paremat majanduslikku tulu, ning mõned neist juba uurivad võimalusi tegevuse mitmekesistamiseks. Teised rõhutasid viinamarjakasvatuse olulist

rolli piirkonna maaelu iseloomu säilitamisel ajal, mil ümberkaudsed alad urbaniseerusid. Ühele avatud küsimusele vastates nimetas vähem kui pool vastanutest veini regionaalse identiteedi või kultuuri alustalana; peaaegu sama sageli toodi esile põllumajandust ja avatud loodusruumi. Kokkuvõttes näib vein olevat kohaliku kohatunnetuse jaoks teisejärguline võrreldes väikesemahulise põllumajanduse ja loodusele ligipääsuga.

Kuna riiklik veinitarbimine on languses, seisab piirkond küsimuse ees, mis saab edasi. Sonoma maakonna turismiamet on käivitanud uue kampaania, mille eesmärk on kujundada Wine Country ümber paigaks, kus lisaks kvaliteetsete veinide nautimisele saab luua sidet loodusega sekvoiametsades, lõõgastuda kuumaveallikatega spaades või avastada terroir'd hüperlokaalse toidu ja joogi kaudu. Uusmitmekesisitud turundussuund tugineb piirkonna mitmekülgsel ajalool ja aspektidele, mida kohalikud enim väärtustavad, viies kasutusväärtuse kooskõlla vahetusväärtusega. Kujunev rõhuasetus loodusele, kohalikule tootmisele ja maalilistele maastikele võib suunata piirkonda jätkusuutlikuma maaelu tuleviku poole, kus viinamarjakasvatus ei ole enam Wine Country identiteedi keskne määratlev element.

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