

Mission in Action
Grape planted by Franciscan Fathers takes firm root again

By Jessica Yadegaran
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In 1999, Gypsy Canyon Winery owner Deborah Hall made a serendipitous discovery. She was clearing her Lompoc property to plant pinot noir when, on a hillside covered in sagebrush along the Santa Rita Creek, she uncovered a thick, gnarly vine. And then another.

Hall was told the vines were useless, and she was advised to rip out all three acres. But the vintner's instincts told her otherwise. Instead, Hall nurtured the vines, and when they sprouted big, heavy, deep-red grape clusters, she sold them to a winemaker who told her they were zinfandel.

But two years later, when Hall's viticulture professor visited from Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria, she took one look at the large, loose clusters and suggested Hall send them to UC-Davis for testing. They were not zinfandel, she said. The test came back with a surprise diagnosis. The grapes were mission, the heritage grape first planted by the Franciscan monks as they established the California missions. And best estimates put the planting of Hall's vineyard around 1887, making it the oldest in Santa Barbara County.

We think of the mission grape as the long-forgotten fruit of sacramental wine, but mission is still relevant, and there are some for whom its future is as important as its storied past. Now Hall and a small but dedicated group of other winemakers are on a mission, so to speak, to resurrect and redefine the historic grape, which has more in common with the padres than mere happenstance. Geneticists recently confirmed the grape's Spanish origin.

Where once mission grapes flourished across the state, today there are fewer than 700 acres of the grape left in California (most are in the Gold Country), and Evelyn Reyes-Umana of Bodega del Sur is on a quest to find more. She purchased her Murphys winery with her husband in 2007, and, ever since, they've searched for mission grapes to add to their Spanish portfolio, which includes tempranillo.

"It has huge importance to my history and California's history," says Reyes-Umana, who is originally from El Salvador.

From her 1,000 mission grape vines, Hall, who farms organically and biodynamically, produces angelica, the signature fortified dessert wine of the California mission padres. Most wineries still producing mission do the same.

Because the vine is vigorous and produces grapes that are tannic and astringent with lots of sugar and low acidity, it doesn't produce a very fine wine, says Andy Walker, a grape

breeder, geneticist and professor of viticulture at UC-Davis. Mission is also subject to wood-rotting diseases, which makes the grape even more challenging for growers.

It's the historical significance, Walker says, that makes the grape so fascinating.

"Mission was critical because it helped stimulate and educate California grape growers about how to harvest and how to make wine, " he says.

But some believe mission can do more than accompany dessert -- or communion wafers. This winter, Hall is planning to make a dry mission wine with her Santa Barbara grapes.

"Because it's cooler here, the grape won't lose its acidity or get too sweet, " she says. "We can make a drier style, and because of the fog and the space between the loose clusters, we don't have problems with mildew."

Story Winery, located in the heart of Amador's sunny Shenandoah Valley, makes two dry reds from its two acres of old-vine mission grapes. They also make a mission port, which they fortify with a brandy from Alameda's St. George Spirits. Their Miss Zin is a blend of mission and zinfandel grapes, which produces a jammy, fruit-forward wine with soft tannins, says Story owner Bruce Tichenor. But the single varietal mission wine they make is another story. It's dark and earthy with 16 percent alcohol.

Meanwhile, down the road at Plymouth's Nine Gables Vineyard and Winery, owner and former winemaker Jerry Notestine worries about the future of his mission grapes, which were most likely planted at the turn of the 20th-century. Notestine says that because they are on original root stock, they are not resistant to phylloxera, the pest that wiped out vineyards in Europe in the 1860s. But he's not interested in replacing them with more commercially viable grapes. Instead, he plans to take the historical cuttings and graft the buds onto phylloxera-resistant root stocks to preserve the lineage.

Since the 1990s, Notestine has produced a mission sherry in the Spanish tradition, which encourages oxidation and caramelization with a complex aging process. He also produces a dry mission, which he calls "a picnic wine." It's soft and lower in acid and tannins than the big, powerful reds Amador is known for. The wine is not for everyone, but Notestine says he can't help his attachment.

"It has a lot of mystery to it," he says.

The grape doesn't just exude history and mystery. It provokes an emotional and even protective response in winemakers such as Notestine and Hall, who donates some of her cuttings to the California missions to help restore the original vineyards planted hundreds of years ago.

"It's part of the history, " she says, "of the land."

History of mission grapes

Mission grapes are a variety of *Vitis vinifera* introduced by Spanish Catholic missionaries to North and South America in the 1500s. They used it to make sacramental and fortified wines. In the late 1700s, the grape was introduced to California by the Franciscan missionaries who set up missions along the state's coast. Its origin was unknown, so they called it the mission grape.

Plantings expanded rapidly during the Gold Rush, and until 1850, mission was the No. 1 grape in California. Today, mission represents less than 700 acres of plantings -- most of it in the Gold Country, Southern California, and the Central Valley -- and just half a dozen wineries make mission wine. In 2006, the origin of mission was finally confirmed. Spanish scholars determined that its DNA matched a Spanish variety called listan prieto. The grape thrives in South America for the production of distilled spirits used in pisco. In Argentina, mission grape is known as criolla. And the popular white grape torrontes is a hybrid of mission and muscat of Alexandria.