

WINE ENTHUSIAST®

How Prohibition Shaped American Wine Country

If Prohibition never happened, could Missouri have been Napa? We take an in-depth look at how the 18th amendment changed wine in the U.S., who survived, and how.

BY SHAYLA MARTIN

December 5, also known as Repeal Day, gets a lot of love in the bar and spirits community. It commemorates the date in 1933 when the 21st amendment to the Constitution was ratified, repealing the 18th amendment that banned the sale, transportation and manufacture of alcoholic beverages, effectively ending Prohibition.

You've seen the images. Well-dressed folks toasting their beer mugs and cocktails under newspaper headlines that scream "Prohibition Ends at Last!" But while the beer and spirits industries continued to thrive during Prohibition thanks to a detailed network of bootleggers and speakeasies, Prohibition had a markedly different and damaging effect on the wine industry.

These days, it's hard to find a winery in the U.S. that's older than 1933. Most that existed before Prohibition were hit hard once the 18th amendment took effect, shutting their doors, dumping their barrels and leaving vines to wither and die. Ironically, although the temperance movement across the U.S. prior to Prohibition was very strong, there were also thriving wine industries in unexpected states throughout the country during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

So what would "American Wine Country" look like if had Prohibition never occurred?

America's diverse 19th century wine regions

California

Perhaps unsurprisingly, California is where the most pre-Prohibition wineries still exist.

Oddly, Prohibition seemed to serve California well, at least in regard to grape sales. Growers in the state clung to the provision of the Volstead Act that allowed the legal production of "fruit juices" (a.k.a. wine) in the home, which led to a demand for fresh grapes across the country. Just before the start of Prohibition in 1919, California had about 300,000 acres of vineyard, but by 1927, the acreage had almost doubled and shipments of grapes grew by 125%. While the demand for grapes helped keep vineyards afloat, California wineries had to get creative in order to stay profitable during the dark days of Prohibition.

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The Wente Family with their barrels in 1895 / Photo courtesy Wente Vineyards

Wente Vineyards in Livermore, California, established in 1883, maintained its bonded status during Prohibition by selling their Saunternes-style white wine to another California winery, **Beaulieu Vineyard** (est. 1900) in Rutherford. Beaulieu had a history of romancing the Catholic church, so unlike other California wineries that perished during Prohibition, Beaulieu's business increased fourfold through the sale of sacramental wine.



A bottle of Wente Bros. Pinot Chardonnay, 1936 vintage.

