

WINE HISTORY

Trivia question: The world's largest winery between 1907 and 1919 was located in a) Napa, b) Sonoma, or c) Richmond? If you guessed the Contra Costa County city where Chevron has a major oil refinery, pour yourself a glass of cab — or whatever your poison. That's because the California Wine Association, the biggest wine producer on the planet in the early 1900s, indeed moved to Point Molate along the San Pablo Bay after the 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed its monster winemaking facility in downtown San Francisco.

At its peak, Winehaven, as the sprawling 412-acre site in Richmond was called, was shipping some 500,000 gallons of vino a month across the country and abroad. "After the quake, everything was just all rubble and I suspect the land in Richmond was pretty cheap," says Tim Patterson, a Berkeley-based wine writer who has studied the area's wine history. "It also gave the CWA proximity to rail and water for shipping."

But the presses at Winehaven came to a halt for good after Congress adopted the National Prohibition Act in 1919. It wasn't until 1941 that the U.S. Navy finally took over the land for the war effort. Despite Winehaven's demise, the East Bay—known for shipyards, not vineyards—actually has a long tradition of making wine. On the other side of the East Bay Hills, the Livermore Valley, where there are grapes aplenty, of course has its own wine history. But the pretty much vine-less Alameda-Oakland-Emerlyville-Berkeley corridor also has a good reason to be on the viticulture map, having over time become the center of the U.S. urban winemaking movement.

Under the "warehouse winery" model, winemakers have set up in offbeat digs such as a former submarine repair station in one case, taking advantage of the East Bay's mellow climate for winemaking. Another plus is being centrally located for sourcing grapes from any of the state's premiere growing regions. The East Bay Vintners Alliance (eastbayvintners.com) representing mostly small urban artisanal wineries now counts 15 members, but the number is likely to grow.

"These folks are the future, not just in the Bay Area, but in all the established wine regions in the country," says Patterson, who also makes his own wine at home and writes a wine blog called Blind Muscat's Cellarbook. "It's just incredibly expensive to buy vineyard land in places like Napa and Sonoma today. The only way for most passionate winemakers to get into the winery business is to open some variation of the warehouse winery."

Alfred W. Baxter launched what was possibly the first modern East Bay label under the name Veedercrest Vineyards in the early 1970s. He started first making wine in the basement of his house in the Berkeley Hills before moving the operation to Emeryville, Patterson says. Despite his humble beginnings, the U.C. Berkeley philosophy professor was no amateur. Baxter's vintage 1972 Chardonnay was esteemed enough to compete in the storied "Judgment of Paris" wine tasting by a group of French wine experts 1976, although it ended up placing ninth out of ten in its category.

But of the half dozen or so urban winemakers who got their start in the East Bay in the 1970s, perhaps one of the most influential has been Kent Rosenblum, a veterinarian originally from Minnesota. After beginning to make wine out of his home



by Eric Wahlgren

Don't laugh, the East Bay actually has a long history of making wine.

CHÂTEAU OAKLAND

with his wife Kathy in 1978, the couple eventually moved Rosenblum Cellars to its current 80,000-square foot space at a former railroad repair facility in Alameda. The winery, particularly reputed for its zinlandels, today produces some 52 wines, quite a few of them award-winning.

What's more, Rosenblum Cellars over the years has served as something of a training ground for the East Bay's urban winemakers, helping spawn, among others, Loren Tayerle's Tayerle winery, Jeff Cohn's JC Cellars, and Michael and Anne Dashe's Dashe Cellars, all in Oakland. The latest sign of Rosenblum's industry clout and the success of the thriving

wine region to which he belongs? International drinks giant Diageo earlier this year drank up Rosenblum Cellars for \$105 million. "The East Bay has great universities, a central location, and a very receptive atmosphere," says Rosenblum, now 63. "Combine that with all the industrial space available and you have many of the right ingredients for making good wine."

In the last few years, there's no question that more young vintners are going the urban winery route, with the East Bay being the top destination. No wonder some jokingly refer to the area as "Baja Napa." One of the latest is Brendan Eliason who started Periscope Cellars in 2005 in a facility originally

built during WWII to repair subs. With vineyards fetching at least \$100,000 an acre in Napa Valley, working out of the vast, raw warehouse in Emeryville was a far more doable option for the 32-year-old, who is focused on making complex, fruit-forward, blended reds from grapes he buys only from small, family growers. "Urban production is actually a retro thing," says Eliason, reflecting on the evolution of the East Bay's wine industry. "The truth is, grapes don't care whether you truck them in." With his 2005 Syrah Dry Creek Valley receiving the San Francisco Chronicle's "Best of Class" distinction in 2008, he certainly seems to be on to something.

Select East Bay Wine History Highlights

Earthquake destroys California Wine Association's wine production facility in San Francisco

CWA builds Winehaven at Point Molate in Richmond, eventually shipping 500,000 gallons of wine a month at its peak

1919

National Prohibition Act is adopted by Congress and Winehaven later ceases operation

U.S. Navy moves into winery buildings at Point Molate

1976

Alfred W. Baxter's Veedercrest Vineyards' vintage 1972 Chardonnay places at the "Judgment of Paris"

1978

Kent and Kathy Rosenblum start Rosenblum Cellars, which eventually moves to Alameda

1986

Audubon Cellars, famous for its labels with reproductions of John James Audubon's illustrations, opens in Berkeley

1996

Michael and Anne Dashe launch Dashe Cellars in Oakland after having rented space from Rosenblum Cellars in the past

2005

Brendan Eliason starts Periscope Cellars in a former WWII submarine repair facility in Emeryville

2008

Diageo buys Rosenblum Cellars for \$105 million