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California  
*Winery of the Month*



Reynaldo Robledo tending one of his vineyards

## From Braceros to Patron in Just One Lifetime

### *Robledo Family Winery*



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Today, just 25 wineries in California are owned by Latin American immigrants. Considering that the wine industry depends for its very existence on thousands of vineyard and winery workers, especially from Mexico but also from Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua among other countries, an observer might expect that more Latinos would have reached positions of influence to the point that they could develop wineries in California. Born in Mexico, Reynaldo Robledo is actually the first. In 1997, he founded Robledo Family Winery, located in the heart of the famous Carneros appellation, which straddles the county line between Napa and Sonoma. Reynaldo believes that a critical mass of Latinos has now achieved sufficient expertise, and he predicts that within five years, 40 percent of California winemakers will be Latin American immigrants. At that point, many will become employers rather than employees.

"Many Latino people who work in wineries are now assistant winemakers. These people are learning. In five more years, a lot of them will be winemakers. And anyone who works in a winery has contacts.

They know the owners of other vineyards. If they're planning to make wine, they can buy five tons of fruit here and five tons there. Pretty soon, they'll be able to do 20 tons and make 1000 cases. One thousand cases represent a lot of money, but they can start with 100 cases like I did. Today, I'm making 20,000 cases."

The story of Latin American immigrants in the California wine business has been very different from that of earlier waves of immigrant winemakers from Europe, where growing vines and making wine was embedded in the culture. Anyone who made wine learned from his father, and both viticulture and enology were practiced on very basic levels that had existed for hundreds of years. Almost any Italian immigrant at the turn of the 20th Century would have been able to put a vine in the ground and make rudimentary wine from its fruit, whereas in Latin America, tequila and rum are the common alcoholic drinks.

Nor were Latin Americans a stable population here as were earlier immigrants. During World War II, the U.S. government invited Mexican farm workers to replace Amer-

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## WINERY OF THE MONTH

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### WINERY *from cover*

icans who were fighting the war abroad. They worked the harvests and then returned home. The program ended in 1964, but a certain number of agricultural workers were granted visas and eventual citizenship as was Reynaldo Robledo. At 16 years old, he followed his grandfather and father from a mountain town in Michoacán, Mexico to the Napa Valley in California. Within months of his arrival, Reynaldo's employer, legendary grower Frankie Barbera, put him in a supervisory position because he was willing to work 16 hours a day. But more important, Reynaldo displayed extraordinarily keen observational abilities that allowed him to understand the plants that he was tending. And he learned from others as much as they were willing to teach him. Ten years later, Reynaldo had become vineyard manager for Sonoma-Cutrer properties in Sonoma, Napa, and Russian River Valley.

In 1981, Reynaldo moved to Curtis Ranches. At the time, Northern California wineries were engaged in feverish experimentation, trying to match rootstock, grape varieties, and clones of those varieties to vineyard sites. Grafting plants from one variety to another or one clone to another was common practice. Reynaldo had developed formidable grafting abilities to the extent that his employer sent him to an affiliate winery in France to teach the skill. As Reynaldo explains, the French farmed small vineyards with varieties and clones that were typical to their locations. They had very little experience with grafting. In this particular French vineyard, the vines were old, not producing, but the owners didn't want to eliminate them. Reynaldo showed the incredulous owners how to graft different clones onto their existing rootstock. Furthermore, their vineyards were familiar to him because, at the time, Napa was full of French clones. "I was one of the first to ever graft plants in France. Today they are doing more," he says.

Reynaldo learned his craft through direct experience over time. He has enormous respect for that type of learning rather than what now takes place in viticulture and enology departments at universities. He cautions against the hasty decisions that he sees other farmers make simply because they don't research their intentions. "You need to check before you do anything in a vineyard. And it's easy to do. Asking questions doesn't cost anything. You need to talk to people who have been in the vineyard for a long time, not people who come from school. Those people have

experience in books but not experience in the vineyard. I work there daily and learn. When you make a mistake, you learn from the mistake."

A common error that farmers make is to ignore the relationships between soils, climate, rootstock, and grape clone, he explains. A farmer may have planted Cabernet but wants the next hot variety, for example Pinot Noir, and grafts the vine over without understanding that the existing rootstock may be incompatible with the varietal or that the climate may be inappropriate. "A lot of people never consult, never ask questions. When you make mistakes with grape vines, you make a mistake for a long time."

Soils are very important to grape quality too, he adds. The farmer needs to dig a hole and observe the soil strata. "If the best soil is at three feet, you want to use a rootstock that grows only three feet, not past that level, because the plant needs those minerals. If the plant doesn't grow to that level, the fruit will be different. You don't always have good weather, but at least you can have a good foundation." Reynaldo is respected for his superior knowledge in this area just as he is for his grafting skills.

Pruning and cropping the fruit are important, he explains. Pruning controls the amount of fruit that the vine must ripen. The less fruit on the vine, the sweeter and more flavorful it will be since sugars are made in the vine and migrate to the fruit. The variables that produce good fruit seem infinite, but at 60 years old with 44 of those years spent in Northern California vineyards, farming, teaching, and consulting, Reynaldo is a master of both science and practice.

Today, he owns 350 acres in prime Northern California appellations, 45 acres in Napa, 85 acres in Lake County above Napa, and the rest in Sonoma. In 1997, Reynaldo opened his winery in Carneros, and last year he opened another winery on his property in Lake County. He continues to operate his vineyard management company, farming for other people, and to consult. He devotes just 20 percent of his grape production to his own wineries and sells the rest to notable producers like Gloria Ferrer and Kendall-Jackson's La Crema.

Reynaldo's expertise and success have taken him to high places, including the White House. He named one of his wines "Los Braceros" and told the story of his

family's experience as migrant workers on the bottle's back label. The wine came to the attention of Mexico's President Philippe Calderón, who visited Reynaldo at the winery during one of his trips to California several years ago. Later when President Calderón and his wife visited the White House, Reynaldo was also invited and met with both Presidents Obama and Calderón. This June, Calderón gave the commencement address at Stanford University and once again asked to meet with Reynaldo. He was interested in what Reynaldo thought of Mexico's potential as a wine growing nation.

Reynaldo feels that the Mexican climate is overly tropical for grapevines. "Grapevines like to sleep," he says. They require cold weather in the winter so that the vine can go dormant for at least four months. The vine also needs cool nights so that fruit has a prolonged period on the vine to develop deep flavors. In a consistently warm climate, the vine won't shut down during winter months, and without cool night-time temperatures, the fruit will ripen too quickly.

Because vines are currently planted near the ocean, Reynaldo has detected salt in many Mexican wines. He says that this is a problem in California's Carneros appellation as well. The remedy in California is to irrigate with water that is totally devoid of salt so that it cleans the soils. Another problem that Reynaldo has noticed is that Mexican winemakers are aging wine for too long in old barrels so that wines are often oxidized. In other words, he's generally not enthusiastic about the nation's winegrowing potential.

Reynaldo owns 200 acres in Michoacán, where he was born, and currently leases the land to farmers, who are growing row crops. Eventually he might try to plant vines there. "I can't do everything," he says. But his greater ambition is to export wine to Mexico City and its population of 21 million people, to start small and eventually increase his production here and sales there.

Soft-spoken with a gentle demeanor, Reynaldo and his wife Maria have nine children, seven sons and two daughters, all of whom work together in their father's various enterprises. With hard work, dedicated attention, vision, and intelligent decision-making, Reynaldo Robledo continues to expand his ambitions. "I need to do my best," he says quietly.