Napa-Sonoma rivalry began in last century

The contest is nearly complete. If the weather doesn’t turn on us, the 1994 vintage could be something to boast about... of which the two major “Wine Country” counties will have boosters’ rights — Napa or Sonoma?

That’s the eternal question. Sonoma and Napa counties have been squabbling over who grows the best grapes and makes the best wine for more than 100 years.

Long before the turn of the century, vintners in the two counties were taking pot shots at each other. In the 1880s, the editor of the Sonoma Index was sniping at the St. Helena Star for suggesting Sonoma Valley residents were jealous of Napa’s wine.

“Now, Brother MacKinder,” wrote the Sonoma editor, “you know better than that, why so many Napa Valley wineries are jealous of Sonoma’s wine than why they are so much better — $300 — and the gold medal at the International Winemaking Fair for best wines, brands and grapes?”

The editor may well have saved his wrath for another day. All the medals won by all the wines in both counties won’t solve this old problem. Napa has been calling itself “premium” and Sonoma “jug,” since the state’s fingered red wine as the “mission grape.” And the competition goes beyond wine.


On page 11 he informs his readers: “Weekending in the (Napa) valley has been a great adventure for a century, lending Napa an aura of respectability lacking in neighboring Sonoma, which was associated with historicist ideas where, during prohibition, San Francisco had retreated from the strictures of police society and the law. Napa’s probity, by contrast, could be read in the pedigrees of old edifices like Inglenook and Beaulieu.”

I suppose that could be countered with the suggestion that Sonoma County’s history is more “important.”

After all, we had a ranching and they didn’t. Or, if I really wanted to get into the game, I could recall a concise description of the city, offered in the 1860s by a Napa transplant to Sonoma County. “Big Graton,” is what he called it.

SONOMANS are practiced Napa bashers. Tom Smothers, interviewed on CBS’s Morning Show, asked the world to remember that “SONOMA makes wine, NAPA makes wine, they are real close; but in the end — they are real close.”

Smothies, a speaker at a forum where I was asked to respond to the Napa Valley as the “only great agricultural land left in the Bay Area,” famously said that “there is no more than one audiuble ‘harump’” after he was asked about the city. “Harump” was a favorite word of Napa vintners.

And Napa has been known to trash our historical figures, casting aspersions on Agoston Haraszthy, the near-legendary Hungarian who is generally regarded as the “father” of California viticulture. Because his Buena Vista wine caves are on the side of the mountain — although barely, since they are on the eastern edge of the Sonoma Valley — questioning his role in wine history has been Napa Valley sport for years.

Likewise, Sonomans try to claim Charles Krug, the Prussian immigrant who was the first to put grapes through a press for commercial wine. It was a cider press, but it worked and it sold the end of the old-country “stomping” method which had been accepted practice. (And you thought that was only an “I Love Lucy” gag, didn’t you?) Krug lived in Sonoma County before moving to Napa. But, in truth, the time was short.

Grape growers in both counties ripped out vines and planted prune trees in the 1930s. In Sonoma County, pears and apples were other “ Substitute” crops. In Napa County, peaches and apricots were the only fruit crops. In both counties, there were winemakers who rote the spasm of national righteousness. In Sonoma County, sacramental wine for Roman Catholic purposes and Martin & Prati continued winemaking to supply those needs. In Napa County, Georges de Latour of Beaulieu Vineyards made enough sacramental wine to finance a truly elegant lifestyle, entertaining movie stars and visiting royalty.

A FEW other winemakers in each county hung on with permission to make medicinal wine, which was the source of many jokes. In 1920, The Press Democrat reported a surprising number of people in Santa Rosa had sore throats and were asking their physicians for prescriptions for “hot claret wine gargle.”

There were, of course, a number of winemakers on both sides of the hill who broke the law. The European immigrants had a hard time understanding why making wine could conceivably be forbidden by law. When winemakers got together to talk over old times, they would chuckle at Dan Bagnari’s recollection that his father-in-law, who owned Geyser Peak Winery, was “so shocked by Prohibition that he almost stopped making wine.”

Still, the industry in both counties was a shambles. There were only 160 of the state’s 700 wineries ready to get back into the business. The rest were history. And here is where the paths of the two counties go in slightly different directions. The multiple valleys of Sonoma County, with their varied agricultural characteristics, have published county as a farming county. The description of the geographical, hops (still selling to foreign markets), prunes, apples, eggs, cherries and pears had made Sonoma the eighth-ranked county in the entire United States in ag production in 1920. In 1935, at the height of the Great Depression, it was still ranked 10th in the nation.

Napa County, essentially one valley, lacked the opportunities provided by such diversity. But Napaans had established themselves as elegant, as Conway has pointed out. And that may have made the difference.

Gentlemen vintners, seeking a challenge as well as a country squire existence, found Napa County about 10 years before they hit on Sonoma County. This new breed of winemaker, aggressive, competitive, and, in many cases, already wealthy (there were successful advertising executives, stock and bond men, and a complement of acquisitive wealth), came seeking the secrets of the grape. There is a saying among winemakers that the way to make a small fortune in the wine business is to start with a big one.

Napa County offered proof of that before Sonoma County was “discovered.”

The story was repeated in Napa in the 1960s. In Sonoma County it was well into the 1970s before there were enough boutique wineries to make a dent in the Napa County market. There were does to play catch-up. Hence, the rivalry, which is sometimes in jest, sometimes not real.

Gentlemen, having played Avis to Napa’s Hertz for nearly 20 years, is gaining. I heard a Jarag commercial on the radio recently which is the idea of the salesmen composers from the wineries by giving them a glass of Sonoma’s finest product.

But now that we are getting the respect we deserve, Sonoma County winemakers are in disagreement. One body of opinion says that the wine is better than Napa at all. Another body of opinion says that the wine is better than Napa at all. There are differences concerning the quality of the wines from the two counties. And there are new boutique winemakers in each county.

The other opinion, held by the Wine Patrol and more, is that this kind of thing is logical. The Napa County has had a certain style de vie to the wine country mystique, which is in danger of becoming snobbish; that we’re having a good time over here in Sonoma County. The popular style, the style of the mountaineers. Why spoil it by trying to love Napa?

Nineteenth-century grape pickers looked the same in both counties. At left is Edward Maybridge’s off-reproduced photo of the harvest at Buena Vista Winery. At right, pickers at Inglenook, in the Napa Valley.