Wine & Spirits
SPECIAL ISSUE

post-phylloxera
A New Napa Valley

The most important event in Napa Valley history was a disaster. An uncontrollable vine pest forced the replanting of more than two-thirds of the valley's acreage (a conservative estimate) in little more than a decade, from the late 1980s through the '90s. It was tremendously painful and expensive (most estimates of economic damage hover around $3 billion), yet in the end the Napa Valley wine community had turned a crisis into a revolution, and the Napa Valley AVA was transfigured.

It wasn't by choice, of course, but rather at the point of a gun—or, rather, in the grip of a voracious insect's mandibles. In short, Napa Valley wine producers were forced into crisis by a tiny yellow aphid: *Dactylasphaera vitifoliae*, formerly *phylloxera vastatrix*, commonly known as phylloxera, often mistakenly called a root louse, and by any name one of the most destructive pests known to agriculture.

Phylloxera had infested California vineyards once before, in the late 19th century, not long after it nearly wiped out France's vineyards. The only known way to combat the bug was to graft vines onto roots with inherent resistance to it. As a result, much of the standing acreage after Prohibition was grafted on St. George and a few other resistant rootstocks.

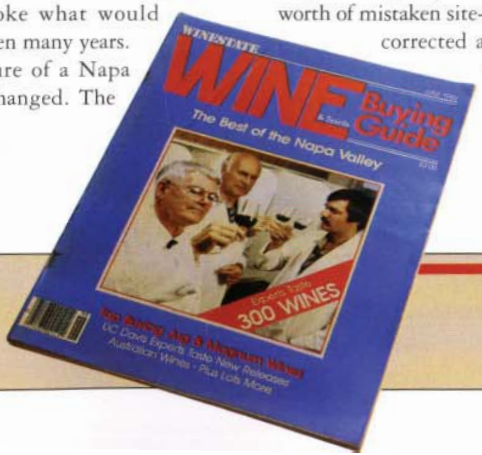
A surge of new planting during the wine revival of the 1970s and '80s set the stage for a second disaster. The majority of new vines were planted on AXR1 rootstock, which had been field-tested by the University of California since the 1890s and was billed as a dream rootstock in terms of easy cultivation and high fruit quality. AXR1 was thought to be phylloxera-resistant and so was embraced by a new generation of wine producers.

In fact, AXR1 was susceptible to phylloxera (or possibly, according to some scientists, resistant to ordinary phylloxera but not to a more virulent form known as Biotype B). By the mid-1980s, the pest was feasting on thousands of acres of recently planted vines throughout California. Napa Valley, with its dense concentration of new vines on very expensive land, was especially hard-hit. UC Davis scientists identified phylloxera as the cause of vine deaths in Rutherford in 1982; by the mid-eighties, it was clear that every vine planted on AXR1 in the entire Napa Valley would have to be ripped out.

Amazingly, the valley's growers and vintners responded to the catastrophe by re-inventing Napa viticulture from the ground up. Rather than simply recreating the status quo, they seized the opportunity to reevaluate, upgrade and fine-tune the Napa vineyard, capitalizing on decades of research and experience to accomplish in one broad stroke what would otherwise have taken many years.

The very nature of a Napa Valley vineyard changed. The mass replanting provided an unprecedented opportunity to rethink cultivation. The necessity of planting new resistant rootstocks allowed growers to match specific stocks to the right locations, often row by row, or even vine by vine. It also allowed for implementation of new pruning and trellising options. And growers were able to select from an expanded array of varietal clones, especially the treasure trove from France that was made available with uncanny good timing in the 1980s. Growers could now offer winemakers what came to be known as the spice rack—diverse aromas, flavors, and textures within a single grape variety, fruit to fit any winemaking protocol or blending style.

The big picture changed, too, as the distribution of varieties in the valley was decisively rearranged. Just like that, a century's worth of mistaken site-variety matches were corrected as under-performing varieties—such as chardonnay in hot



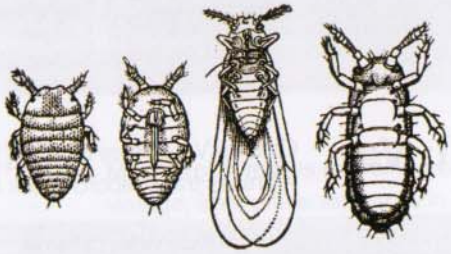
1982 Peter Simic publishes first issue of *Winestate's Wine & Spirits Buying Guide*

1982 Sonoma Valley is recognized as an AVA

northern-valley locations—were matched up with their optimal environments.

In fact, chardonnay was all but excluded from the upper valley, taking over the cooler areas from Yountville south into Carneros. Merlot and cabernet franc were concentrated in proven areas and introduced to promising regions such as the warmer parts of Carneros, and grapes seen as extraneous (riesling, for example) were excised. Most important to the valley's international image, cabernet sauvignon became the overwhelmingly dominant variety.

There was in important paradigm shift in the wine community as well. The uniquely Californian cult of the winemaker was reigned in as the grape grower vaulted to equal stature, a fully-vested partner in the wine-production process rather than a mere purveyor of raw material. Many winemakers who seldom set foot in vineyards embraced a new vision of growing wine rather than creating it with high-tech equipment. It was the birth of the California version of France's *vigneron*, the grower-winemaker with one foot in the cellar and the other among the vines.



Before phylloxera, Napa Valley was just another fine-wine district in the making, evolving in the traditional manner at a respectable vintage-by-vintage pace. It emerged from the chaos newly sleek and powerful, the most defined and focused California wine district, nearly synonymous with California wine. Practically overnight (in viticultural time) the valley's already-charismatic image had been focused in the brilliant light of a star, something like the transformation of Norma Jean Baker into Marilyn Monroe.

Marketing mavens like to tout the 1976 Paris Tasting as a decisive moment, pointing out that it put Napa Valley on the global wine map.

Yet it's one thing to claim the limelight and another to hold the crowd's interest. None of that great publicity for a few outstanding wines would have sustained the valley's glamour in the long run if the Napa Valley wine community hadn't moved decisively to reestablish its basic viticultural standard at a uniformly high level and consolidate its image as the New World headquarters for cabernet sauvignon.

All of which would make *D. vitifoliae* a good candidate for Bug of the Century. Well done, phylloxera. Now please go away. ■

UC Davis scientists discover phylloxera is the cause of vine deaths in Rutherford