

## Settler Vines: Rethinking the History of Wine Production

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Volume 33, Number 2, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108195ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1108195ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this document

Shubert, A. & Martel, M. (2023). Settler Vines: Rethinking the History of Wine Production. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 33(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1108195ar>

# Settler Vines: Rethinking the History of Wine Production

ADRIAN SHUBERT AND MARCEL MARTEL

Sometime in 1866, a Spaniard named Josep Soler (1840–1906) arrived in Whanganui, Aotearoa New Zealand. Born in Constantí in the Camp de Tarragona winemaking region south of Barcelona, Soler came from a winemaking family and was a winemaker himself before leaving Spain. He planted his first New Zealand vineyard shortly after arriving in Whanganui, and his business life was one of uninterrupted success. In 1880, the *New Zealand Herald* proclaimed him its “New Zealander of the Year” for “his founding role in a great industry.”<sup>1</sup>

Soler’s is a classic immigrant success story, but there is another, intimately connected yet hidden history that lies behind it. Soler arrived in New Zealand at a crucial moment in the colony’s history: the final years of the New Zealand Wars. Vincent O’Malley, the wars’ preeminent historian, has described them as “a prolonged and complex series of conflicts... [f]ought between the Crown and different groups of Māori” between 1845 and 1872 that would determine the place of the Māori in the burgeoning settler colony.<sup>2</sup> Whanganui, where Soler settled, was one of the battlegrounds, and while much of the fighting there had ended before he arrived, he was living there when the fighting from June 1868 to March 1869 known as Titokowaru’s war put the town itself under threat.<sup>3</sup> Soler initially engaged with local Māori for his wine business, travelling up the Whanganui River to purchase grapes from them to mix with his own grapes to make his wine. This soon stopped as he found the journey much less useful.<sup>4</sup> In the last years of his life, Soler acquired 200 acres of formerly Māori land along the Whanganui River taken as part of the process of dispossession since the end of the New Zealand Wars.<sup>5</sup>

The story of Joseph Soler is one example of Nēpi Mahuika’s observation that “all New Zealand history is relevant to Māori and ... Māori are relevant in all New Zealand histories.”<sup>6</sup> Soler’s relevance goes far beyond New Zealand, however; although his activities were a tiny part of the explosive geographic expansion of wine production that took place during his lifetime, they illuminate the connection between that expansion and such large historical processes as mass migration, settlement, and Indigenous dispossession around the

world, a connection that historians are still only beginning to explore, as we discuss below.

Winemaking has a 9,000-year-long history.<sup>7</sup> For the bulk of that time, its geographical range was small, limited to the Mediterranean and a few other European countries. This changed after the Spanish conquests in the Americas as growing grapes and making wine became synonymous with European empire. Only a few years after conquering Mexico and Peru, Spaniards were producing wine there, and Spanish winemaking reached what is now the United States in the seventeenth century. The first governor of the Dutch East India Company's Cape Colony planted wine grapes just three years after the colony had been established.

However, it was only as part of the intense process of globalization that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth that commercial wine production spread much further. Only at the end of the nineteenth century did production outside Europe attain significant levels. While Europe still produced around 90 percent of the world's wine in 1914, and France, Italy, and Spain were by far the largest producing countries, Argentina had reached seventh place, Chile ninth, and the United States tenth.<sup>8</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, people in settler societies began to produce the lion's share of wine for domestic consumption. Protectionist tariffs (in places such as the United States, Argentina, and Chile) or imperial networks (in places such as South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand) spurred on the spread of wine around the world. In some societies, such as Argentina, the consumption of wine was a well-entrenched cultural practice and the nascent wine industry faced off against imports from Spain; elsewhere, however, especially in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, the consumption of wine competed with other alcoholic beverages, such as beer and gin.<sup>9</sup>

This extension of wine production was driven by the massive outflow of Europeans from the continent, especially to the temperate belts of the world that attracted most European settlement. The explosion of the European settler populations of colonies and former colonies brought with it the mass dispossession of Indigenous peoples of land and resources.<sup>10</sup> Yet despite this intimate connection between settler colonialism, on the one hand, and the spread of winemaking, on the other, the writing on the history of wine has long been rather self-contained and Eurocentric. Even purportedly global histories dedicate

their attention mainly to this continent of origin.<sup>11</sup> And to the extent that global studies of wine look beyond Europe, they largely ignore Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil, thereby replacing the Eurocentric gaze of some with an Anglocentric global history that focuses only on British settler dominions and the United States.

Only very recently have scholars begun to explore the relationship between the development of the industry and broader questions of empire and its impact on Indigenous peoples. Australian historian Julie McIntyre has incorporated Indigenous Peoples into her narratives of the creation and development of wine production there, especially in the first colony of New South Wales.<sup>12</sup> In her recent book, Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre makes the connection between the extension of commercial winemaking and European, particularly British, imperialism explicit. The new centres of production were “a creation of European colonialism over the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries” and one that was “inextricably part of the painful histories of the devastation of indigenous populations.”<sup>13</sup> It was also part of a cultural project. Wine was “a means of subduing and controlling what they experienced as a strange and exotic land, of making its topography conform to a European model.”<sup>14</sup> Owen White’s study of the wine industry in Algeria, which became the fourth-largest wine-producing region in the world in the early twentieth century, similarly connects these developments to colonialism, in this case French. For White, “nothing symbolized the French presence more than the colony’s own vines.” Indigenous Algerians, Muslims who usually did not consume alcohol, were displaced from vast tracts of agricultural land and then turned into wage workers.<sup>15</sup> Finally, in her book on the creation of the wine industry in California, Julia Ornelas-Higdon analyzes how that development involved Indigenous Californians, Mexican Californios, Chinese immigrants, and settlers from Europe, and involved significant amounts of racialized violence.<sup>16</sup>

Regan-Lefebvre also interrogates the term “New World,” which has become ubiquitous in writing about wine since the 1960s, although she does not challenge the term’s connection to outdated ideas about “discovery.”<sup>17</sup> The most common understanding of the term in the literature is as a shorthand for “the wine-producing countries that challenged the market dominance” of the traditional European hegemons. The term also connotes differences in “production methods, corporate models, classifications systems, and ultimately wine styles.” It can even be a matter of individual psychology: “how you think

... what your ambitions [and] dreams are,” as one influential British wine critic put it. Wine writers also debate whether European countries such as Greece, Georgia, or Hungary are part of the New World, while others have proposed the concept of a “Third World” of wine to take into account production in India and China. For Regan-Lefebvre, “all these distinctions are based on generalizations,” but there is one respect in which the term is valid: the New Worlds of wines were products of European colonialism.<sup>18</sup>

The role of settlers — conceptualized as immigrants — has received more attention. The globalization of wine took place alongside the massive outflow of Europeans. Of the 60 million people to leave the continent between 1840 and 1940, 96 percent went to the temperate belts of the world.<sup>19</sup> From Australia and New Zealand to Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, to the United States and Canada, immigrants from Europe, and especially from France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, were crucial to the expansion of commercial wine production in the second half of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth. Settlers from these countries brought their knowledge of grape growing and winemaking. At the same time, scientific and agricultural knowledge was transferred to these incipient wine-producing regions through the publication (and translation) of scientific and amateur books.<sup>20</sup>

This special issue contains six articles that were presented at the Settler Vines: Making and Consuming Wine in a Globalizing World since 1850 virtual conference that took place in September 2021 at York University. These six contributions cover a range of issues, including the role of entrepreneurs, immigrant communities, and the state in the development of the commercial wine industry and its impact on the land and Indigenous people, in different parts of the world, notably Argentina, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.

The first two pieces engage with questions of empire and wine production. Julie McIntyre uses settler colonial grape growing and winemaking, which began almost immediately after the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, to explore Indigenous-settler relations in Australia. While relatively insignificant in strictly economic terms, these activities, McIntyre argues, had powerful symbolic meanings as markers of economic, social, and cultural citizenship. Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre proposes a more critical approach to a wine history that has too often been written by those enthusiastic of the spread of wine and its improve-

ments in quality. In particular, she highlights the absence of attention to imperialism and colonialism. First, Regan-Lefebvre provides three distinct historical readings of the story of the Burgoyne company, the major importer of Australian wine to Great Britain that was founded in 1872. She then complicates the story further by exploring the meaning of the wine Burgoyne imported from one colony when it was sold in another colonial setting, Ireland.

The next two articles examine the expansion of wine production in the second half of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth, focusing on the contributions of different groups of people involved in the industry. Chelsea Davis analyzes the role of “viticul-tural capitalists” — large-scale winegrowers, producers, and merchants — in restructuring the colonial wine industry in Australia and South Africa between the 1850s and 1880s. The entangled processes of mining speculation, wine production, and political power and the brand of settlers who relied on their privileges as white, British colonists to extract financial capital from mining and contribute to an industry that exploited racialized systems of labour and sought economic profit provide a useful starting point for further historical examination of racial capitalism in Britain’s winegrowing empire. Steve Stein examines the explosive development of the Argentine wine industry from the 1880s to the outbreak of the First World War, looking at the crucial role of immigrant and working-class consumers in making an industry. His article charts the role of several wineries that quickly created a model of industrial wine production, and it highlights the Spanish and Italian connections of the producers and the important role of the Argentine state.

The last two articles bring us into the second half of the twentieth century and address the role of the local, regional, and provincial and state governments in encouraging the production and consumption of wine. Kathleen Brosnan explores responses to urban sprawl in two major North American wine regions: the Napa Valley in California and the Niagara Peninsula in Ontario. Governments in both places enacted legislation that was both progressive and conservative, reflecting a modern ethos celebrating environment and lifestyle while ensconced in traditional images of the “rural idyll.” Marie-Joelle Duchesne analyzes the role of the Quebec state in the promotion of wine consumption in the 1970s and 1980s. Wine was popularized as both a newly accessible consumer product and a hedonistic commodity, thus targeting a homogenized middle-class market that came to represent Quebec’s

overall *savoir-boire*. This shift not only helped popularize the French gastronomical discourse of civility but did so in a sociopolitical context marked by cultural and linguistic revindications by injecting the object of wine with cultural and economic symbolism.

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## Endnotes

- 1 *New Zealand Herald*, October 9, 1880. Soler made another important contribution to wine production in New Zealand. In 1888, he brought his nephew Antonio José Vidal, or Anthony Joseph Vidal as he became, to Whanganui. After working with his uncle until 1900, Vidal made failed attempts to strike out on his own in Whanganui and Palmerston North before purchasing an old racing stable in Hastings in Hawke's Bay in 1905. There he became a pioneer in what is now one of the country's major wine producing regions. Vidal's winery still exists and is considered one of the oldest continually functioning wineries in the country.
- 2 Vincent O'Malley, *Voices from the New Zealand Wars | He Reo nō ngā Pakanga o Aotearoa* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2021).
- 3 O'Malley, *New Zealand Wars*, 268–92.
- 4 "Wanganui Success," *Canterbury Press*, March 24, 1970; *Wanganui Herald*, July 11, 1903.
- 5 *New Zealand Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic Review*, July 6, 1899, November 29, 1900; *He whiritauoka: The Whanganui Land Report* (Lower Hutt, NZ: Legislation Direct, 2015), 1471. Soler also tried to acquire land upriver from Māori to grow fruit but "had been unable to arrange suitable terms." "Chamber of Commerce," *Wanganui Herald*, March 8, 1906.
- 6 Nēpia Mahuika, "New Zealand History is Māori History: Tikanga as the Ethical Foundation of Historical Scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of History* 49, no. 1 (2015): 5.
- 7 Rod Phillips, *9000 Years of Wine: A World History* (Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 2017).
- 8 James Simpson, *Creating Wine: The Emergence of a World Industry, 1840–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). This globalization of wine production did not translate into a significant increase in international trade in wine. This would not happen until the period after 1960, and especially after 1990, when wine "switched from being one of the world's least traded agricultural products to one of its most traded internationally." Kym Anderson and Vicente Pinilla, eds, *Wine Globalization: A New Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4.
- 9 W. J. Rorabaugh, "Alcohol in America," *OAH Magazine of History: Drug Use in History*, 6, no. 2 (1991): 17–19; Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003); Simpson, *Creating Wine*; Jock Phillips, "Alcohol," *Tē Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, page 1, "Colonial Drinking, 1800–1880," <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/alcohol>.



- 10 James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). On settler colonialism, see Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–40; and Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010). For Canada, see Jerry Bannister, “Settler Colonialism and the Future of Canadian History,” *Acadiensis* (blog), April 18, 2016, <https://earlycanadianhistory.ca/2016/04/18/settler-colonialism-and-the-future-of-canadian-history>; and Cole Harris, *A Bounded Land: Reflections on Settler Colonialism in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021).
- 11 Simpson, *Creating Wine*; Phillips, *9000 Years of Wine*.
- 12 Julie McIntyre, *Hunter Wine: A History* (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2018); Julie McIntyre, Maggie Brady and Jillian Barnes, “They Are Among the Best Workers, Learning the Ways of a Vineyard Quickly: Aboriginal People, Drinking, and Labor in the Early Australian Wine Industry,” *Global Food History* 5, no. 1-2 (2019): 45–66.
- 13 Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre, *Imperial Wine: How the British Empire Made Wine’s New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 13–15.
- 14 Regan-Lefebvre, *Imperial Wine*, 240. For a similar argument about another colonial product, see Rebecca J. H. Woods, *The Herds Shot Round the World: Native Breeds and the British Empire, 1800–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
- 15 Owen White, *The Blood of the Colony: Wine and the Rise and Fall of French Algeria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 3.
- 16 Julia Ornelas-Higdon, *The Grapes of Conquest: Race, Labor, and the Industrialization of California Wine, 1769–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).
- 17 In the field of global health, for example, “New World” – even in this subfield – is considered an “archaic term that has little relevance today. “How We Classify Countries and People—and Why It Matters,” *BMJ Global Health* 7, no. 6 (2022): e009704, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009704>.
- 18 Regan-Lefebvre, *Imperial Wine*, 11–15. The *Oxford Companion to Wine* defines the “New World” as “the colonies established as a result of European exploration, beginning with some of the longer voyages of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As such, it contrasts with the OLD WORLD of Europe and the other Mediterranean countries where the vine was widely established by the 4<sup>th</sup> century.” Jancis Robinson and Julia Harding, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 501.

SETTLER VINES: RETHINKING  
THE HISTORY OF WINE PRODUCTION

- 19 José C. Moya and Adam McKeown, *World Migration in the Long Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2011).
- 20 Chelsea Davis, “From European Roots to Australian Wine: Exchanges in Agricultural Knowledge in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australian Wine Industry,” in *Agrarian Reform and Resistance in an Age of Globalisation: The Euro-American World and Beyond, 1780–1914*, ed. Joe Regan and Cathal Smith (London: Routledge, 2019), 123-136.