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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER



Labels with roots in Mexico

13 companies represent a groundswell of Latino winemakers
Alex Sotelo Cellars, Napa.

Thirteen years ago, Alex Sotelo visited his uncle in Napa and fell in love with the vineyards. At age 18, he dropped out of Teacher's College in San Marcos, Mexico, and went to work pruning vines.

After two years, Sotelo felt he was stagnating in the collegial, but segregated, farmworker community. "Mexicans are hard workers -- we do all the labor," says Sotelo. "But we almost like to stay within our own limits, where it feels comfortable."

In 1993, when he began taking English classes, he was hired to do menial cellar work at Robert Pecota Winery in Calistoga. Pecota, a Russian immigrant, liked to hire people who were driven to learn.

Sotelo worked his way up the ladder at Pecota while taking viticulture and enology courses at a variety of colleges, including UC Davis and Napa Valley College. In 2002, 11 years after immigrating, he was named Pecota's winemaker.

Today Sotelo owns a house in Napa that he shares with four of his seven sisters: Norma, Mirna, Lorena and Mireya.

Two years ago, Sotelo launched his own wine label, Alex Sotelo Cellars. His 2002 Dalraddy Vineyard Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$28) was released this month. He also has Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon in the pipeline, for a total annual production of about 740 cases.

Although Sotelo never finished his degree, he is treasurer and a director of the Latino Cultural Center of Napa Valley, a Yountville nonprofit that encourages young Latinos to go to college.

Education is the key for Latinos to get ahead, says Sotelo. While much progress has been made, he says, "The industry is still mostly segregated. I think that will get better, but I think it will take one or two generations."



By Carol Emert
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