

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER



Living la vida vino

By Carol Emert / October 7, 2004

Que rico! More winemakers of Mexican heritage are making their mark on the wine world. When Alex Sotelo got his first assistant winemaker job and started pouring wine at tastings, people would often ask where he hailed from -- Italy? Chile? Spain?

A slight man with brown eyes, black hair and a sing-song accent, Sotelo would tell them Mexico. "I saw many surprised faces," says Sotelo, 31, with a rueful smile. "They never guessed I was Mexican. They never did."

Yet people of Mexican heritage have remained largely invisible, pruning and racking in the background while Caucasian winery owners and wine makers enjoy the accolades. Finally, the heavy lifting is beginning to pay off.

Thirteen wineries isn't a lot compared to the hundreds in Northern California owned by people of European ancestry, but it's a start. And the number is growing steadily -- the culmination of advantageous business conditions such as low interest rates and, more importantly, generations of hard work, pinching pennies and pulling together.

Among the vintners, each has a different story, but most follow one of three trajectories.

The largest group consists of multi-generational families who attained financial success as grape growers and parlayed their assets and connections into winemaking. In the generation now running the business, most are college-educated. These include the Ceja, Frias, Madrigal, Renteria and Robledo families.

The second group are bootstrapping entrepreneurs -- immigrants, in most cases, who worked their way up from the fields to winemaker status without the benefit of family money. They are more likely to speak with an accent and lack a college degree -- Sotelo, Rolando Herrera and Raul Gloria are among them.

The third category consists of people who attained wealth in other industries and took up winemaking as a second career: Olga Keever with her husband Bill, Joe Reynoso and his wife Elena.

While Latino-owned brands are a very visible sign of progress, Mexican Americans who don't have their own label are finding success in other ways.