Making (a) place: wine, society and environment in California’s Sierra Nevada foothills

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of the wine industry, writ large, in place-making via a case study of the wine industry, from ‘grape to glass’, in the Sierra Nevada foothills of California, which examines how wine production and consumption has influenced the sociocultural and physical–environmental landscape of the region. Using qualitative field methods and secondary data analysis, the paper investigates the impacts of the ‘emerging’ wine industry of the Sierra Nevada foothills by engaging with industry actors at all levels. We find that, while not new, wine grape production and winemaking have become increasingly prominent economically and culturally as evidenced by (in)visible infrastructure and growing direct and indirect contributions to foothill counties’ economies. Moreover, we argue that, in the Sierra Nevada and beyond, wine growing and winemaking provide a powerful mechanism for identity and material landscape production in the area. The pursuit and construction of the Sierra Nevada foothills as ‘wine country’ becomes a means through which the place ‘makes’ itself and, in turn, makes a place for itself across a variety of economic and cultural contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Although wine is grown, produced and consumed across the United States and the world, some regions stand out as emblematic, while others come across as more surprising or incongruous (Dougherty, 2012). In places such as California – with Napa and Sonoma counties standing out in particular – wine is seen as natural and expected; in contrast, wines from Arizona, Texas or Wisconsin can come as a surprise. In the US context, California wine is nearly synonymous with ‘quality’ and ‘tradition’; however, there are numerous (and increasing) growing/production regions within the state that are not as well known or as trusted as producers. A case in point is the Sierra Nevada foothills region of California.
The Sierra Nevada foothills are environmentally and culturally dynamic: ecologically, the region is characterized by large elevation changes and attendant ecosystem transitions; and, socially, it hosts a diverse and fluctuating population with a variety of backgrounds and interests (Duane, 1999). The region’s rich history of natural resource extraction includes mining, logging, ranching, agricultural production and recreation/tourism (Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project, 1996). Although the ‘boom’ of several of these once prominent historical industries has passed, many of these activities are still occurring, and, collectively, play an important role in the form and function of the landscape (Council, 2007; Myles & Filan, 2017). In addition, there are distinct, and sometimes conflicting, social and political factions in the area, which leads to often heated debates regarding public policy and environmental management (Walker & Fortmann, 2003). As such, this region, like all others, is not static; in the Sierra Nevada foothills, both environment and society are diverse and shift over time.

While there may be a number of drivers of change in this area, this study specifically examines how the wine industry, from ‘grape to glass’, has influenced the sociocultural and physical–environmental landscape of the Sierra Nevada foothills. We explore the socio-ecological context of the Sierra Nevada foothills and consider how wine – both wine grape growing and winemaking – has contributed to the transformation of the physical and cultural landscape. Landscape in this context is understood in the classic sense as a marriage between physical (morphological) form and function, meaning, and ideology (Cadieux & Taylor, 2013; Mitchell, 2000, 2008). The wine industry in the Sierra Nevada is examined as a transformative agent, as a means for identifying and describing the significance of fermentation – in this case, of grapes into wine – as an economic, environmental and social driver of landscape change in the region. Through this analysis, the Sierra Nevada is revealed as a quintessential ‘fermented landscape’, one shaped, inextricably, by its literal and figurative ferment (Myles, Forthcoming). While fermentation is process that can occur naturally, the study of a ‘fermented landscape’ such as this is considering how and when it does not. Specifically, such studies enquire about instances when fermentation is deliberately pursued by actors large and small, investigating the numerous implications for fermented-focused landscape change, including the construction of identities and environments (i.e., places) (Myles, Forthcoming).

This overview paper describes the context of wine in the Sierra Nevada and enquires specifically about the role of the wine industry in place-making and landscape change. The findings herein are, however, applicable to regions above and beyond the Sierra Nevada – and perhaps into other kinds of ferments. Fermented products such as wine, beer and spirits have emerged as a veritable panacea in contemporary economic and social development (Chapman, Lellock, & Lippard, 2017; Kline, Slocum, & Cavaliere, 2017; Myles et al., Forthcoming; Patterson & Hoalst-Pullen, 2014; Reid & Gatrell, 2017); by better understanding the dynamics of fermentation-focused development in this place, we may well be able to understand them better elsewhere as well.

THEORETICAL FRAMING AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

The story of landscape change in the Sierra Nevada is situated within a wider process of social and environmental transformation. Specifically, the traditional, and still generally predominant, agricultural industry in the Sierra Nevada foothills is ranching; however, the cattle industry is no longer as economically viable as it once was (Smethurst, 1999). Nevertheless, the practice remains significant for this region as both an economic driver and a sociocultural touchstone for the local population (Council, 2007; Duane, 1999; Walker, 2003). Even as the return on heritage activities such as ranching diminishes, landowners of all kinds struggle to maintain economic viability while also retaining rural identities and lifestyles. Here, and across the American West, the result is often a shift from landscapes of production to landscapes of consumption (Travis, 2007).

Landscapes of production are defined by primary production and natural resource extraction, while landscapes of consumption are defined by economic activities reliant on ‘consuming’ the
landscape both literally through agri- or eco-tourism and symbolically through rural recreation, second home ownership and amenity migration (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Taylor & Hurley, 2016). Such social and environmental shifts are framed as ‘rural restructuring’, the fundamental (re)shaping of rural areas in response to global, national, state, regional and local (often economic) forces (Woods, 2011). Hiner (2016b) details the swift and drastic changes in economy, tourism and culture of the area as part of the localized processes of rural restructuring occurring in place and reveals how a particular winery was a catalyst for social and economic change in one specific community in the Sierra Nevada foothills. This research responds to wider questions about how the wine industry – vineyards, wineries and associated wine tourism – is shifting the sociocultural and physical environmental landscapes of Sierra Nevada region in general.

RESEARCH AIMS, METHODS AND SITE DESCRIPTION

Research aims
As an exploratory study, the research question was broad: How has the wine industry – wine grape growing, winemaking, and wine marketing and associated tourism – influenced the social and physical landscape of the Sierra Nevada foothills? Specifically, we enquired what role(s), broadly speaking, wine has played in the transition from (or in the relationship between) landscapes of production and landscapes of consumption in the Sierra Nevada foothill region.

Methods
Research methods for this study include: an ethnographic field study (such as field observation, participant observation and in-depth one-on-one and group interviews); cultural landscape analysis, including the textual analysis of images; as well as secondary data analysis, including the examination of annual crop reports, wine grape association materials, tourism promotional materials as well as other economic and agricultural reports. These mainly qualitative field methods captured data from farmers, winemakers, agricultural advisors and commissioners, and prominent business owners and economic development advocates selected via their prominence in the field and by snowball sampling. These varying data sources were used in conjunction and in contrast with each other to garner a holistic view of the processes occurring in this case. The research was conducted in the first half of 2014, including intensive data collection/fieldwork in the Sierra Nevada foothills in July 2014. Sixty-one interviews were completed in the eight-county research area. As the study was designed to be exploratory, the research questions and subsequent analysis were broad and inclusive.

Site description
In the low elevations of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California is a region known as the Sierra Nevada foothills. The foothills are composed of eight Sierra Nevada counties (as listed on the American Viticultural Area (AVA)¹): Yuba, Nevada, Placer, El Dorado, Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne and Mariposa. The counties’ populations have been growing steadily; 7–16% between 2000 and 2010 (Sierra Nevada Conservancy, 2010). However, despite the recent population stabilization (United States Census Bureau, 2013), the spectre of growth (and thus ‘development’) has been an important and notorious driver of both public opinion and policy for many years (Beebe & Wheeler, 2012). Additionally, the region features large elevation changes and attendant ecosystem transitions, has a long and interesting environmental history (Beesley, 2004), and has been populated by indigenous and other groups for thousands of years (Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project, 1996). Given is long habitation, diverse governing regimes over time, and ongoing extraction and amenity appeal, the Sierra Nevada proves to be an excellent ‘living laboratory’ for socioculturally driven environmental/landscape change. More importantly,
changes seen here can be used as a model for change in other places also pursing fermentation-focused development.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Through the course of conducting fieldwork, several factors of interest emerged, leading to in-depth interviews: to identify the major players in the Sierra Nevada wine industry; to locate the predominate geographical areas where wine is being grown; and to investigate how the wine industry, both wine grape growing (i.e., vineyard development) as well as wine production (enology/winemaking), has shifted the society/community, culture and economy in these areas.

The evidence gathered suggests that Sierra Nevada foothill counties are intentionally pursuing wine as an economic development strategy. The tourism director in one Sierra Nevada county called wineries ‘the economic engine of the county’ (interview with study participant, July 2014). Wine grape growing, in terms of both yield and acreage, is significantly on the rise in the region (United States Department of Agriculture, 2007) – and yet wine grape growing yields more than just grapes. The emergence of wine production, wine sales, associated tourism and outside investment allows the region to become ‘wine country’. The tourism director noted that ‘experiencing wine tasting rooms or getting to see the wineries and wine makers … [is] a large part of the romance of what we sell’ – namely a sense of place and a ‘wine country’ experience (interview with study participant, July 2014).

The transformation into wine country is made possible by a significant economic multiplier effect (Rusu, 2011) that capitalizes and builds upon wine-based activities and spreads across the economy and community. This transformation is evidenced by the presence of industry and tourism infrastructure, both physical and virtual, including the existence of wine grape and winemaker associations, wine tourism maps and facilities, and, of course, the proliferations of vineyards and wineries on the landscape itself. As such, although the multiplier effect is, as of yet, not quantified in the Sierra Nevada region, its qualitative implications are nevertheless clearly etched onto the landscape.

A visual analysis of the landscape can be constructive for uncovering latent (and blatant) changes to the physical and cultural environment. For example, when driving along Shenandoah Road in Amador County, a part of the region that is now saturated with wineries, motorists encounter a classic wine country landscape (Figure 1). At its most basic, this scene presents a ‘tractor crossing’ sign alongside a clearly manicured landscape. However, looking more closely into the construction of the place, the reader notices that this aesthetic has been specifically cultivated, just as much as the agricultural product present – wine grapes. This is a visual display, featuring bright white fencing, ornamental flora and a well-groomed vineyard, as well as a well-placed ‘tractor crossing’ sign. A careful observer might ask, as we did: What purpose(s) is that sign serving? What purposes is the landscape serving?

Located on a well-travelled route to and from one of the prominent wine-tasting zones in the Sierra Nevada foothills (Figure 2), this scene depicts an agricultural zone where active cultivation occurs. However, it is also displays a landscape built to be consumed by visitors – just as the wine produced here will be consumed in tastefully designed and decorated wine tasting rooms. In this way, in the Sierra Nevada, both production and consumption serve as a sort of double entendre: The production of landscapes occurs through the purposeful pursuit of a wine economy and the subsequent, literal production of wine, and the consumption of the landscape occurs both through the literal consumption of wine and wine grapes as an economic commodity as well as the symbolic consumption of these emerging wine landscapes.

However, these cultural and landscape shifts are not without their challenges. Some tensions are seemingly personal, such as those between residents less thrilled about the booming wine industry and those who participate in it. For example, Figure 3 was taken in a town that is
only a couple of blocks long – a historic stage-stop town in Calaveras County, California – which before the wine boom did not often attract visitors other than those simply passing through en route to other destinations. However, the town features a vibrant wine-based economy, including more than 25 tasting rooms in a several block area, restaurants, hotels, boutiques, etc., all thriving because of tourism driven mainly by wine. The sign, posted by a private citizen, is an amusement to the local wine community because the disgruntled owner who put it up is clearly not entirely pleased with how the town has transformed.

Two main thematic findings emerged from these observations (see the summary in Table 1). First, the region, despite having a well-established and historic wine growing and making tradition, can be considered as ‘emerging’ in the wine industry due to issues related to: quality versus quantity in wine grape production and winemaking; the ‘invisible’ costs of wine grape growing and winemaking; its relationship to determining palatable price points for consumers; the pros/cons of using various geographical designations for locally produced wine; and the challenges associated with managing the influx of ‘big guys’ in a wine industry otherwise dominated by ‘boutique’ producers. Second, the Sierra Nevada foothills wine region is one marked by coopetition (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino, 2017) or collaborative economies (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2017), such that producers compete together rather than against each other, working collectively toward mutual goals and outcomes. Numerous wine grape producers and, especially, winemakers and purveyors, noted the blanket benefit(s) provided by radio ads, billboards, mass winery mailings and high-profile events put on by the larger – even if newer – wineries in the region.

While one might have expected animosity from the ‘big guys’ about the free-riding ‘little guys’ or resentment from the smaller scale producers toward the larger ones for siphoning their potential customers, instead the variously sized and sourced retailers saw the collective benefit of building and maintaining a viable tourism and consumptive district/region. Essentially, because of the relative status of the wine region (i.e., especially in comparison with other California wine regions), the emerging nature of the market in the Sierra Nevada foothills positioned these
various actors to be well suited for cooperation rather than competition, fostering a sense that ‘a rising tide raises all boats’. An inclination toward coopetition has been found in fermentation industries elsewhere as well (Myles & Breen, 2018; Slocum, Kline, & Cavaliere, 2018) and seems especially relevant in an emerging wine region such as the Sierra Nevada because it improves the prospect of success for all those involved. In addition, the symbiotic growth and development of different firms can be seen as an example of industrial ‘catch-up’, wherein a

Figure 2. Amador (County) Vintners Wine Map. Source: https://amadorwine.com/wineries/location-winery-map/ (accessed April 2017).
more peripheral region leverages technology, partnerships and research to bridge the gap rapidly between itself and existing industry leaders (Giuliani, Morrison, & Rabellotti, 2013). While California itself is a recognized a global wine leader – though, also a ‘New World’ player, which, relatively speaking, is a newcomer to the world of wine (Dougherty, 2012) – the Sierra Nevada foothills are not. In other words, coopetition and cooperation may be one way that this emerging wine region is jumping ahead to catch up with the leaders of the pack.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Sierra Nevada, the shift in agricultural focus from ranching to wine grape growing brings with it shifts in the economy – as desired and designed – as well as in the landscape. In other words, wine growing, making and marketing are playing a key role in the process of rural restructuring, the fundamental reshaping of form and function in rural landscapes and places, in the Sierra Nevada. However, as revealed through the preceding analysis, these cultural and landscape shifts are not without their challenges, including: inherent, though perhaps latent, conflicts between wine grower and maker interests; the struggle to extract a fair price, let alone profit, from buyers unfamiliar with the extent of labour and material inputs required to produce good wine; and, in this region, the complexities of promoting a regional versus county-level wine identity – especially since the region is seen as ‘emerging’ despite its longstanding growing history.

Using the concept of landscapes of production versus landscapes of consumption, we argue that wine growing and making is a mechanism through which the identity and environment of the region is both protected and produced. Namely, the actors in this region have endeavoured to valorize and promote the history and heritage of the place while simultaneously building a new reality for it, one built on tourism and recreation by outside visitors and (amenity) in-migrants (Myles & Filan, 2017). As one local tourism director put it: ‘[Wine] is always a piece of the story. And the fact that the planting of the vineyards date back to the Gold Rush days, it's

Figure 3. Sign posted on a main street in Murphys, California. Photo: Author; July 2014.
very much a part of our story from then to now’ (interview with study participant, July 2014). In other words, as agricultural producers, craftspeople in the fermentation business, and entrepreneurs and investors endeavour to make a place for themselves in a competitive and increasingly
global marketplace, wine is a niche that the Sierra Nevada can mobilize to multiple beneficial ends: building a profitable, agriculturally based economy while promoting tourism focused on locally produced food products which complement other nearby recreational opportunities based on the natural amenities of the area, all the while preserving the open space landscapes and environmental quality that characterize and create value for this particular place.

In this way, the pursuit and construction of the Sierra Nevada as a wine region becomes a means through which the place ‘makes’ itself and, in turn, makes a place for itself in a changing (global) economic context. However, a singular focus on wine production and consumption is potentially problematic due to changes to job markets and seasonal economies, cost of living and real estate pricing, and environmental management practices. As fermentation-focused development has become increasingly prominent, it is wise for policy-makers and planners to consider both the potential benefits and detriments on this approach (Myles et al., Forthcoming). In short, understanding the shifting material and symbolic landscapes of the Sierra Nevada – and of other fermented landscapes in general (Myles, Forthcoming) – especially as they relate to issues of environmental sustainability, economic productivity and cultural change, is essential to academic and pragmatic discussions of environment and society in this region and beyond.

NOTES

1 ‘A viticultural area for American wine is a delimited grape-growing region having distinguishing features [...] a name[,] and [a] delineated boundary. These designations allow vintners and consumers to attribute a given quality, reputation, or other characteristic of a wine made from grapes grown in an area to its geographic origin. The establishment of viticultural areas allows vintners to describe more accurately the origin of their wines to consumers and helps consumers to identify wines they may purchase’ (Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade, 2013).

2 See Hiner (2016a) for an additional account of cultural transitions and personal/political turmoil as related to other such ‘contested ecologies’ in the Sierra Nevada.

3 At the start of the famous Gold Rush in this region of California, emigrants came from all over the world, including places such as Italy and Spain, and brought with them their penchant and desire to grow wine grapes and drink wine (Wooten & Baxter, 2008).

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