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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Pinna, P. (2023). Donne in the Vineyards: Italian-American Women in the California Wine Industry. *GENDER & HISTORY*, 35(3), 1051-1069 [10.1111/1468-0424.12627].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/889887> since: 2023-10-18

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12627>

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Donne in the Vineyards: Italian-American Women in the California Wine Industry

Pietro Pinna

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the participation of Italian-American women in the California wine industry, paying attention to the interactions between gender and ethnicity. Italian-American women contributed to the birth and the development of family-run companies, but their role in wineries was often invisible, as it was regarded as mere support for male business owners, and their power was limited. The work of Italian-American women did not represent a model of individual emancipation from the family, but carried out a social function of conservation which made it possible for family businesses to thrive. After the Second World War, women such as Rosa Mondavi and Sylvia Sebastiani reinvented their own roles to fit within the models of femininity imposed on the middle class, gaining control over their family businesses and contributing to Italian-Californian wine culture.

Introduction

The traditional assertion that women were excluded from the alcohol industry has, over the last few decades, been called into question by scholars.¹ The engagement of Italian-American women in the California wine industry demonstrates how viticulture was not an exclusively male world, as it has frequently been described, and how female participation was far more significant than appeared.² The objective of this article is, therefore, not only to retrace the Italian and Italian-American female presence in California's viticulture, but also to explore gender and ethnicity dynamics in agriculture and in the food industry. The article argues that the entrepreneurial skills of Italian-American women have been crucial for the development of major US family wine businesses. The analysis of their often contradictory stories contributes to the more general understanding of the winding paths of female entrepreneurship in the twentieth century.

Women had historically been involved in European viticulture, although the progressive industrialisation and the capitalist transformation of the industry had been accompanied by a masculinisation of the wine business. Limitations on women's property rights represented, at least formally, the most significant constraint on female participation in European viticulture. This was even more evident in a country like Italy, where the 1865 civil code was based on the principle of female subordination and marital authority over family properties.³ The concentration of agricultural

property in the hands of men allowed them not only to manage intergenerational transmission through the male line, but also to reinforce the ideology of agriculture as a man's business, belittling female farm work.⁴ Even in California viticulture, the gender barrier remained present, although the state Constitution of 1849 guaranteed female landownership and, from the 1870s, the law foresaw the possibility of joint property in marriage.⁵ Nonetheless, Italian-American women participated in significant numbers in the growth of the California wine industry, even though they were often invisible in such a deeply male-dominated field.

Italians in the state were largely employed in agriculture, but the contribution of Italian women to the development of farming is almost unknown. Notwithstanding some important studies, in particular on the large female presence in the canneries, the history of Italian-Californian women seems yet to be written.⁶ In the first part of the article, the participation of Italian-American women in the wine industry will be described with an almost prosopographic approach. The list of these Italian women will demonstrate that working in viticulture was part of a strategy within family businesses. Many women entered the industry through marriage, gaining property rights if widowed.⁷ Their participation in business, however, was not limited to transition phases following the death of their husbands; women were active in the daily management of the wineries as well. The work done by women was undoubtedly less visible than that of their male counterparts, but it was one of the keys to the success of the wineries that established themselves in California, starting from the second half of the nineteenth century. As was the case in Italy, most of the wineries in California were run by families. The peculiarity of Italian-American wineries, however, lies in their ability to resist and thrive in California's agribusiness, where, since the turn of the century, corporations and labour-and-capital-intensive businesses dominated. Italian women were entrepreneurs fully integrated into their family systems, but their commitment should not be interpreted as mere support to men. Their stories, marked by difficulties and poor social recognition, seem to disprove the traditional consideration of the existence of 'separate spheres', in which 'men were entrepreneurial, women self-sacrificing'.⁸ Italian-American women contributed economically to the successes of their companies, made important decisions together with their husbands and children or, in certain circumstances, assumed the responsibility of choosing alone. They also took charge of the transmission of cultural behaviours imported from the motherland and took care of family matters in order to maintain their businesses.

The family management of Italian-Californian wineries, while formally excluding women from positions of power for many decades, provided opportunities for some of them to exert agency over their companies. The Italian-American women who achieved greater success in the wine business, like Rosa Mondavi and Sylvia Sebastiani, whose biographical profile will be drawn up in the second part of this article, were representatives of a conservative and traditionalist culture. The female model that inspired them and that they contributed to strengthening was based on the idea that women were first of all mothers. Thus, the celebration of motherhood became a perfect tool for affirming a female presence in the industry, reaffirming the centrality of the Italian-American family and adapting it to the standards of domesticity imagined by American society for the middle class. These two women, matriarchs of two of the most important families of wine producers, became champions of the wine business

in the post-Second World War era, building a model of participation which, although firmly anchored in conservative values, helped them to emerge. This was possible only between the 1950s and 1970s, when the Italian-American community was largely becoming part of the American middle class, thus trying to embrace its principles and consumerist values.

Through Italian cuisine, both Rosa Mondavi and Sylvia Sebastiani affirmed a model of *Italianness*, strongly linked to domesticity, motherhood and family, and functional to the running of their wineries. Furthermore, they contributed to the definition of the Italian-American culture in California. The insistence on cooking as a privileged way to express the ability of women, which lasted until the 1980s, represented the desire to escape any feminist or progressive characterisation. After all, the Italian-American woman who feeds her children had become the media-favoured stereotype, although, as Micaela Di Leonardo notes, it was more about building 'an idealised world in which women automatically nurture men and children' than representing the reality of Italian-American families.⁹ The matriarchs did not intend to question the culture they felt they were part of, even though their progressive Americanisation, their social advance and the role they now occupied in their companies clashed with the model of housewife and mother. Their experience also showed that the Italian-American family was not immutable, but transformed itself in different historical contexts, while remaining an element of enormous importance for Italian-American women in the definition of their own identity.

Italian-American wine women

The Italian families who, starting from the end of the nineteenth century, decided to buy or rent small lots of land for growing grapes and producing small quantities of wine entered a commercial and productive milieu dominated by a few enterprises.¹⁰ Scattered throughout California from the Sonoma Valley to Los Angeles, these wineries often sold their products to larger competitors. The resources of the entire family were used for the development of their own cellar and to ensure the greatest possible profits. Although wineries were rarely considered the property of both spouses, even women's savings were used in the purchase of land and equipment. The sources rarely mention female co-ownership and it took many years for women to be listed among the proprietors of the companies, together with their husbands. The Briano Winery, founded by Maria and Paolo Briano at El Monte in 1899, represents an example that stands out: the role of Maria as co-founder was recognised in her obituary in 1953.¹¹ Similarly, Teresa Carrara Franzia has only recently been identified as the founder of the family business in Ripon, along with her husband Giuseppe, in 1906.¹²

Usually, women were involved in agricultural work, at least until companies were firmly established. According to Andrew Rolle's observations, based on the 1890 census, Italian women were less engaged in agriculture than women of other nationalities.¹³ Statistics, however, especially with regard to female work, can be easily misleading. Many women, in fact, while considered unemployed or housewives, traditionally worked without pay as a part of the family's production unit.¹⁴ Although information on the tasks performed by women is scarce, it can be assumed that particularly in the first years of settlement immigrants followed the organisational patterns of traditional Italian families. It is relevant to underline that most Italian immigrants

to California at the end of the nineteenth century, unlike the Italians of the East Coast, came from the central and northern regions of the country. In the plains and hills of Tuscany, Piedmont and the Marches, agricultural contracts such as sharecropping and land tenancy were common: the families had to be extended families, with a division of labour along generational and gender lines so as to have adequate workforce for land cultivation. Gender division of labour in rural societies is particularly difficult to define, since 'women's roles are fluid, especially in periods of transition' and separation of reproductive and productive functions does not necessarily appear so sharp.¹⁵ Ethnicity, farm size, type of production and orientation towards the market are all factors that have contributed to differentiating the tasks performed by women in European and non-European countries.¹⁶ According to scholars, the role of women in Italian extended families varied regionally and according to farm size, but some general features can be recognised. The division of labour was, first of all, a division of spaces: outdoor work, particularly in the fields, was a job reserved for men (although many exceptions were possible), while women took care of the house and neighbouring spaces, where they cultivated vegetables and tended to farm animals. Women were also often employed in seasonal agricultural work such as fruit picking. Grape harvesting and grape crushing, in particular, were considered among the main agricultural activities open to women.¹⁷

Immigrants could not recreate the traditional extended families in the new homeland, but it is likely that at least first-generation Italians in California tried to reaffirm the same division of labour and spaces of central and northern Italy's agriculture.¹⁸ In newly established family wineries, Italian-American women certainly dedicated themselves to the grape harvest and other agricultural works that could guarantee family subsistence, while they were apparently rarely involved in winemaking itself. Thus, Angela Vasconi Seghesio worked in the vineyards of the Seghesio winery, established together with her husband Edoardo, a former employee of the Italian Swiss Colony (ISC), until the company could afford to hire labour. Angela not only dedicated herself, starting from this moment, with her daughters Ida and Inez, to the traditional domestic activities, but she also took care of 'the business work of negotiations for buying grapes from growers in the area', showing that immigrant women could cross gender lines and were not necessarily marginalised in the domestic spaces; on the contrary, they could play important decision-making roles in the public sphere.¹⁹

For young Isabella Simi, managing the family business was initially a necessity. The Montepulciano winery had been founded in Healdsburg, Sonoma County, in 1876 by her father Giuseppe and her uncle Pietro, who together ran a retail liquor store in San Francisco. Isabella was raised in Healdsburg and had apparently always been really close to her father, 'weighing in grapes and going on business trips with him from the age of 12'.²⁰ After the sudden deaths of Pietro and Giuseppe in 1904, a few months apart, eighteen-year-old Isabella took over the vineyards and the winery in the Sonoma Valley. Although her brother was initially involved in the family business too, it was apparently Isabella who made the most relevant choices. Thus, she can be credited with the decision to expand the Simi cellars and reinforce them with steel bars in case of an earthquake, several years before the 1906 catastrophic event caused enormous damages to the Northern California wine industry.²¹ In 1908, Isabella married Fred Haigh, and from this date until 1970, the family ran the company, surviving

Prohibition and becoming an important brand in the immediate post-Repeal period. Like Angela Seghesio, Isabella tended the books of the winery and weighed wagons of grapes at harvest time, but her name disappeared from the official documents. As often happened, 'brothers or husbands became the guardians of their sisters' and wives' landholding'.²² Notwithstanding, she did not give up the management role in her own company and continued to make important decisions with her husband, such as the use of the name Simi to sell their wines, rather than Montepulciano, which was considered too difficult to pronounce, and the opening, after the Second World War, of one of the first tasting rooms at a California winery. After Haigh's death in 1954, Isabella continued to manage the winery with her daughter Vivien.²³ Vivien died prematurely in 1968, and Isabella sold the now-neglected winery in 1970, but she continued to meet with visitors to the tasting room until 1979, two years before she died. The story of Isabella Simi, who spent a whole lifetime managing the family winery, tells of both her leadership capacity and the difficulty of emerging in a predominantly male field, as witnessed by Haigh's role as representative of the company with the authorities and the other winemakers. In the 1970s, for example, Edmund Rossi, former president of the ISC, when questioned about the Simi winery, replied that it was the cellar of Haigh and 'his wife's family', mentioning the latter as Mrs Haigh.²⁴

The sudden death of Giuseppe Simi gave Isabella the opportunity to become the owner of the company at the beginning of the century, but it was in the 1920s and 1930s that the different life expectancy between men and women began to produce effects on the California vineyard estates. Widowhood was one of the traditional gateways to agricultural property for women, and, as Ann B. Matasar pointed out, it is a tragic irony that many women were able to gain power and authority in the wine industry thanks to the loss of their husbands.²⁵ Italian-American women who inherited wineries and vineyards during the 1920s had to face the hard years of Prohibition. They fought with the federal bureaucracy to maintain the wine produced before Prohibition without being forced to destroy it, as provided by the law in case the wine had been improperly stored. Some of them, like Margherita Sarzotti and Rosa Pinelli, chose to abandon wine production and to sell their properties after years of struggles.²⁶ Italian-American women were also responsible for violations of the Volstead Act and suffered the consequences of their actions. Mary Marchetti was arrested for selling a gallon of wine in front of the family farm in Morgan Hill, while Ofelia Bacigalupi was imprisoned and fined for having sold wine at her restaurant in San Francisco.²⁷ After all, during Prohibition, many Italian men and women committed small crimes in the attempt not to get rich, but simply to make a living, without having to be considered bootleggers or gangsters.²⁸ The women arrested in the United States for violations of the prohibitionist legislation were, however, very numerous, to the extent that, according to Lisa McGirr, the first female federal prison, built in 1929, represented the answer to the 'crisis of number' of women arrested for the violations of the Volstead Act as well as of the Harrison Narcotics Act.²⁹

The Prohibition years also demonstrated how actively women participated in the survival strategies of the Italian-American vintners, affirming their role as decision-makers within family businesses. It was Letizia Tonneti Rafanelli, as stated by her grandson, who decided to nurture and maintain the family vineyard when the production of wine for the A. Rafanelli Winery was not allowed.³⁰ Matilda Foppiano, sole

owner of the L. Foppiano Wine Co. from 1924, did not surrender after the imposed destruction of her wine from the authorities in 1926, and continued to manage the family estate until the 1940s, when her son took over the business.³¹ The Passalacqua Winery of Healdsburg, inherited by Rachele Passalacqua after the death of her husband in 1929, survived Prohibition, mostly thanks to the ability of their daughter Edith, who was unusually in charge of the cellars even before her father's passing.³² In 1930, Rachele bought a new estate in the same town and when she died, Edith, in agreement with her brothers, decided to take over the winery, renaming it Sonoma Cellars. And it was Angela Seghesio who persuaded her husband Edoardo to support the efforts of their son-in-law Enrico Prati by buying the ISC's plants in Asti in 1919.³³ The long-serving Angela inherited the family winery in the immediate Repeal period, successfully leading it and passing it to her children's hands in 1941. Transitioning property towards inexperienced successors represented one of the crucial functions of women in the 1930s, and it must be noted that, from these years, the property's shares were often subdivided regardless of the heirs' gender.

The same pattern was quite widespread after Repeal and in the following decades throughout California. Furthermore, women continued to be a part of the activities of family businesses, even when their husbands were still alive, participating in the rush to purchase the vineyards that affected many Italians during the 1930s. These families often underestimated the economic difficulties of managing a winery, and their companies were sometimes short lived. Not all Italian-American wine businesses were fated for failure. Giovanni and Maria Cambiaso, for instance, established their Healdsburg winery in 1934. According to a visitor's guide published in the following years, the operation was managed as a 'family affair' by their three children Joseph, Rita and Theresa, but, not surprisingly, the same guide underlined that 'the art of wine making passed on from father to son'.³⁴ Despite this misleading perception of women's work, family businesses continued to see, as always, the collaboration of the whole family. Henrietta Curletti Romano, for example, had the idea – like Isabella Simi – of opening a tasting room at the Alta Loma Romano Winery and, together with her children, took care of the labelling of the bottles.³⁵ Despite its description by *The Wine Review* 'as the only winery in the United States owned and operated by women', even the De Bartolo Winery of Culver City, LA, followed the pattern of family-run wineries. Reopened by Mary De Bartolo immediately after Repeal, the company was greeted enthusiastically by the national press. *The Wine Review* unusually underlined Mary's professionalism, describing her as 'well known in the wine trade as a capable sales executive', and affirming that 'the distribution of the company in Southern California is evidence of her ability'.³⁶

The main recognition that women obtained from the end of the 1930s was the possibility of being included on the board of directors of family businesses, even if it was often an inclusion that did not change the rooted attitude of masculine transmission of power. Some women were also part of the boards of important companies, such as Mary and Josephine Cribari in B. Cribari & Sons and Ebe Cella Turner in the Cella Vineyards, but their low standing in the industry was witnessed by their absence in the ranks of the Wine Institute which, starting from the immediate post-Repeal era, became the most powerful association of winegrowers. Only in the 1980s would Italian-American women hold real power in the industry: Carolyn Martini, daughter

of Louis P., was president and CEO of the family company until its sale in 2002, while Gina Gallo, after graduating at UC Davis, assumed the position of winemaker in the Gallos' Sonoma vineyards.³⁷ The success of Gina Gallo is significant, because Italian-American women rarely had been among the lab technicians and the enologists who worked on the progress of viticulture in California. Preconceptions against women in the wine business were combined with the idea that women, regardless of their ethnic origins, were unfit to scientific careers. The technological advancement of California wine industry since the end of the 1930s seemed to deepen the gap between the perception of masculine and feminine. The prejudice regarding the incompatibility between women and wine was now accompanied by the idea that women were less skilled than men at technical and scientific jobs, and that their contribution to the wine business was completely negligible. It took many more years for women to get top roles: it was only in the early 1970s that Mary Ann Graff became the first female winemaker of California, followed a few years later by Zelma Long. Both of them were hired as enologists for the first time at Simi Winery, which, years before, had been the starting point for one of the women pioneers of Italian-American viticulture.

Little information is available regarding the employment of Italian-American women in the sales sector. In family-run companies, as we have seen, many women were involved both in the maintenance of the wineries' books and in the setting up of tasting rooms and sales points. The concentration of the business and the professionalisation of the sales sectors led to qualified personnel, very often male, to enter many companies. Two exceptions may be mentioned. In the 1950s, Vittoria Gambarelli, heir to the famous New York distribution company Gambarelli & Davitto, obtained excellent results, while at the end of the 1960s, Cecilia Nervo gained the position of sales manager of the Nervo Winery.³⁸ The gender division of labour seemed to be influenced less by the natural talents of men and women, and more by the companies' structures and sizes. Their growth often led to a risk for many women of being marginalised. Some of them, however, found a way to maintain their power even within wineries that were now different from the small farms created by the first Italian immigrants in California, reshaping their ethnicity and using it as a tool to recognise and consolidate their functions within family-run companies.

The matriarchs

The importance of parental ties in Italian and Italian-American culture has been underlined by numerous sociological studies that have sometimes highlighted its pathological elements, summarised in Banfield's famous definition of *amoral familism*. Although Banfield essentially refers to the absence of civic sense in Southern Italy – where the nuclear family model was far more common than the extended one – the notion of *amoral familism* has come to represent a formula describing the role of the Italian family in hindering the country's political and economic development. Banfield's writings have been criticised by many scholars over the years, including their aim of rehabilitating the Southern family, which was no more pathological than others.³⁹ The main criticism concerned the emphasis placed on familism as typical of Southern Italian society. Starting from Arnaldo Bagnasco's studies, in fact, Italian historiography and sociology have attributed a growing – and positive – role to the family in the economic development of the so-called *Third Italy*, where a network of small

businesses, originating from extended farm families, developed and became essential for Italian economic growth of the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the negative connotation of familism seemed to follow Italians even across the ocean.⁴¹ Scholars of Italian-American history, rejecting the first interpretations according to which 'family cohesion' represented 'continuity with the past, rather than a change', have correctly emphasised that Italian-American familism, rather than being a typical Italian character, was the product of migration and life of Italians in the United States.⁴² The invention of what has been called an 'ideology of *la famiglia*' had numerous symbolic functions, which served both to build a group identity, differentiating Italians from other immigrants, and to progressively approach the American middle-class values that found their fulfilment in domesticity.⁴³ Family was also the place of affection and solidarity, as well as a fundamental economic unit, whose function was much more complex and changeable than it seemed.⁴⁴

Italian women sought for a long time to find their space in a culture that, although it guaranteed their sustenance, also represented 'a patriarchal force that often diminishes and silences women'.⁴⁵ However, it was precisely Italian culture that offered women an interesting loophole for the consumption of wine itself. Although immigrants from the peninsula shared the tradition of hostility towards alcohol consumption by women, they considered wine as something different. Wine, in fact, was perceived as a food that had to be consumed during meals. For this reason, not only women, but also children could consume moderate amounts of wine without generating excessive concern, even if this practice was not uniformly spread across all Italian regions.⁴⁶ The Italian pattern of wine consumption was used extensively by anti-prohibitionist propaganda in California during the 1910s. Over the course of that decade, appeals to Italian women to educate their children in a moderate use of wine and to vote against the referendums for state prohibition in California multiplied.⁴⁷ Despite the approval of the Eighteenth Amendment, the idea that Italian women could educate about the consumption of wine seemed to remain deeply present, confirming that they were considered first of all as mothers, whose main task was to raise their children.

Emphasis on Italian-American motherhood grew considerably in the post-war period. The relevance of the maternal figure in the Italian family constitutes another *topos*, often interpreted 'as an anthropological and trans-historical characteristic of the whole society'.⁴⁸ Similarly to what had happened with familism, the mother's role as the centre of the Italian family and the mother-son relationship – which has sometimes been defined as *mammismo* – was considered as a distorting element that made Italian males unable to break free from their maternal dependency. As many scholars have pointed out, the cultural construction of the *mamma italiana* model, while tracing its roots back to previous centuries, was consolidated after the Second World War and constituted a particularly relevant stereotype which is still very much present today in representations of the Italian and Italian-American family and womanhood.⁴⁹ According to Colleen L. Johnson, the mother represented for Italian-Americans the 'centre or heart of the family: without her, the family would cease to exist', and as such her figure was the object of a real veneration, defined as *motherholotry*, 'because of the special status she maintains in her children's lives'.⁵⁰ The repercussions of such a vision, even free from its more caricatural aspects, were also documented in the attitude towards Italian-American women within the wine industry.

The female figures who had always been involved in the business together with their own family were increasingly characterised as matriarchs. The reference to matriarchy, however, appears slightly misleading, both because the power of these women was not exercised by virtue of their femininity, but by virtue of their maternal function, and because their power did not modify the structure of family businesses nor the inheritance criteria towards daughters. In this sense, it can perhaps be argued that the insistence on female figures in the post-war Italian-American wine industry represented an extension to the public sphere of the *motherholotry*, perfectly suited to both the desire to maintain the centrality of the family in the management of businesses and the need to conform to the values of American middle-class domesticity, which advocated for women to be good wives and mothers first. The portrayal of Italian mothers, committed to managing the business exclusively in the interests of their children and represented as housewives and cooks rather than businesswomen, appeared to be an acceptable balance, a sort of conservative – and by no means emancipatory – maternalism that held together Italian-American culture and the new Americanising values to which Italian women, lagging behind the Americans, intended to adapt.⁵¹

The glorification of the mother figure in the Italian-American wine industry was also an important tool for marketing the product of family-run companies to American consumer society.⁵² Italian-American mothers, so dedicated to their children's lives, represented part of a marketing strategy in which family tradition assumed a significant role. The myth of matriarchs seemed to spread slowly starting from Repeal, when women gradually became the object of attention by wine producers as potential consumers, overturning the idea that wine consumption was not legitimate for women. Even during the 1930s, the ISC introduced some advertisements reproducing images of women drinking wine, but the industry seemed more concerned about the kind of education to be provided to the new consumer group of housewives.⁵³ The wine was then presented to women mainly, though not exclusively, as a product to be used for cooking, in the belief that this choice corresponded more to the female pattern of consumption.⁵⁴ The emphasis on domestic consumption of wine confirmed the role of women as the core of the family, but also expanded their private role to a more public dimension, as two of the most famous Italian-American matriarchs, Rosa Mondavi and Sylvia Sebastiani, demonstrated.

Rosa Grassi was born in 1890 in Sassoferrato, in the Ancona province of Italy. After having married Cesare Mondavi when she was seventeen years old, she followed him to Minnesota in 1908. Cesare, like many Italians, worked in the mines, while Rosa took care of their four children: Mary, Helen, Robert and Peter. The young woman actively contributed to the family budget once she arrived in the United States, running a boarding house for the Italian miners. Keeping a boarding house was a common activity in the early twentieth century for Italian women, as for women of other nationalities, to provide help not only to their kin and friends but also to their fellow compatriots.⁵⁵ Often assisted by their young daughters, women took care of cooking and cleaning, and they helped to recreate a domestic environment for the mass of men without women who populated the US labour market. As Judith E. Smith pointed out, boarding was a way to extend 'the services they were already providing for their own families' to other immigrants.⁵⁶ The sense of ordinariness with which many women considered this demanding job is summarised by the simple phrase with which Rosa,

who had hosted up to fifteen to eighteen boarders at a time, described it, 'I kept boarders and cooked and washed and scrubbed floors'.⁵⁷ Rosa's words, although highly representative of the Italian culture of constant female commitment and unpaid and often silenced effort, do not do justice to her work and that of the many Italian women, often considered housewives in the statistics, who worked hard to support their families, thus contributing to the 'primitive accumulation of capital' by immigrants.⁵⁸ The writer Angelo Pellegrini so portrayed the life of Rosa Mondavi in her early American years:

Without hired help, she had cooked, washed, and scrubbed for them. When they were ill, she had been their nurse and mother ... Every day, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, she had tried to provide for each man what he liked best ... A woman must protect her man; and while the men were in her home and they behaved, they were all her men ... She had been a mother to men without women and far from home.⁵⁹

The celebration of Rosa as a mother – Pellegrini also wrote about her 'talent for motherhood' – is not surprising because it respects both American middle-class values and Italian-American *motherholotry*, according to which female self-realisation was fulfilled in motherhood.⁶⁰

The boarding house also had important economic consequences. Thanks to the family's earnings, including Rosa's, the Mondavis eventually managed to buy a grocery store and then a saloon in Virginia, Minnesota, which they managed together, while Rosa was still having boarders at home, until the advent of Prohibition. In 1922, Cesare, appointed by some of his fellow Italians to buy grapes, decided to move to Lodi, California, where the family started a grape shipment business to the East. Immediately after Repeal, Cesare decided to enter into the winemaking business, buying a winery and introducing both of his sons to the industry. Rosa had been an important part of the C. Mondavi & Sons Company since the very beginning, and it was she, according to Robert Mondavi, who convinced reluctant Cesare to buy the renowned Charles Krug Winery, following their elder son's wish, in 1943.⁶¹ After the incorporation of the company, the stocks were subdivided between the different members of the family, though the two sons were privileged compared to the two daughters: Cesare and Rosa held 40 *per cent* of the shares, Peter and Robert 20 *per cent* each and Mary and Helen 10 *per cent* each. Upon the death of Cesare, in 1959, Rosa, now in possession of the majority of the company's stocks, assumed the role of president of C. Mondavi & Sons, although Robert and Peter continued to work with her, because – as the bulletin of the winery underlined years later – 'she wisely refrained from the task of operating Charles Krug Winery herself'.⁶² However, Rosa's attempts to keep the family together broke down in 1965 when the two brothers, long divided over the management of the winery, confronted each other bitterly. Rosa decided to side with her son Peter, who shortly after became the new president of the company. After a few months, Robert was expelled from the family business, while his son Michael was not allowed to work in the company.⁶³ Litigation followed, and the lawsuit concluded in favour of the elder brother, who had meanwhile established the famed Robert Mondavi Winery, immediately after Rosa's death in 1976.

Despite the family disagreements, which in any case showed Rosa's strong decision-making abilities, the matriarch of the Mondavi family, as Robert himself called her, managed the company in a different way from her husband. As Donna

Gabaccia wrote, 'Rosa Mondavi remained a businesswoman on traditional models. She oversaw the business from her kitchen, and cooked meals for board members and business clients'.⁶⁴ In a sense, Rosa represented the icon of the traditional Italian-American woman, who, despite her great power, defined herself according to the canons of middle-class domesticity. The reference to her culinary skills should not be considered only as a detail. For Rosa, the cooking represented the legacy not only of her Italian ancestry and of her work in the boarding house, but also a tool to popularise the products of the family. Not surprisingly, in the *tortellini* that apparently represented her most famous dish, Rosa, leaving behind the traditional recipe, added a cup of wine to the filling.⁶⁵ Rosa Mondavi's cooking confirmed the importance of the family bond for the Italian-Americans – Rosa continued to cook for Robert even during the litigation – but also represented a model, traditional but successful, for Italian-American women in the quest for their own role in US society after the Second World War.⁶⁶ Although the winery's bulletin surprisingly wrote at her death that she had led an 'uncomplicated life', Rosa Mondavi had become a woman of power and experience, perhaps not the 'mother to winegrowers' as Pellegrini rhetorically called her, but certainly a successful Italian-American woman.⁶⁷

Sylvia Scarafoni was born in 1916 on a farm near Sonoma, to an Italian family that had emigrated from the Italian region of Lombardy. A few years later the Scarafonis moved to the town of Sonoma, where they managed a dairy farm. There Sylvia met her future husband August, son of the founder of Sebastiani Vineyards, Samuele; they were neighbours, attended the same school, and Sylvia also worked along with her mother cutting peaches and string beans at the Sebastiani fruit cannery.⁶⁸ Sylvia and August married in 1936, and had three children: Sam, Mary Ann and Don. After Samuele's death in 1944, his wife Elvira owned the family winery for eight years; in 1952, August and Sylvia bought it and ran it as a family company. Like Rosa Mondavi, Sylvia is credited with having inspired some decisions at Sebastiani Vineyard. The most relevant was undoubtedly the transition from the exclusive sales of bulk wines to bottled wines under the Sebastiani label in the 1950s.⁶⁹ Sylvia seemed, however, at least until the early 1970s, decidedly less involved than other female figures in the family business. According to L. Doug Davis, long-time chemist of the winery:

For many years, she was the typical Italian mother, married to the typical Italian man, meaning in this case and I think in a lot of cases she tended the home and took care of the children. She didn't have to be concerned with the checkbook or business or anything like that, and had very little, if any, contact with what was going on business-wise because that's what the man did.⁷⁰

Things changed for Sylvia, when, thanks to her culinary ability, she built herself a role as a writer and promoter of Italian-American wine culture. In 1970, she published in St. Helena the cookbook *Mangiamo (Let's Eat)*, which collected the Sebastiani family recipes. The book was so successful that a revised version was republished in 1977 by the Lyle Stuart publishing house in New Jersey, with the title *The Sebastiani Family Cookbook*.⁷¹ The recipes represented an interesting synthesis of the personal history of Sylvia Sebastiani, but they were also the expression of the progressive transformation of Italian-American cuisine. Some of them, such as *lasagna*, *cannelloni*, *gnocchi* were in fact a shared heritage of Italian national cuisine that, slowly, was becoming established. Sylvia accompanied them with some recipes more typically Lombard, like *osso buco* or *chicken cacciatore a la Lombarda* and others of Tuscan origin, which

her mother-in-law Elvira had taught her on Sundays spent together, like *farinata*.⁷² According to Sylvia, hers was the ‘traditional Italian style’ cuisine, so different from the East Coast one.⁷³ The search for Italian authenticity represented, as Simone Cinotto has pointed out, a fundamental aspect of the renewed interest in cooking that led, precisely in the 1970s, to the rejection by Italian American cookbooks’ authors of the traditional immigrant cuisine.⁷⁴ In this sense, the distinction made by Sylvia represented both the desire to distinguish her own cuisine from the hybrid immigrant one – mainly of southern extraction – and to affirm an Italo-Californian specificity, and the sign of a class transformation of Italian cuisine, increasingly imagined as a product made by and for the middle class. Sam Sebastiani described his mother’s book as ‘a partial compilation of skills she has learned over the years, plus old country recipes and handed down techniques over generations’, and he added: ‘But even more than that, realising many of today’s cooks are also working women, she modified her recipes to save time over the laborious old ways, yet ending up with the same classic Italian dish’.⁷⁵

Mangiamo was also a significant marketing operation. Not by chance, the book had an appendix, called ‘Wine in Cooking’ which began with these words, ‘As you will note in my recipes, I use a lot of wine in cooking. It gives a flavor to certain dishes that cannot be had otherwise – many types of food would be bland and flat without it’.⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, all the wines mentioned were of the Sebastiani brand. The idea of using cookbooks as a tool to sell larger quantities of wine was not recent. If the releasing of recipes in advertising booklets was already partially widespread before Prohibition, their diffusion occurred after Repeal, when the wine industry, in an attempt to expand its market to women, began to exploit them. In the 1960s, the Wine Advisory Board published a book called *Favorite Recipes of California Winemakers*, which was apparently very successful.⁷⁷

The book by Sylvia Sebastiani differed, however, from these publications, not only because it was a volume with many recipes and not a simple booklet, but also for the intentions that seemed to motivate its author. The desire to win over the public to the wines of Sebastiani Vineyard was accompanied by the will to affirm a success story, at a time when Italian-Americans were trying to enhance their background. According to several scholars, despite the popularity gained by Italian cuisine in the United States, cookbooks written by Italian-Americans were relatively few both because the recipes had been transmitted orally for a long time, and because of the process of Americanisation which concerned second-generation women.⁷⁸ Rarely, according to Gabaccia, ‘did compilers celebrate the ethnic group itself. A few described their purpose as celebrating “our Italian and American heritages” ... More often, though, cookbook prefaces emphasised the compilers’ desire to celebrate their mothers and families’.⁷⁹ Even Sylvia Sebastiani, in the short foreword to her cookbook, stated that she wanted to write out the recipes acquired from relatives and friends, without making explicit reference to the desire to celebrate Italian-American cuisine.⁸⁰ The author offered more details about her family life in the appendix. Recalling the figure of her father-in-law’s father, Lorenzo, Sylvia wrote:

If he did not have his glass of wine or two with his meal we knew he was not well, which was not often as he lived to be 94. In spite of presence of wine at all meals, temperance prevailed. Wine was always treated with respect as a part of our life. It was even given to the young diluted with water.⁸¹

Although through her recipes Sylvia Sebastiani had likely no intention of representing others besides her family, the reiteration of the theme of wine as an element of temperance, which represented one of the favourite arguments of Italian-American wine producers, made the book an interesting product of the environment in which the author lived. Accepting the idea that cookbooks can ‘simultaneously present us with a glimpse of a commemorative tradition as well as an interactive system of communications among food preparers, chroniclers and consumers’, *Mangiamo* represented not only a significant marketing tool and Sylvia’s desire to reconnect with her own family history, but also the affirmation of a specific culture, that of the Italian-Californian wine producers, who considered wine as an element of culture and tradition to be preserved and their lifestyle as an example of temperance.⁸²

The authority of Sylvia Sebastiani was not defined solely through her cuisine. In 1980, after August’s death, Sylvia became the owner of her husband’s stock, thus having an estimated 96 *per cent* of the shares in the family business.⁸³ She appointed her elder son Sam as the president of the company, while she initially maintained the position of CEO and chairman of the board of directors. As had happened twenty years before to the Mondavis, the Sebastianis had to face a family and business crisis. And, as it was for Rosa, Sylvia had to choose between her children. In 1986, Sam was ousted from the company and Don became CEO and chairman of the board, while Richard Cuneo, husband of Mary Ann, was appointed temporary president of the Sebastiani Vineyard. The press paid great attention to this new family feud in California viticulture, comparing it to the successful TV series aired in those years, *Falcon Crest*, and Sylvia to its powerful female protagonist.⁸⁴ Beyond the reasons that led to the family disagreement, which can be traced to a different view of the company’s prospects as well as excessive expenses attributed to Sam, Sylvia Sebastiani, who held control of the eleventh most important winery in the United States, arose as a powerful and authoritative woman.⁸⁵ Sylvia died in 2003, and the Sebastianis sold the historic family winery shortly after.

In the meantime, the world had changed and, although female careers were still very limited in the wine industry, Italian-American women no longer needed to submit to household models to succeed in the working world.⁸⁶ Contemporary wine women, like Gina Gallo, differ significantly from matriarchs, both in their education and in their desire for self-affirmation in a still largely male-dominated industry. As also happens in Italy, these businesswomen no longer necessarily have to portray themselves as mothers to hold some form of power, despite the difficulties still existing in the conciliation of motherhood with career.⁸⁷ Even newer generations of women, however, must deal with the permanent importance of family. Their belonging to family dynasties appears not only a central element to gain respectability in the wine sector, but also a fundamental marketing tool. Thus, in the platform of the empowerment campaign ‘Women Behind the Wine’, launched in 2019 by E & J Gallo to support gender equality, Gina Gallo is presented as a woman capable of using her creative talent as a wine-maker within the ‘entrepreneurial history of her family’.⁸⁸ The insistence on family tradition, which accompanies the promotion of wine not only in the United States, but also in Europe, seems to fit perfectly with the affirmation of the existence of a *family terroir*, based on the culture of wine transmitted through generations even more than on geography. The need to promote wine through the construction of a tradition, which

could also be an invented tradition, was clear from the very beginning to the founders of the American wine industry, in their attempt to compete with the viticulture of the Old World. Italian-Americans contributed to the creation of a California wine culture, trying to persuade the reluctant Americans to consume wine. The popularisation of wine, although consumption levels in the United States – despite having narrowed the gap in recent decades – never reached those of countries like Italy or France, was not only due to obvious marketing efforts, but it found its *raison d'être* in the idea, shared by Italian-American men and women, that wine was a cultural product, one which favoured a temperate and pleasure-loving society.⁸⁹

Conclusion

Despite the concentration of a large part of wine production in the hands of corporations, Italian-American family businesses still dominate the California wine industry today. Their successes seem to prove that familism did not represent an impediment to development, but, on the contrary, it became an instrument of cohesion conducive to the building of business solidity. The importance of the family in the construction of the wine industry leads us to consider the role of women precisely within the family structure. What was missing in viticulture was not the presence of women, but rather the possibility for them to exercise power, a function that became possible during periods of widowhood, when some of these women could demonstrate their skills. In some cases, female decision-making was more subtly expressed as mediation skills among other family members, or was the result of a shared choice between spouses. Without underestimating the weight of male authority over them, it can be argued that these women had an undeniable entrepreneurial ability, the strength of which expressed itself exclusively within the family dimension.

Italian-American women progressively emerged in a field dominated by men, taking advantage of the opportunities and using their maternal role to succeed. Within a model that in many ways appeared paternalistic, some of them, such as Rosa Mondavi and Sylvia Sebastiani, gradually assumed power, demonstrating that gender and intergenerational relationships within family businesses were far more complex and fluid than they have sometimes been described. Further studies will be needed to understand whether this celebration of motherhood only took place in the wine industry or whether it was also a useful tool for women to access other sectors of the Italian-American food industry. It is equally interesting to wonder if a form of *motherholotry*, allowing women to find their own path in industries apparently dominated by men, also existed among other ethnic groups. Certainly, the mother/wife who cooks for her family became a favourite advertising framework which, keeping intact the middle-class gender pattern, suggested, at the same time, 'that through their cooking women had a powerful tool within their home. According to advertisers, women's power lay not only in their ability to please family members, but also to help assimilate their family into American life, to improve its status, and to maintain its ethnic, religious, or racial identity'.⁹⁰ The emphasis accorded in this article to some Italian-American female figures is not meant to disregard the fact that the majority of entrepreneurs, winegrowers and labourers were men of many nationalities, nor to forget women of other origins engaged in viticulture. Rather, the aim is to underline how Italian-American women have contributed, with their own culture and entrepreneurial skills, to the definition of

the character of the American wine industry, demonstrating the significance of gender and ethnicity for the study of business history.

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77. 'Sixth Printing for Wine Cook Book', *Wines & Vines* 5 (1965), p. 7.
78. Donna R. Gabaccia, 'Italian American Cookbooks: From Oral to Print Culture', *Italian Americana* 16 (1998), pp. 15–23.
79. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, p. 183.
80. Sebastiani, *Mangiamo*, p. III.
81. Sebastiani, *Mangiamo*, p. 148.
82. Carol Helstosky, 'The Tradition of Invention: Reading History Through La Cucina Casareccia Napoletana', *Italian Americana* 16 (1998), p. 8.
83. Sam and Mary Ann would have had 2 *per cent* each, while Don sold his shares to his mother in 1983. Laurie Itow, 'Sour grapes at the Sebastiani winery', *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 January 1986, D1–D2.
84. 'Sebastiani Soap Opera Better Than Falcon Crest', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 January 1986, p. 28 and Jerry D. Mead, 'Inside Sebastiani Vineyards', *Progress*, 19 January 1986.
85. In 1992, Don affirmed: 'I continue to serve at my mother's pleasure, as did my brother ... It's not my company. My mother could fire me, too'. Tim Tesconi, 'A Dynasty Divided', *The Press Democrat*, 12 April 1992.
86. According to the University of California, by the early 1990s nearly 50 *per cent* of the viticulture and enology graduates at Davis were women. The percentage has remained stable in the last fifteen years. Nonetheless, women held just 14 *per cent* of leadership positions in the wine industry in 2020. Elizabeth Kauffman, 'Women in Wine', *UC Davis Magazine* 4 (2009); Karen MacNeil, 'Being a Woman in Wine in the Time of Reckoning' (2018), <https://winespeed.com/blog/2018/12/being-a-woman-in-wine-in-the-time-of-reckoning/>; Lucia Albino Gilbert and John C. Gilbert, 'California's Lead Women Winemakers Show Slow, Steady Progress from 2011 to 2020' (2020), <https://webpages.scu.edu/womenwinemakers/20112020progress.php>.
87. Alessandra Pescarolo, 'Fra impresa marginale e società di famiglia: le imprenditrici toscane nel quadro italiano', in Fondazione ASSI, *Annali di storia dell'impresa 18* (Padova: Marsilio, 2007), pp. 171–208; Matasar, *Women of Wine*, pp. 58–74.
88. Gina Gallo, 'Winemaker', 2022, <https://www.winedialogues.com/wbtw/women/gina-gallo>

89. Wine consumption per capita in the United States, France and Italy, in gallon.

	United States	France	Italy
ca. 1839	0.3	23.3	–
1851–1860	0.2	15.9	–
1861–1870	0.3	26.4	22.2
1881–1890	0.5	24.9	25.1
1901–1905	0.4	36.7	30.2
1921–1930	–	37.8	29.8
1931–1940	0.26 (1934)/0.68 (1940)	–	23.3
1941–1950	0.76 (1941)/0.93 (1950)	–	19.8
1951–1960	0.83 (1951)/0.91 (1960)	33.3 (1960)	26.6
1970	1.31	28.8	30.0
1980	2.11	24.0	24.5
1990	2.05	19.2	16.5
2000	2.01	18.8	13.5
2010	2.58	15.0	12.1
2018	2.95	13.3	11.5

Sources: William J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 228; *US Wine Consumption*, The Wine Institute, <https://wineinstitute.org/our-industry/statistics/us-wine-consumption/>; Inserm (ed.), *Alcool: Dommages sociaux, abus et dépendance. Rapport* (Paris: Les éditions Inserm, 2003), p. 5; International Organisation of Vine and Wine, <https://www.oiv.int/en/statistiques/>; Allaman Allamani, Francesco Cipriani, Franco Prina (eds), *I cambiamenti nei consumi di bevande alcoliche in Italia* (Roma: Osservatorio Permanente sui Giovani e l'Alcool, 2006), p. 36.

90. Katherine J. Parkin, *Food Is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 9.

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