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Pickers to Vintners: A Mexican-American Saga

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NAPA, Calif. Mexican-Americans who were once migrant workers are managers or winemakers for important vineyards in California, where rise of fine-wine business has created growing demand for year-round workers with special skills; state's wine industry was built on backbreaking labor of largely Mexican seasonal work force; many former migrant workers settled down in wine country, sending their children to school and teaching them how to tend vines; some saved money and bought land, and soon began growing their own grapes.

Alex Sotelo, who arrived in the Napa Valley as a field worker in 1991 and is now the winemaker at the Robert Pecota Winery, will begin selling his own wines this fall under the label Alex Sotelo Cellars.

Their tales are new versions of a familiar story, in which the children of immigrants, by working hard and celebrating the virtues of family, achieve the American dream of ownership. These immigrants, though, came with even less than, say, the Gallos and the Mondavis. And unlike those families they did not come from a land with a great tradition of winemaking. Like the dishwashers in a fancy restaurant, the Mexican field workers have long been invisible players in the history of the wine industry, hired to do the work that Americans would not or could not do themselves.

Today the wine industry uses far fewer seasonal workers than it did 25 years ago. Still, an overwhelming proportion of the field workers in the wine industry - 98 percent by Mr. Sotelo's estimate - are Mexican.

"We're all making top-of-the-line wines, which I think is very interesting," Mr. Sotelo said. "I think because people looked at us as farmers for many years, and we're proud of it, but we wanted to prove that we're able to do much more than that."

Mr. Sotelo was only 18 when he arrived in the United States in 1991. He got a job in the fields through an uncle who had been in the Napa Valley for 23 years. He fell in love with the place, he said, learned to speak English and got a job working in the cellar at the Robert Pecota Winery. With the encouragement of Mr. Pecota, he took classes at Napa Valley College in viticulture and learned the laboratory skills necessary for modern winemaking. He graduated in 2000. He says the formal education was crucial in gaining the confidence to become a successful winemaker, which, like the executive chef at a restaurant, now requires some public image building.

"We've been making the wine for many years, although people don't notice this," he said, "but we have to learn to feel comfortable to step out and take charge."

Mr. Sotelo says the success of Mexican-American winemakers has encouraged him to pursue his dreams. "We're just getting started," Mr. Sotelo said. "The sons and daughters of the Robledos, they're going to get into the industry. They're going to get formal educations, going to Davis and Fresno State."

"I think we're limited to a certain point," he said of his generation, "but they're not going to have limitations."