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WINE CLUB NOTES



Anna Maria Knapp

Farm labor, one of life's mysteries

With war, terrorism, healthcare, and education firmly at the top of citizen concerns throughout the country, I'm not sure whether immigration is still a major issue nationally. But here in the west, and particularly in California, hardly a day goes by without a media story about immigration, both legal and illegal, and the workforce it supplies. At the dinner table with friends, it's a subject to avoid along with sex, politics, and religion if you want a peaceful meal.

Media stories in California usually focus on the extent to which agriculture is and always has been dependent on labor from Latin America and that government must put programs in place that allow an orderly flow of this essential labor. Lately, stories have circulated about crops rotting on the ground because people who cross the border during harvest and then return home are threatened by heightened security at border crossings. So fewer are crossing, and those who do are staying once they arrive. Both California senators Diane Feinstein and Barbara Boxer recently appeared before congress with horrendous descriptions of fruit, nut, and vegetable crops rotting on the ground from a desperate shortage of migrant farm workers. At the time, they were pleading with Senate leaders to include a farm labor bill in the legislation that created a 700-mile fence on the Mexican border. "It is a disaster," Feinstein said. "This is tragic for us," said Boxer, apparently meaning all of us in the nation, because the situation could possibly increase the prices of farm goods dramatically.

David Bacon, writing for the San Francisco Chronicle on 11 October 2006, tells a different story. "I've spent eight months trav-

eling through California valleys, and I have yet to see rotting fruit. I have seen some pretty miserable living and working conditions for workers, though." He goes on to write that 25 years ago, the United Farm Workers negotiated union contracts that guaranteed almost twice the minimum wage, whereas today, the hourly wage for most farm workers is the minimum wage of \$6.75 an hour. After inflation, \$6.75 an hour is lower than it was then, yet the price of fruit in supermarkets has doubled, not to mention the price of premium wine. The argument here seems to be that if this work paid enough to afford a decent living, a permanent domestic pool of workers would evolve. This month's featured California winemaker, Courtney Benham, buys most of his winegrapes from a sizable number of growers. He too says that he hasn't heard growers complain about fewer workers. So are all these scary stories about the collapse of California agriculture the result of nervous agribusiness interests, which are afraid that the cheap labor pool will be compromised even though this is not yet the case?

So what exactly is the story here? Is there presently enough farm labor to satisfy the demands of the huge California farm sector and of agriculture in other states as well, or not? If workers were paid a living wage, would a domestic pool of workers evolve, or not? Shouldn't congress be able to come up with honest answers to these and other related questions and then create honest policy that would benefit the nation, or not? Should citizens expect congress to do its job, or not? And if not, surely there will be even more trauma at the border, in boardrooms, and at the dinner table.