Chasing Angels
The Sweet Wine Angelica

The drink halfway filling the cordial glass looked like maple syrup, smelled like Christmas, and tasted like nutty caramel. It went down smooth but was so thick that it coated my mouth and left me with the kind of inner warmth I normally associate with bourbon. And it was sweet. Gaspingly, cloyingly, shockingly sweet.

Was this really Angelica, that fragrant wine first brought to California by Spanish missionaries in the 1700s, a drink whose original recipe is lost to time and whose very name is cloaked in historical guesswork? Connoisseurs debate whether Angelica is even a wine at all. Many say that it originated as an unfermented grape juice mixed with spirits, and then became a more typical fortified wine as a response to a change in the federal tax code after Prohibition. Angelica remains an enigma.

Portugal has Port, Spain has Sherry, Sicily has Marsala—and California has Angelica. But Californians never codified the making or cultivated the following of Angelica the way the Portuguese, Spanish, or Sicilians did with their wines. Part of the reason lies in the scarcity of written recipes from the Spanish period, part in the fact that California has never been populated by people overly bound by rules or traditions. Blame the region’s political vagaries (it went from Spanish to Mexican to American rule) and Prohibition for the rest.

The facts surrounding one of California’s oldest alcoholic drinks are few. We know from mission records, letters, and memoirs that something resembling Angelica was drunk at least as early as 1806, when the German naturalist Georg von Langsdorff visited Mission San Jose, near the present-day city of the same name. Langsdorff drank the mission’s wine and declared it “excellent wine, sweet and resembling Malaga.” Malaga, a Spanish wine made from Pedro Ximenez and Muscat grapes, can be extraordinarily sweet. Could the wine that Langsdorff drank have been Angelica?

Wine historian Charles Sullivan, who has researched the early wines of California, thinks so. But he doesn’t think that the beverage Langsdorff drank was wine; he thinks it was Mission grape juice mixed with grape brandy, a drink known as a mistela, akin to ratafia. “It’s not wine. It’s not debatable. It was a cordial,” Sullivan avers. He notes that many of the mission friars were from Catalonia in eastern Spain, and that the Catalonians were known for making mistela. He believes that the Angelica Langsdorff drank must have been made several years earlier, given the time needed to grow the vines and then age the drink.

Two decades later, in 1827, a Frenchman, Captain Auguste Duhaut-Cilly, tried the wine at Mission San Luis Rey. “I have some of it still,” Duhaut-Cilly wrote in 1834. “After seven years, it has the taste of Paxaret, and the color of porto depouillé” (the same color as tawny port). According to Thomas Pinney’s A History of Wine in America, Paxaret (pajarete) is another sweet Spanish wine made from Pedro Ximenez grapes in Jerez. Angelica? Perhaps.

An oft-quoted letter written by Father Narciso Duran—a Catalanian—to the Mexican governor in 1833 describes the wines at Mission San Luis Rey and gives the first known recipe for the drink. “There are also two kinds of white wine. One of them is from pure grapes without fermenting. I mean from pure grape juice without fermenting it with the skins of the pressed grapes. This produces a white wine. The other of the same juice is fermented with a quantity of grape brandy. These two make a most delicious drink for the dessert.”

Sweetness is the theme here, and sweetness is Angelica’s dominant trait. Sugary wines were far more popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than they are today,
and a sweet, highly alcoholic drink would have been a gift to the weary travelers who were offered a taste at mission tables. Until the mid-nineteenth century, and until the work of Louis Pasteur unlocked the mysteries of the microbe, most fine wines were sweet, not dry, as dry wines spoil faster than those with some residual sugar. Although plenty of cheap, dry wine was drunk for everyday use, winemakers of the day were judged on the sweetness, body, and heft of their wines. Through this prism, Angelica shines brightly indeed.

Angelica entranced all those who tried it. In 1841 Paul Revere’s grandson Joseph Warren Revere drank Angelica on a visit to Los Angeles. He must have drunk quite a bit to wax so poetic: “A most delicious cordial is likewise made, called Angelica, and if the Olympian gods could get a drop of it, they would soon vote nectar a bore, and old Jupiter would instantly order Master Ganymede to change his goblet, and change it with the new tipple to the brim.”

Sullivan contends that this rhapsody stems from the dearth of sugar in the average nineteenth-century diet: “If you were used to drinking dry wines, most of which weren’t very good, or drinking brandy, then you drink the Angelica and it’s heaven! You know what a little sugar will do.”

Even though there might have been a huge market for Spanish-era Angelica, the missions did not begin selling it until after 1821, when the newly independent Mexican government shifted the missions’ focus from religion to commerce. Foreigners began to arrive in greater numbers, including Europeans with extensive winemaking experience. Thanks in part to a Belgian named Augustine Janssens, brandy production—often a byproduct of winemaking—increased as well, especially in and around the pueblo of Los Angeles.

Legend has it that Angelica was named after Los Angeles. Charles Sullivan believes that the striking increase in quality and quantity of the grape brandy produced at the missions in the Cucamonga and San Gabriel valleys throughout the 1830s and 1840s, partly because of Janssens’ superior methods, caused the friars to call their mistela “Angelica” after the nearby town of Los Angeles. Darrell Corti, a Sacramento, California, wine merchant who has written extensively about sweet wines in California, disagrees with this story. Corti believes that the name is most
likely connected with the herb angelica, whose stem was commonly candied at the time, and that the wine was similar in taste to the herb. Several other cordials made by monks, notably Benedictine and Chartreuse, included angelica among their ingredients. (A Basque cordial called “angelica” also existed at the time, although most scholars don’t consider the two drinks related.)

Whatever the origins of the drink’s name, trade in Angelica swelled during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, although bottles that had survived from the Spanish era were still considered the best. In the 1920s a bottle of mission-era Angelica turned up in, of all places, Fukier’s restaurant in Warsaw, Poland, where it was tasted by a visiting Englishman. “Imagine my surprise,” he wrote, “when I found that [the bottles] were of wine from the Franciscan missions of California grown during the Spanish period, a century and a half or so ago. The wine was light brown in colour, rather syrupy, resembling a good sweet Malaga in taste, and in good condition.”

By the 1920s, however, the Englishman could have sampled any number of Angelicas that had been made in the United States prior to Prohibition, including one made by the railroad baron and ex-governor of California Leland Stanford. The drink was apparently popular. Consumption rose from 80,000 gallons in 1867 to 400,000 gallons in 1900, to more than 13 million gallons in 1955. But this boom nearly killed Angelica.

Throughout the twentieth century dry table wines gradually became more popular, leading to the destruction of the Mission grape vineyards that had dominated California for several generations. Although Mission grapes can be high in sugar, they are always low in acid, and thus it is nearly impossible to make a fine table wine from them, as low-acid wines taste dull and flat and age poorly. Varieties better suited to dry wines were planted instead. After World War II dry wines became wildly popular, and for a time California “Chablis” and California “Burgundy” ruled the market. This trend drove prices for Mission grapes ever lower, and by the early 1950s the relatively few Mission grapes that remained were used largely for blends or for cheap fortified drinks. Angelica’s reputation joined that of the Thunderbird and Night Train brands favored by winos. Today, only around one thousand acres of Mission grapes are still in production, and fewer than a dozen winemakers still make Angelica.

Gino Filippi is one of them. Filippi belongs to a group of vintners in California’s Cucamonga Valley who still create Angelicas the way their great-grandparents did. The valley remains the heart of Angelica production in California, as it was in the mission days. In producing Angelica, Filippi and his neighbor René Biane follow the instructions of Emile Vache, a Frenchman whose 1891 recipe is still considered the standard. Filippi ages his Angelica by the Spanish solera method, in which a series of barrels are partially filled and blended with the previous vintage over several years. Filippi’s Angelica spends at least eight years in his solera. Both he and Biane say that Angelica should “cook” in the barrels at temperatures well over one hundred degrees for several months to give the drink its flavor. It seems appropriate that the Cucamonga vintners should use the solera method for their re-creation of this mission-era wine, and not only because Spanish
Spanish enologists finally solved the mystery of the Mission grape’s origin, which had hitherto been unknown. It is Listan Prieto, a now-rare sherry grape native to Spain.³

David Heitz, of Napa Valley’s Heitz Cellars, still sells his father’s Angelica from the 1974 and 1976 vintages, but he himself no longer makes the drink, having replaced it with a white port, which is about half as sweet. “We’ve kind of moved on now,” he said. “Port sort of fills the same niche. It’s too bad. We’re losing a good wine, but people are moving away from it.”⁴

San Jose’s Picchetti Winery makes the sweetest Angelica of the dozen varieties I recently tasted. Owner Leslie Pantling created the drink as an homage to the century-old winery she bought in 1998. She purchased her Mission grapes from Kettleman City, a blistering hot area of California’s San Joaquin Valley where grapes develop an extremely high sugar content. Pantling finds her Angelica so achingly sweet and lacking in acidity that she prefers to drink it over ice, with a twist of lemon.

Angelica’s alcohol content—it can push 22 percent—packs quite a wallop. Even the well-made versions of Angelica have drawn their share of critics. A New York taster in 1862 found Angelica “too strong for a ‘ladies’ wine,’ and a bottle full of it contains I don’t know how many headaches.”⁵ Philip Wagner, in his 1933 book, American Wines and How to Make Them, was more charitable. “Strangely enough,” he wrote, “these Angelicas have always been looked upon as being ‘for the ladies,’ though a lady must be very much a lady not to disclose the effect of a glass or two.”⁶ By 1941 Angelica’s reputation as the wino’s drink of choice had begun to take hold: “Better products have taken their names from smaller towns,” sniffed Frank Schoonmaker in his book American Wines,⁷ referring to the legend surrounding Angelica’s name.

It is highly unlikely that 13 million gallons of Angelica will ever again be consumed in this country, although several winemakers, notably Cribari in Fresno, California, still make Angelica as an altar wine. In fact, the altar is where most Americans may have had a sip of Angelica, without even knowing it. The drink also retains a small place in modern dining, just as Port or Muscat or Beaumes de Venise does. The Heitz Cellars Angelicas are deep, lingering drinks that fill the mouth with honey and caramel. Because Americans enjoy sweet wines every now and again, Angelica is well suited to the occasional sip, for it ages very, very well. Darrell Corti has several pre–World War II bottles in his possession that he considers superb, and in 2006 a bottle of Cucamonga Vineyard 1875 Angelica sold at auction in San Francisco for $527.

But Angelica does not need decades to perform well. Deborah Hall in Santa Barbara County ages her Gypsy Canyon Angelica only two years before selling it. Gypsy Canyon is made from 120-year-old Mission grapes that Hall discovered hidden in brush when she bought her property; these vines are believed to be the oldest in California. Where most Angelicas are heavy, Gypsy Canyon is light, and it is far more floral and butterscotchy than most other...
versions of the drink. Hall’s Angelica also has an acidity rare for Mission grapes; she thinks this is because her grapes grow in much cooler conditions than in most other Mission vineyards. But, in fact, Hall ferments her Mission grapes far longer than most other vintners, which makes her Angelica only half as sweet as that of her competitors. Technically it is a white port, not Angelica, because of the extended fermentation. In any case it is expensive: a half bottle costs $120, and Hall sells out every year.

I could not find a single vintner who makes Angelica the way most historians believe the friars did, as a cordial. A primary reason is that this process would drive the drink into the higher tax category reserved for distilled spirits, for which a vintner would need an additional license. Yet some California winemakers also sell grappa, which is essentially the same kind of grape brandy the friars used for their Angelicas. Could they not also make real Angelica?

In a 1938 Wines & Vines article, University of California at Davis enologists M.A. Amerine and A.J. Winkler warned about Angelica’s potential decline: “It is one of our native California wines, and it would appear worth while to devote some attention to its improvement and the maintenance of a high standard. To permit it to become another cheap source of alcohol will deprive it of the place which it deserves, namely, a smooth, very sweet, delicately flavored, fortified wine. This is not the easiest wine to prepare, but its possibilities should justify the effort.”

Corti, the Sacramento wine merchant, has watched as Amerine and Winkler’s prediction came to pass. “After the 1950s the production stopped—screech! And then there was no more. People forgot about the wine,” he said. “We’ve gone from complex, aged, sweet wines to less complex fruity ones.” Corti compares the impatient American producers to the makers of Sherry or Port, who have weathered far deeper valleys in consumer demand. “They have preserved their tradition, and we have not. Winemakers all want to make the next new thing, the kind of wine that Robert Parker will give one hundred points to. What did we do wrong? Why did we not persevere?”

NOTES
2. Phone interview with author, August 2007.
12. Frank Schoonmaker and Tom Marvel, American Wines (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1941), 221.