Crushing Prohibition
Northern California’s Wine, Women, and the Fight For Repeal

Thesis
In California’s San Francisco Bay Area, the unique economic and social importance of wine shaped the women’s campaign for the repeal of Prohibition, forcing a different path from the rest of the nation. Immigrant women, several of whom wintered in San Francisco but summered in Napa or Sonoma Counties, outnumbered native-born American women, giving them a distinctive role in elite society and politics. The result was a unique and more positive connection between rural and urban communities surrounding the San Francisco Bay. While the national leadership of the repeal movement demanded respectability by distancing themselves from women connected to alcohol, in Northern California, the women of wine country who fought for the cultural and economic significance of wine were joined by women who shared their rejection of the increased crime, hypocrisy, and violence associated with insufficient enforcement of the Volstead Act. Together, they led a non-partisan, multi-pronged assault to nullify or repeal the Eighteenth Amendment.

Analysis
While far from being the only women involved in opposing Prohibition, the stories of a few women illustrate the avenues that women found to opposed Prohibition. While wine histories focus on the efforts of men and national Repeal histories focus on women, the women of Northern California played a significant role in the Repeal campaign.

Research Question
How did the women of Northern California’s wine country shape the fight for the nullification or repeal of National Prohibition?

Methodology
This work integrates the history of Northern California’s wine country women within the national story of the Repeal of Prohibition, focusing on Napa, Sonoma, and San Francisco Counties, as well as the San Francisco Bay Area.

The largest challenge in researching women who were challenging norms and mores and breaking boundaries and laws is a lack of documentation. However, information can be gleaned from existing archival sources. This study relies heavily upon:

- Local Newspapers, circa 1915-1935
- Local Archives, including the Healdsburg Museum and Historical Society, Napa Valley Historical Society, Petaluma History Room, Sonoma County Wine Library, Sonoma State University’s Gaye Lebaron Collection, and winery files.

Related Literature
While not a full bibliography, the following sources are the most influential in the field: Cinotto, Simone. Local Prohibition. The Birth of American Reinnovation. In California. New York: NYU Press, 2012.


Findings
There were three main categories:
- California’s winery women, who skirted Prohibition and fought for nullification through their production, distribution, or public consumption;
- Accidental allies whose complicity with the violent and extralegal enforcement of Prohibition encouraged others to oppose Prohibition; and
- Temperance women concerned with “home protection,” who advocated for temperance through the Repeal of the 18th Amendment.

Conclusion
The different dynamic of California’s wine families, most of whom were Italian, French, German, or Spanish immigrants, and their integration into the social elite of the San Francisco Bay Area, meant that nation-wide characterizations of the WONPR as a group of Conservative, former Prohibitionists who never touched alcohol, did not adequately account for the place of the wineries within the Repeal movement. The study of wine, women, and Prohibition in the greater San Francisco Bay Area therefore illuminates the degree to which Anti-Prohibitionists and the “home protection” enthusiasts worked together to end a law that was socially and economically discriminatory and unenforceable.