Field Experience

Chronicling the impact of a blossoming wine industry is the fruit of anthropology team’s labor.
From the long rows of grape vines that snake across the hills of this southern California wine country, Kevin Yelvington could hear the clinking of glasses on a veranda and the chatter of friends enjoying a leisurely afternoon as he worked alongside a crew of farm laborers.

As a researcher, Yelvington had come to the Temecula Valley to study what is perhaps the nation's next great wine country, or maybe just another place where opulent dreams might die on the vine. He is doing research on this economic, environmental and social phenomena—quite literally—from the ground up.

Wine country tourism unites the sale and consumption of the product at the location of production, and Temecula is taking the wine country concept even further, wrapping wine as an aspirational product in an entire experience that would include restaurants, hotels and inns, and concert venues.

The impact for that particular region is enormous, but the lessons learned from it can speak to other communities looking to advance economic development that's tied to the environment and natural resources, Yelvington believes.

Yelvington, a USF anthropologist, has assembled a team of advanced graduate students in applied anthropology and has secured funding from the National Science Foundation for a three-year project. The research effort includes Jason Simms, who graduated with his Ph.D. last May with a dis-
sertation on the environmental impacts of wine tourism in the Temecula Valley where water is a precious commodity; Laurel Dillon-Summer, a masters student who is examining the impact of policy-making on the wine industry; and Elizabeth Murray, a doctoral student who this fall will delve into the marketing and branding of Temecula wine country. They will be joined in the fall of 2015 by Russell Edwards, a doctoral student who will look at tourism and its impact on the region.

For Yelvington—a faculty member in the USF Anthropology Department since 1994, who has studied capitalism, commodification and the culture of work—the research is fraught with complex issues: the management of scarce water; the politics of immigration and land-use regulation; and even the tangled history of California wine-making, which began in Spanish missions around the same time as the American Revolution.

“I wanted to go into all of the factors of this

‘taste of place,’” Yelvington says. “Wine is not a natural outcome of the geography and climate of a particular place. It’s rather the result of that and a lot of human endeavor.

“When we buy a bottle of wine, we are looking at the label—the kind of grape, the region. But it’s really a commodity like a car or a cell phone—but one that hides that by suggesting that the grape, the region, and the skill of the winemaker combine to produce something that is more akin to a craft.”

Yelvington chose the Temecula Valley because it is a new wine country, its commercial vineyards are less than 40 years old but it has an ambitious plan to stake its future on wine. With 40 wineries now, zoning changes were recently approved to spur the development of as many as another 60 wineries and to devote a major portion of the community’s agriculture area to wineries and equestrian centers with the hopes that it will become a national and international tourist destination like Napa and Sonoma in the state’s north.

Polished as the plans sound, the development blueprint has to contend with major issues from
its impact on southern California's fragile water supply; the effect of alcohol-fueled businesses on neighborhoods and schools; and managing the issues of labor—primarily Mexican migrants—in an area where U.S. immigration policy is unsettled at best.

For Yelvington, the place to start understanding the complexities was on the ground with the workers who tend to the vineyard. The bilingual Yelvington—whose Ph.D. dissertation on Caribbean factory workers was produced after a year of working alongside them—was allowed to join the crew by a farm management company that provides labor to the wineries for several weeks to experience the harvest firsthand. He will return this spring to work on planting vines.

The harvest was as he expected: back-breaking, dirty and often done at night when cooler weather provides optimal conditions for capturing the grapes’ sweetness. The workers pride themselves on how many tons of grapes they can harvest each night; slackers are not indulged.

“I wanted to see how labor is deployed as part of the process and the conditions in which they worked to understand the process more fully,” he says. “It’s also about the use of the environment and human interaction with the environment.

“You realize what this industry does and upon what it relies. Grape picking is low-paid, back-breaking work. You learn how hard the work is, how poorly paid, how difficult and dirty the conditions really are and this is what it takes to make wine.”

“I told them: There would not be any wine tourism without wine; and there would be no wine without you guys.”