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Latino Winemakers Rise in California, Through the Ranks

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

SONOMA, Calif. — It is harvest season in wine country, the time of year when the scent of crushed grapes infuses the air and flatbed trucks heavy with fruit cargo come lurching down narrow back roads.

For the winemaker Everardo Robledo — who grew up working in the fields alongside his father, Reynaldo, on weekends and after school — the harvest has a particular emotional resonance: a measure of how far the family has come since his Mexican immigrant grandfather drifted from one migrant labor camp to another and his father toiled in the vineyards for \$1.10 an hour.

Mr. Robledo, 30, and his family are part of a tiny but growing fraternity of Mexican-American winemakers, many of them farmworkers' children who now pursue wine business degrees or study viticulture and oenology at the University of California, Davis. "It's what we have been doing all our lives," the younger Mr. Robledo said of picking, pruning, trellising, planting and "suckering," or removing unwanted shoots from vines. "The land is in our DNA."

For tourists here and in other wine-producing regions, the harvest is an opportunity to swirl, sniff and sip wine, stomp grapes and revel in dinners by master chefs. In Sonoma, visitors can experience an annual "grape camp" whose Web site advertises "three blissful days" picking grapes.

But for members of the three-year-old Napa Sonoma Mexican-American Vintners Association — who have collectively launched some 14 wineries — the cusp of the harvest is a time to celebrate and take stock. At their recent Vendimia, or harvest party, winemakers like Mario Bazán reveled on the Robledos' patio, the moon rising as if on cue to bathe rows of chardonnay grapes in chiaroscuro-like light.

Amid celebratory yells by folk dancers and mariachi musicians, Mr. Bazán recalled arriving in the "Valle de Napa" in 1973 from Oaxaca as an 18-year-old. He cut brush and cleared fields, spending three years in a labor camp bunkhouse. At harvest, when picking frequently begins in the dead of night under glaring lights, Mr. Bazán's goal was to accrue enough hours

did six of his nine siblings, even though his parents lacked formal education in Michoacan. In the early 1980s, the family bought a 15-acre plot in Carneros.

Today, Pedro's brother Armando is a winemaker, and his brother Jesus owns the Carneros Brewing Company.

Hugo Maldonado, also a farmworkers' son, grew up with his father's perpetual refrain: "If you get up in the morning and go to work, you'll be fine." And even now, every day at 6 a.m. sharp, there is a familiar 72-year-old voice on the other end of the phone, asking Mr. Maldonado if he is working yet.

