

PETALUMA'S LACHMAN & JACOBI WINERY INNOVATORS OF THE CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY

by Alice van Ommeren

When the April 18, 1906, earthquake and subsequent fires devastated San Francisco, the famed Lachman & Jacobi Winery cellars were among the business casualties. Owners Abraham Lachman and Frederick Jacobi quickly decided that Petaluma was the best location for establishing new operations because of its location along the river. Within just a few months, the firm built a massive complex at the northwest corner of Washington and Hopper (now Lakeville) streets. Although the plant did not collect and crush grapes, it served as a major storage, aging, and blending facility.

The Lachman & Jacobi Winery was established in 1876, during a period when California's wine industry began shifting northward from Los Angeles. San Francisco became the center of this growing industry, where large amounts of wine from across the state were collected, blended, and shipped. In 1894, seven of California's largest and most powerful wine firms combined to form the California Wine Association (CWA). Lachman & Jacobi came under the control of the CWA in stages, with a 50% acquisition in 1900 and full ownership completed in 1912. This large cooperative, headquartered in San Francisco, came to control most of California's wine

production. According to wine historians Gail Unzelman and Ernst Peninou, the cooperative owned vineyards, wine cellars, and shipping facilities in every major wine-producing region, and handled more wine than anyone else in the state.³

By the early 1900s, Sonoma County was considered one of California's leading wine-producing regions. Hundreds of small and mid-sized wineries and grape growers were in operation across the county, particularly in the Alexander, Russian River, and Dry Creek valleys. The county also benefited from a well-developed railroad network that ensured the efficient movement of wine and supplies. Petaluma, situated along these transportation corridors and with direct access to both rail lines and river traffic, was an ideal choice for Lachman & Jacobi's new facility. Wine from across Sonoma County could be transported to Petaluma for final blending and then shipped by the Steamer Gold down the Petaluma Creek to San Francisco and beyond—including Germany, Honolulu, China, and Central America.⁴

State-of-the-art Facilities

Only one month after the devastation of 1906, the



*Aerial view postcard features Petaluma's Lachman & Jacobi Winery on Washington Avenue in the 1910s.
Image courtesy of the Darlene Houston Collection.*



*Loading tank cars are pictured at Petaluma's Lachman & Jacobi Winery in 1915.
Postcard courtesy of the Sonoma County Library.*

Lachman & Jacobi Winery purchased a 10-acre property from the Wickersham estate, located just north of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad depot. Within five days, ground was broken for the first of eight separate fireproof buildings. The buildings included a main storage cellar, a boiler room, a sherry warehouse with a capacity of 320,000 gallons, a shipping and receiving building, and a storage cellar equipped with a small oak cooperage. Other structures included the bonded warehouse and the tank building. The tank building housed 18 glass-lined cement tanks, each with an average capacity of 30,000 gallons, at a time when most wineries still relied on wooden tanks. Large lawns and flower gardens were planted between and around the buildings, intended for employee recreation and public enjoyment. The first shipment of brandy from the new Petaluma facility was made in December 1906.⁵

One of the most significant improvements at the Petaluma facility was the installation of the reinforced cement wine tanks. Their adoption dramatically reduced wine losses from leakage and evaporation, cut maintenance costs by nearly three-quarters, and lowered fire insurance premiums due to their fireproof construction. The initial costs were slightly higher than that of redwood tanks, but the long lifespan, minimal maintenance, and increased efficiency more than justified the investment—and, significantly, did not compromise wine quality.⁶

As its San Francisco plant had been lost to fire,

the company prioritized building a fire-and earthquake-proof facility in Petaluma. All the buildings were constructed of brick on cement foundations, a modern approach at the time. A 300,000-gallon water tower, the tallest structure on the grounds, was explicitly built to supply water in the event of a fire. The winery also installed the first private automated fire-extinguishing system in California, a critical but costly investment. Small wooden shelters covered fire hydrants and hose reels outside each building to keep equipment accessible. The new winery was regarded as having one of the most advanced fire-protection systems in the country.⁷

A Hub of Innovation

Before 1908, communication at the winery depended on handwritten notes or verbal messages carried from building to building. That changed dramatically when Petaluma's first private telephone exchange was established at the Lachman & Jacobi Winery. The new system, installed by the Sunset Telephone Company, connected eight telephones throughout the sprawling plant, linking the office, cellars, cooperage, warehouse, and other departments. For the first time, employees could speak instantly across the 10-acre property, accelerating production and coordination, and reinforcing the winery's reputation as one of the most modern industrial operations in the region.⁸

The Lachman & Jacobi Winery influenced Petaluma in multiple ways, most notably econom-

ically. Construction and ongoing operations generated local employment, beginning with major contracts to Petaluma businesses. W. C. Stradling constructed the brickwork and masonry for all buildings, while the McNear Company supplied the bricks.⁹ Although management and specialized workers had relocated from San Francisco to Petaluma, the new plant employed as many as 60 people at a time, many of them local residents. The company also increased river and rail freight traffic, stimulating related businesses and services. By 1910, the winery was shipping an average of 300 barrels per day, not only to the East Coast but also to destinations worldwide.¹⁰

In 1912, the winery was sold to the California Wine Association and operated by CWA until 1918, just before the onset of Prohibition. It took a few years, but the buildings were eventually sold to the Poultry Producers of Central California and subsequently the National Ice & Cold Storage Company. The buildings were demolished in 1973 and replaced by the current shopping center.¹¹ Aside from the spur tracks along Copeland Street, laid by the winery to expedite shipping, there are no physical remains of the complex known locally as the “monster” plant. The Lachman & Jacobi winery’s brief but remarkable presence reminds us that Petaluma once stood at the forefront of California’s wine



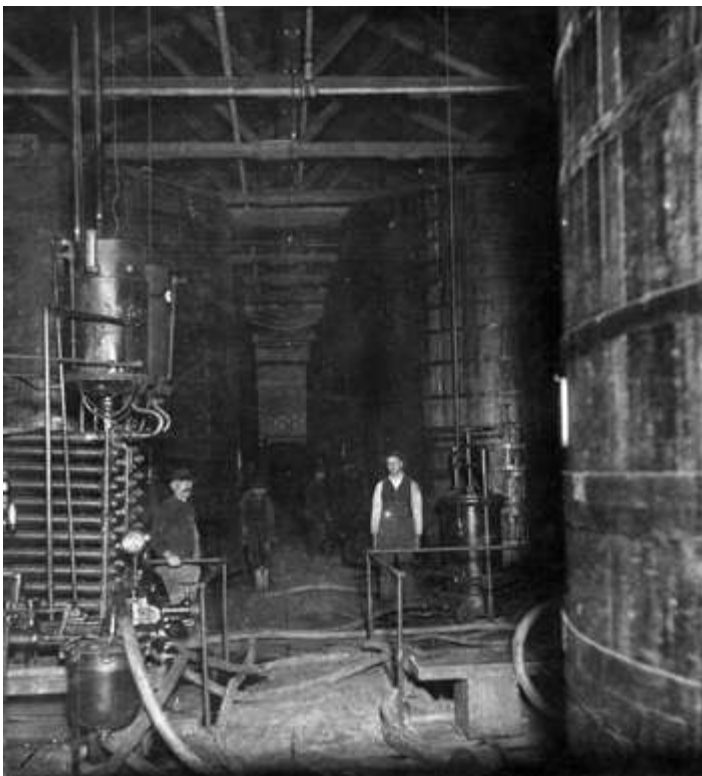
An interior shot of a Lachman & Jacobi Winery storage building in Petaluma shows the network of hoses, large tanks, and piping used for wine storage and blending.

industry and helped shape the region’s legacy of innovation.

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SOURCES

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Interior view of Lachman & Jacobi Winery’s storage building shows large tanks, piston pumps, and long hoses. All images on this page courtesy of the California Wine Museum.