

Gold Country vintners pick up where prospectors left off

By Mike Dunne, Sacramento Bee

Not all the prospectors lured to the hills and hollows around John Sutter's sawmill at Coloma in El Dorado County had as much luck finding gold as James W. Marshall.

For that matter, not even Marshall made much of a fortune in digging for color. His celebrity rests largely on his happenstance discovery of small flakes of gold in the tailrace of Sutter's mill, which he was helping build in 1848, touching off the Gold Rush.

With only sporadic success beyond that, Marshall and many other argonauts began to exploit Coloma's rich soils, agreeable climate and abundant water to cultivate other sources of revenue, namely flowers, vegetables, fruit and wine. They were so successful that Coloma Valley, aka Coloma Basin, came to be recognized more for its agricultural bounty than its gold. "Coloma is literally a pomological garden," waxed Placerville's Mountain Democrat in 1858, according to Eric Costa's 2010 history of winemaking in El Dorado County, "Gold and Wine."

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