

DEEP *Italian Roots*

Spend an afternoon sipping wine in Sonoma County, California, and you'll see the influence of Italian Americans everywhere, from the rolling, vine-covered hills reminiscent of Tuscany to the many Italian names that abound on wine labels. Many of Sonoma County's still-thriving vineyards and wineries were founded by the wave of Italian immigrants that settled in this idyllic corner of California in the early 1900s, transforming it into what is today the state's largest wine producing county, with 13 approved American Viticultural Areas and over 350 wineries.

The first Italian settlers to this region brought along agricultural expertise from the motherland, as well as the unmistakable drive and *passione* to not only make their mark on the wine world but also create still-thriving farming operations, passing eco-preservation practices down through generations. Two Sonoma County families epitomize the Italian-American dream come true in Sonoma: the Pedroncelli and Sanchietti families.

A SLICE OF TUSCANY

One of the first wineries in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley, Pedroncelli was founded by Giovanni and Julia Pe-



droncelli in 1927. "My family has deep Italian roots via my grandparents, who arrived separately with their families, from northern Italy in the early 1900s," explains Julie (Pedroncelli) St. John. "My grandmother came with her mother and sister who met up with my great-grandfather in Redding, California. My grandfather traveled as a teenager with his sister when she was betrothed to marry a fellow Italian in Dunsmuir, California. Years later, my grandfather, Giovanni, was selling vegetables to the hotel run by my great-grandparents and met my grandmother Julia on one of his stops. The rest was history and a few years later the young family, with three children — Margaret, Marianne and John — pulled up roots and moved to Geyserville where

by Amy Bizzarri

there was a home, a vineyard to tend and a shuttered winery waiting out Prohibition."

It's easy to see why Giovanni and Julia set their hearts on purchasing this particular patch of countryside: the rolling hills are dotted with cypresses, grapevines flourish in the rich soil, and at sunset, the sky turns a terracotta rose color.

With their winemaking operations firmly on standstill thanks to Prohibition, the Pedroncelli family survived by tending to the vines and selling the grapes to home winemakers who, by law, were still able to produce up to 200 gallons.

It wasn't until post-WWII that the family was able to focus on growing their business by entering their wines into competitions, expanding their vineyards, and upgrading their wine making facilities with the latest technology. In the 1960s, the family introduced a new varietal to the Dry Creek Valley: the now ubiquitous Cabernet Sauvignon.

The Pedroncelli tasting room is open daily from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Picnic decks and a bocce court are open year-round. Wine tastings are \$10 per person and waived with the purchase of wine.



▲ SONOMA COUNTY

Home to some of the world's most famous wine labels, it rose to prominence thanks to the expertise and hard work of Italian immigrants whose descendants still prosper there.

A DREAM COME TRUE

From prunes to pears to Pinot Noir, the Sanchietti family has kept their family business strong for over four generations, surviving the Great Depression, Prohibition and seemingly endless droughts by meeting changing consumer demands and envisioning themselves not as farmers but as caretakers to the land. Today, the family farms 400 acres of premium wine grapes on their picturesque farm in western Sonoma County, between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol.

The Sanchietti story begins in 1919, when Luigi and Filomina Sanchietti emigrated from Pesaro, a small town on the Adriatic Coast, to then-quiet Sonoma County. They purchased land already covered with thriving grapevines. Then along came Prohibition, and the market for wine grapes collapsed.

Similar to the Pedroncellis, the Sanchiettis had to use their ingenuity to survive hard times. They pulled out the grapevines and planted pear, plum and

walnut trees.

When stuck with an overabundance of pears in 1943, Luigi and Filomina's son, Gus, loaded up his flat-bed truck and headed straight to San Francisco to peddle fruit from a vacant lot on Market Street and Duboc Avenue. Other farmers soon joined in on the peddling operations, and the vacant lot eventually became the San Francisco Farmers' Market.

"Farming is just part of us and what we do. I can't imagine doing anything else," says Mel Sanchietti, Luigi and Filomina's grandson.

Today, Mel's son, Mark, carries on the Sanchietti legacy with his wife Jenny. The couple's two sons, Mason and Meritt, the fifth generation of the Sanchietti family in Sonoma, are already learning the ropes of the farming life, a calling that requires a solid work ethic, honesty, integrity and that elusive *passione*. Indeed the family was named the Sonoma County Farm Bureau's Farm Family of the Year. Steve Dutton, a director and past president of Sonoma County Farm Bureau notes, "No family deserves to be Farm Family of the Year more than the Sanchiettis, who over the generations have done what it takes to survive and thrive in farming."

SUSTAINABILITY IN ACTION

The vast majority of farms and wineries here in Sonoma County are family-owned and operated, a fact that translates into the unparalleled respect that Sonoma's grape growing industry pays to its land. In 2014, Sonoma County set off on a mission to become the world's first 100-percent sustainable wine region.

"Sustainability is a fancy term today, but we've always farmed sustainably," explains Mel Sanchietti. Fitting with the

principles of sustainable farming, the Sanchietti family does not use synthetic fertilizer and long ago implemented cover crops to suppress weeds, control pests, manage soil erosion and promote biodiversity.

"As a family who has farmed for 90 years in Dry Creek Valley, you could say that we have 'sustainable' in our DNA," says the Pedroncelli family. "We want the next generations to be able to continue farming in an environmentally-sensitive way. We practice sustainable winegrowing and over the years we have reduced water use, built healthy soil and protected the vineyard environment. The most important statement we can make about our wine is that we are here for the long term and protecting the land is one way we will achieve that goal."

SIP THE PASSIONE

While the Sanchietti's fields are not open to the public, you'll find wine made from their grapes well-known to winemakers across the region, including Coppola, Patz & Hall, Kenwood Vineyards, and also Pedroncelli — the two families have a longstanding friendship.

"Gathering around the table, enjoying outstanding wine with family friends that have been growing wine for generations, sharing a love of the land, and the love of sharing in its bounty with others," says Ed St. John of Pedroncelli, "that's why we do what we do."

Catelli's Restaurant

Originally opened in Geyserville around 1936 by Italian immigrants Santi and Virginia, Catelli's is now run by the third generation, Domenica and Nicholas Catelli. The menu highlights ingredients from local and organic farmers as well as over 100 local wines.



The Sanchietti Family



The Pedroncelli Family



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