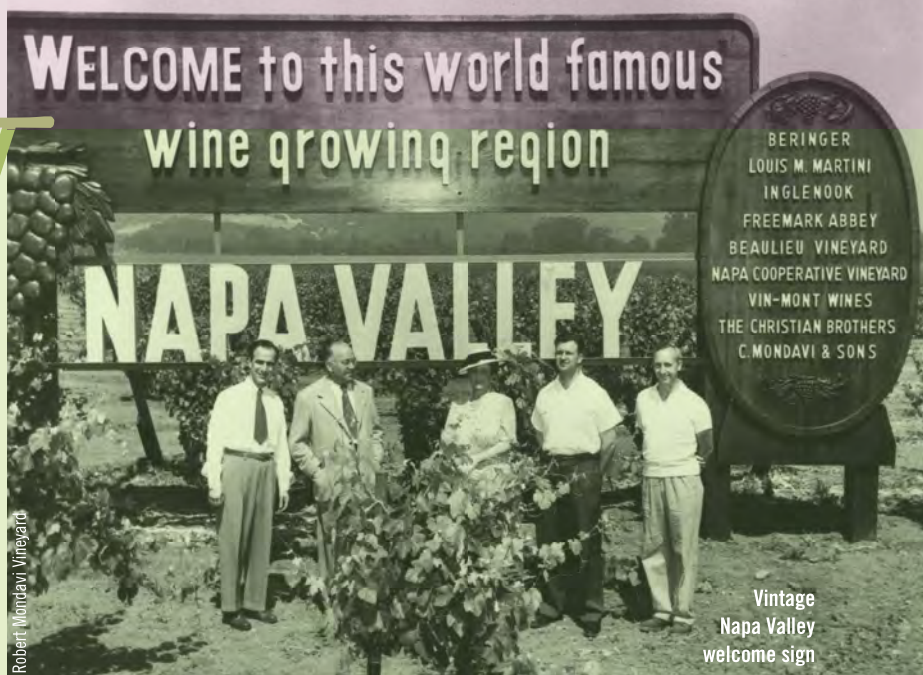


# HOW

## ITALIAN American Wineries Survived A Great Crisis

By Dick Rosano



The world is enduring a great crisis, a test of our ability to survive and revive. Over the last century, America has faced other challenges: The Great Recession, 9/11, World War II, the Great Depression. But the years from 1919 to 1933 posed a unique and separate threat: **Prohibition**.

To some, that may just sound like a matter of access to alcohol. Yet, to many Americans, it also represented a near-fatal blow to their culture and traditions, and a cataclysmic threat to their local and national economies. At that time—the dawn of American wine culture—Prohibition was smothering the infant in the crib. But some family-owned wineries toughed out the lean years to wait for the sun to rise again—and most of them were Italian immigrants.

Old stories abound:

That since production of sacramental and medicinal wine was still legal, large segments of the American population became religious or sick. That the exemption for home winemaking made sales of fresh grapes skyrocket. That, as a result, vineyard planting increased, not decreased. That the home winemaking allowance made everyone's Italian neighbor—who knew how to turn these grapes into wine—everyone's best friend.

Yes, it was the Italians around the corner, or filling the neighborhoods

of little Italys, or buying up vineyard land in California who carried America through that unique stretch of bad luck called Prohibition. They had only just begun to arrive in the New World; the Great Migration that filled the lanes of Ellis Island and the railroad cars heading west to California had only really begun in 1880. The decades between that and 1920 were years of movement and ambition, hope and discovery.

The traditions of the Old World came with these brave people, brave

enough to seek a life in a New World and brave enough to believe that their food and wine would remain a staple on the family table.

"It'll never last," one old Italian said of Prohibition. "Americans are crazy, but they're not crazy!"

So, these Italians coming to California bought vineyard land, sometimes even wineries shuttered in the dark dawn of Prohibition. And they swore that they would plant their feet firmly in the soil and wait for this "crazy" American experiment to end.



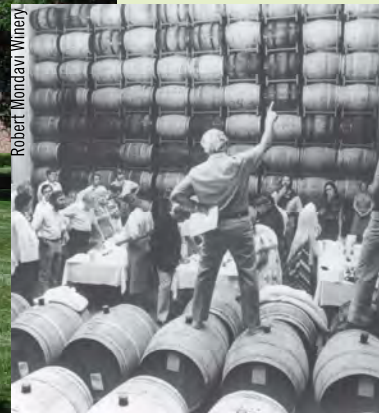
Workers loading railroad cars with grapes for “sacramental” and “medicinal” wines in Guasti, Calif, circa 1923.

Eugene Zelenko / CC BY-SA 2.5



The Charles Krug Winery in St. Helena, Calif.

Vintage  
Robert Mondavi  
photo



Robert Mondavi Winery

## Tasting Notes

They were right. It did. This is the story of some of those families who are still producing wine today and tasting notes of some of their recent vintages.

*Giovanni (John) and Julia Pedroncelli bought the Canata Winery near Geyserville, Calif., in 1927 in the midst of Prohibition. Initially, they sold grapes to local home winemakers and sustained their farm on the receipts from that practice. In 1934, Giovanni applied for a winery license and was granted use of the original bond from the pre-Prohibition winery. Ownership passed to sons John and Jim, and today the third generation is at the helm, led by Julia Pedroncelli and her husband, Ed St. John.*

**Pedroncelli 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon Block 007 Estate (Sonoma County, \$26).**

Rich, savory aromas of earth crushed berries and oak, flavor profile fits the scent, with silky textures. Score: 91

*Cesare and Rosa Mondavi had settled their family in Minnesota by 1906 but, when Prohibition hit, the Italian Club of Minnesota convinced Cesare to go to California and arrange for shipments of grapes. He did as they asked, but he fell in love with California and moved his family there in 1923. Charles Krug Winery in St. Helena was the family's first property, now run by third generation Mondavis. Robert Mondavi opened his iconic winery in 1965 and became a symbol for American wine triumphs. Today, his son Michael Mondavi leads Folio Wine Partners and continues the stunning Mondavi string of successes.*

**Robert Mondavi 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville, Napa Valley, \$65).**

Richly textured, with focused blackberry and plum aromas and flavors, luxurious accents of brown spice and toasted oak frames the impression. Score: 93

**Animo 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley, \$85).**

Intensely aromatic with scent of dark fruit and toast laced through with an edge of pencil lead; crushed berries, featuring blackberry and Bing cherry; accents of mint, eucalyptus, and toast on finish. Score: 95 (from Folio Wine Partners and Michael Mondavi Family)

*The Gallo story is another multi-generational success. Giuseppe (Joe) Gallo and his wife, Assunta (Susie) Bianco bought vineyard land in early 20th century. Their venture was stalled by Prohibition and sons Ernest and Julio inherited the land. Today, third generation Gallos manage the still-family-owned business, including a portfolio of nearly infinite variety and a dedication to high quality wines that redefined the earlier image of Gallo for jug wine.*

**Gallo 2016 Chardonnay Signature Series (Russian River Valley, \$32).**

Full bodied yet soft silky textures. Rich tropical fruit flavors, butter and toasted almond from front to back palate. Score: 90 ➤



Robert Mondavi Winery

Vintage Robert Mondavi photo



# Tasting Notes

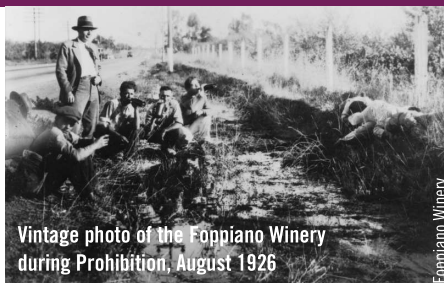
Louis M. Martini came from Petra Ligure to America in 1899 and initially made a living selling fish in San Francisco. He became inspired to make wine and returned to Italy to learn the trade, then came back to California and bought a vineyard in Pleasanton in 1911. To survive Prohibition, he switched his focus to sacramental wine—cleverly assisted by cornering the church market—medicinal wine, and home winemaking. The winery was sold to Gallo in 2002.

## Louis M. Martini 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley, \$43).

Rich and succulent on nose and palate; nicely textured, features black fruit and toast. Score: 90



Louis M. Martini Cabernet Sauvignon



Vintage photo of the Foppiano Winery during Prohibition, August 1926

Giovanni (John) Foppiano left Genoa in 1862, ending up in Healdsburg. He bought a vineyard in 1896 with his son, Louis, but John lost faith in the wine business and Louis took over. When Prohibition hit, they had 80,000 gallons of wine on hand. Federal agents raided the winery but allowed the local people to fill their jugs with the wine rather than waste it. (Still a family winery)

## Foppiano 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon (Russian River Valley, \$55).

Bold forward aromas of dark fruit and spice, rich textures, ample flavors of dark berry, toast, and jam. Score: 92

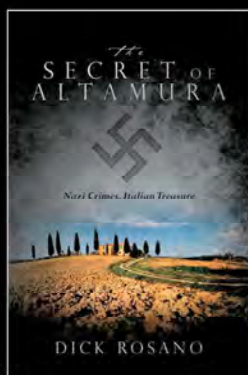
## Foppiano 2017 Zinfandel Nonno's Block (Russian River Valley, \$45).

Richly scented with dark fruit and tobacco smoke; blackberry and raspberry flavors with accent of clove and tar. Score: 92

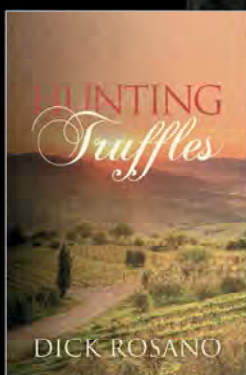
There were scores of other Italian families who dared to find their way past Prohibition. Seghesio, Sebastiani, Parducci, Simi, and Petri are just a handful of the immigrant families who laid the cornerstone of the wine industry in America and brought the centuries-old practices to the New World. Without them, we would have been less; without them the sun that rose after Repeal in 1933 might have cast a weaker light on the landscape.

But their determination, their confidence, and their faith that Americans "may be crazy, but they're not crazy" was a bet placed on their new home. And they cashed in. ▲

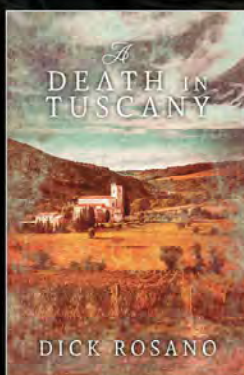
Dick Rosano's columns have appeared in *The Washington Post* and other national publications. His novels that often are set in Italy and capture the beauty of the country, the flavors of the cuisine, and the history and traditions of the people, include *Vivaldi's Girls*; *A Death in Tuscany*; *The Secret of Altamura*; *A Love Lost in Positano*; *Hunting Truffles*; *To Rome, With Love*; and *The Vienna Connection*. His critically acclaimed new two-part *The Sicily Chronicles*, is now available on *Amazon.com* and other book stores.



Secrets hidden from the Nazis in 1943 are sought by an art collector in modern-day Italy. Evil stalks those who try to reveal it.



The slain bodies of truffle hunters are showing up. An investigation finds that the multi-million dollar truffle harvest has been stolen.



A young man mourns the suspicious death of his grandfather while preparing to take the reins of his family's winery in Tuscany.



Darren Priest's hitch in military intelligence is over, but when the President calls, he realizes that some things you can't un-volunteer for.

"Dick Rosano stages mysteries with the insider knowledge, finesse and flare of the accomplished wine, food and travel writer he is. And it all happens in Italy!"

All books are available on *Amazon.com* and numerous other book outlets.