

CHARBONO

Calistoga's signature vine has been an "alternative" variety for at least a century

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

From Sonoma to Santa Barbara, an alternative wine grape movement is gathering steam in California.

Over the past several years, wine drinkers have gotten familiar with unusual varieties like Aleatico, Trousseau, and Grüner Veltliner, none of which are likely to remind anyone of Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay. Some of the vines have been planted in the state for decades, while others are a novelty for both grape growers and for the eager, experimental winemakers who buy their fruit. All of the newcomers to the scene appear to be broadening the definition of California wine.

Meanwhile, at the northern end of Napa Valley, there's a grape *not* called Cabernet that has been an "alternative" variety for at least a century, and it has a young proponent whose family has been in the Napa farming business even longer.

A.J. Filipelli is a partner in one of Northern California's newest wine outfits, Sebastopol-based Two Worlds Wine Company. He and winemaker John Harley are only a few vintages into production of their boutique label, Inizi Wines, but the college friends and business partners have already made a statement with Calistoga's signature vine, Charbono.

"I was in this MBA program, and the fruit—the Charbono itself—became available," said the 29 year-old Filipelli, seated at a rough-hewn kitchen table in the Calistoga home he shares with his wife, Jennifer.

He talked about the vineyard from which he and Harley access fruit to make their distinctive red wine. "My partner, who works at a winery, had recently changed jobs. He came to me and said, 'You know, if you ever have the opportunity to get some grapes, I have an opportunity to make wine as one of my benefits working at this new company.' So everything just kind of fell into place."

"From what I know, the prop-

erty was planted in the early 70s. It was under a planting contract with Inglenook for their Inglenook Charbono program, and it went to them for a long time, until that wine fell out favor, I guess you could say."

One of Napa Valley's old-school cult wines, Inglenook's Charbono bottling had a following among wine enthusiasts and collectors that ended two decades ago, when the Rutherford estate's corporate owners ceased production. As a grape variety that makes for darkly colored, yet brisk and inherently lighter-bodied red wine, Charbono has always stood out in sharp relief against Napa Valley's big rich Cabernet backdrop. Even in Calistoga, where wines made from Zinfandel and Petite Sirah are popular alternatives and have thrived for as long as anyone can remember, the grape is an oddball.

"All [the Charbono] is from the same source," Filipelli said, describing the vineyard just off Highway 29 near Heitz Way that is owned, appropriately, by two brothers in the extended Heitz family of Calistoga.

"When we started buying fruit from the vineyard, it was in a bit rougher shape, and I've been working with the grower to kind of bring it back to life a little bit. So we've enjoyed good vintages—bountiful vintages—the past couple of years from the good vintage years of '12 and '13. And then also some things we've done in the vineyard have gotten it back in shape."

From a very young age, Filipelli was probably destined to learn how to "do things in vineyards." He was raised in a farming family in Marin County, though wine grapes weren't the family's business. His great-grandparents grew a half dozen varieties of eucalyptus, along with acacia, myrtle, and sunflowers, on their Browns Valley property at the western edge of the city of Napa. They also founded Pacific Coast Ever-

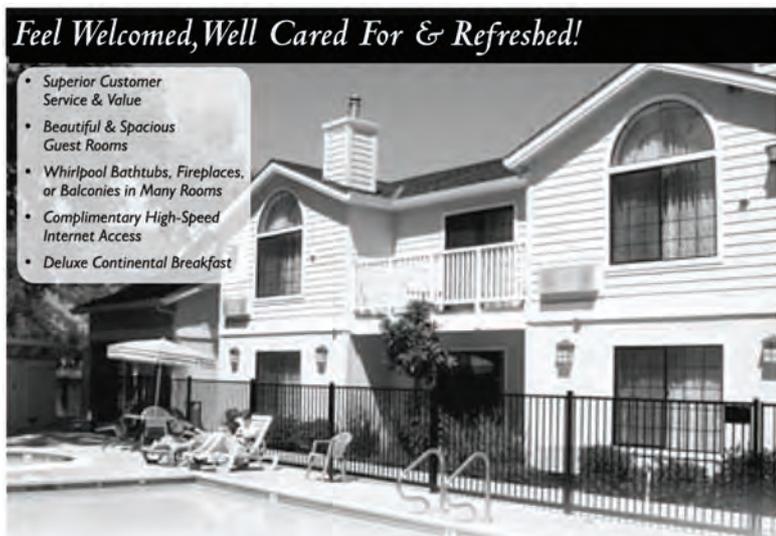
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The Charbono label actually won the Best Label in The San Francisco Chronicle wine show this year.

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green, an ornamental floral and evergreen supply company at the San Francisco Flower Mart. That business has been in the Filipelli family for three generations, with A.J. representing the fourth. His father, Albert Sr., is the current proprietor.

“Pretty much as young as I can remember, I was going up and helping my dad. When I was young, it was just kind of going for a ride in the truck, and as I got older, it was to work,” Filipelli remembered with a laugh. But he also recalled never being pressured to take over for his father.

“My dad always made it clear from when I was young to do what I wanted to do,” he said. “He just told me, ‘There’s no reason to stay in the family business if there’s something you want to do more.’ And that was grapes.”

Albert Filipelli confirmed this one recent, overcast morning when the reporter found himself in the Filipelli family’s store in

San Francisco. Aromas of fresh-cut greenery wafted through the high-ceilinged warehouse as a trio of employees snipped away at piles of branches spread out on work tables. Albert Sr. was more than happy to discuss his son’s role, as well as his own.

“Growing up and doing this business, I watched the Napa Valley get bigger and bigger with the grapes. So as Albert—or A.J.—was growing up, to me that seemed like it would be a good thing for him to get into.”

“We were farmers always,” he explained. “A.J. grew up going up there with me, doing different things: the irrigation systems we’d set up, and the picking and harvesting of the different things that we grew there.”

The practical lessons Albert’s son took away from those visits to the farm in Napa led him after high school to the respected viticulture program at Fresno State University, from which he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 2007. Right out of college, Filipelli landed a full-time

job: Assistant Viticulturist with Jack Neal & Son Vineyard Management in St. Helena. Initially managing 1,500 acres of clients’ property, he was soon promoted to the general manager position, a job he held—and excelled at—for more than four years. Another vineyard company, Lodi-based Vino Farms, lured him away in 2013. They are Filipelli’s current employers and have him overseeing 2,500 acres of vineyards in Napa and Sonoma Counties.

Before moving from Jack Neal & Son to Vino Farms, the young but already experienced viticulturist started the Executive MBA Wine program at Sonoma State University. It was an educational decision that contributed directly to Inizi Wines.

“It played a big part in establishing the company and doing all the permitting and licensing, that kind of stuff, since I was right in the middle of a wine MBA program where I was basically learning how to do all of that.”

As Filipelli describes his work days, they are 90% “day job” at Vino Farms, and 10% building Inizi into a viable wine label and business. He and John Harley, his partner and winemaker, had Mother Nature on their side when they debuted the Inizi 2012 Calistoga Charbono last year: the vintage was widely considered one of the North Coast’s finest in the last 30 years. That was until the 2013 vintage, which could trump ’12 in quality. And 2014, according to Filipelli, is looking very promising. Mother Nature hasn’t frowned on Calistoga recently, though she seemed to come a bit unglued in 2011.

For more dependable help, the Inizi partners have their wives.

Jennifer Filipelli and Kirsti Harley are wine industry professionals whose own full-time jobs, at Fisher Vineyards and Medlock Ames Winery, respectively, are geared towards sales, marketing, and hospitality. Kirsti is the general manager and spirits buyer at Medlock Ames’ Alexander Valley Bar and also manages events for the popular music venue. Jennifer directs hospitality and visitor sales at the Fisher winery on Spring Mountain. The Texas native recruited a college friend, Austin graphic designer Lindsay Huck, to create a label for Inizi that is as distinctive as the wine in the bottle.

“They’re responsible for a lot
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John Harley and Kirsti Kinservik of Inizi wines specializing in charbono.

of creative and design decisions,” said Filipelli, “and they played an important part in the label. The Charbono label actually won the Best Label in The *San Francisco Chronicle* wine show, so that was a big thing.”

“In addition to the creative and design roles, my wife and John’s wife also do a lot of sales for us. They visit wholesale ac-

counts, and they’re responsible for those.”

Judging by Inizi’s list of North Bay restaurant and retail customers, Jennifer and Kirsti have the selling thing down. As a team, they managed to land the 2012 Charbono on the wine list at Chef Bob Hurley’s eponymous bistro in Yountville. It was a deal made more impressive by the fact that

the restaurant’s general manager, Jerry Lampe, meets with winery salespeople approximately once a year—and the Inizi ladies weren’t in on that meeting.

“I told Jennifer and Kirsti that they’d missed that window,” Lampe shared over the phone, “but as soon as they gave me the information about the wines that they made, the Charbono com-

pletely interested me, because I’m a huge Charbono fan. So we actually tasted it right then and there.”

“The ’12 is what I started with. We did it this last year, and then when they rolled over to the ’13, we put that on by the glass.”

Bob Hurley’s menu usually features wild game, a cuisine he specializes in. He and Lampe both think of Charbono as an ideal red wine to pair with game meat preparations. As business partners, they even decided several years ago to carve out a section of their wine list for Charbono after trying one made by a staff member at the restaurant.

“We fell in love with it, and then all of a sudden I found out how rare it was, and how very little is made. So at one point we had eight different Charbonos on our list, and we still continue with six of them.”

About that many Charbonos were recognized earlier this year for awards at the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s 2014 Wine Competition, the show at which the Inizi label won the design sweepstakes. To go with the prestigious label award, the Inizi 2012 Charbono won a gold medal in the category of “All Other Red Varietals.” Filipelli and Harley’s wine was up against many alternative grape varieties, including the aforemen-

tioned Aleatico, as well as Counoise, Lemberger, and something called Uncle Tannat. “All Other” may be an all-encompassing category, but with the huge range of lesser-known grapes being grown and made into serious wine in California (not to mention Oregon, Washington, and beyond), it puts Calistoga’s traditional red grape in an interesting place that juxtaposes the old with the new.

Of course, a lot of credit for the gold medal at the *Chronicle* competition goes to winemaker John Harley. He and Filipelli have been friends since their college days at Fresno State, and the Inizi business partnership is highly cooperative in the classic grape-grower and winemaker sense.

“A.J. and I roomed together, studied together, and worked together,” Harley wrote via email. “We’ve been a really good team since. The working relationship has stayed that way. With A.J. getting his MBA, he does most, if not all, of finances and record keeping along with viticulture management with our vineyard sources. I really couldn’t ask for a better business partner.”

Asked to comment on the alternative grape varieties coming to the fore in California viticulture and winemaking, he replied

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A.J. and Jen Filipelli (above) and John and Kirsti Harley are the co-founders of INIZI.

INIZI

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that he thinks “it’s impossible for us to be separate from the ‘alternative grape movement,’ being that we produce the wines that we produce. Honestly, we make the wines that we make simply because A.J., Jen, Kirsti, and I all work around the same ‘big three’ (among others): Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Chardonnay. We have the honor of working in some of the best vineyards in California for these varietals, and as a creative outlet we chose to make wines that are hard to find.”

“The North Coast of California in general has hundreds of microclimates that are suitable for hundreds of different grape varietals. Charbono and Tocai Friulano shouldn’t be planted everywhere but neither should Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir.”

Harley mentioned the northeast Italian white grape, Tocai Friulano, which he and Filipelli purchase from Saini Vineyard in Dry Creek Valley and use to make the white wine of the Inizi portfolio (the trio of Inizi wines is rounded out by a dry rosé of Charbono; see sidebar). Traditionally, though somewhat haphazardly, Tocai has been grown in parts of Napa and Sonoma Counties for decades and rivals both Charbono and Uncle Tannat under that obscure grape heading.

“It was really similar to the Charbono,” Filipelli said, moving from his kitchen to a shaded picnic table in his backyard to open and taste some Inizi bottles. “John’s day job led him to meeting Mr. Saini, looking at another project he was working on, and he noticed some white grapes speckled amongst a field of old-vine Zinfandel. We’d been talking about making a white wine after the first vintage of Charbono and rosé.”

The Inizi wines were and are, in a word, delicious. Both Charbono vintages impressed with their dark, almost black, hues in the glass, in pleasing contrast to the pink-and-orange-tinged Charbono rosé and elegantly pale Tocai Friulano. But the wines can be appreciated as a single stylistic offering.

“I think these wines will usually have a much more wine-educated consumer who will most likely enjoy our ‘old world/old California’ style of winemaking,” Harley wrote in his email.

“I grew up drinking wine made from Napa and Sonoma that echoed the European style. These are the wines I like to drink, and I’ve chosen to build my career in making wines of that early style. It’s really exciting to see this style coming back.”

With his nose in an oversized glass, Filipelli reflected on both the wines in front of him and on the Inizi project. He gave credit to his business partners, starting with Harley.

“John is a very talented

winemaker,” he observed. “He’s able to make these wines with great consistency, and the way he makes wine is to be drunk right away. You hear a lot about some winemakers that have the philosophy that wine must be aged in barrel x amount of months. John’s style is he makes wines to be enjoyed, and enjoyed with food.”

He summed up that Inizi really is a partnership of two young, married couples just getting started in a wine venture. *Inizi*, by the way, is the Italian word for “beginnings.”

“Together we make big decisions as far as where the company’s going, and sales decisions, you know, how we want to market it. Those big-picture things and sales things we kind of do as a group. It’s a good excuse to get together and drink some wine and kind of plan out where we’re going.”

The reporter invited Filipelli to help himself to a glass of Inizi Charbono before the bottles disappeared for later consideration with a grilled Memorial Day chicken. He graciously accepted.

“Like I said, we’ve been doing it for a few years, and we’re still going. And we have plans to expand organically. We’re not buying a winery or anything like that. We kind of like the situation we’re in right now.”

Filipelli handed over the corks for the pair of red wines, careful to avoid the inky sludge on the underside of each cork.

Charbono is, indeed, a colorful red wine.

Tony Poer’s Tasting Notes

INIZI Wines



The winemaking partners of Two Worlds Wine Co., A.J. Filipelli and John Harley, make the Inizi Wines at Brack Mountain Wine Company in Sebastopol. Harley also works as the winemaker at this modern facility in west Sonoma County. As he said about Inizi’s focus on lesser-known grape varieties, “California is an incredibly diverse state that has a huge amount to offer the wine world. I love making and drinking Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, and Pinot

Noir but I’m also proud to be a part of this new movement to showcase lesser known varietals.”

Their website is www.iniziwines.com

Inizi 2014 Tocai Friulano, Saini Vineyard, Sonoma County

Very pale, light-colored, faded yellow, almost clear rim. Delicate, floral-saline nose, lemon rind, wet stones, lemon balm, a bit of chalk, raw almond. Broad flavors for a delicate white, deceptively fruity. Very dry on palate, crisp acidity, green-yellow citrus, minerals. Delicate white but has good length. An oyster wine.

\$24

Inizi 2014 Rosé of Charbono, Calistoga

Pale pink, orange-tinge, lovely pale color. Nose is sour cherries, bit of hard red candy, subtle earthiness. Juicy-fruity opening, nice forward fruit and acid balance; dried cranberry, dried red-black cherry, touch of strawberry, light and juicy Charbono character through finish. **\$19**

Inizi 2013 Charbono, Calistoga

Dark, saturated color, almost black in glass, dark purple rim. Complex nose, herbs, forest floor, grilled garden herbs, grilled meat, some gaminess. Up-front tannins, light-bodied but still chewy, Cabernet-like structure. Juicy cherry-berry red fruits, some darker wild berry flavors through finish. Firmly balanced acidity. A chunky, structured Charbono, definitely to keep 4-5 years in the cellar then serve with hair or feathers. **\$32**

Inizi 2012 Charbono, Calistoga

Very deep purple rim to black center. Earthy, herbal notes, some wild berry, touch of leather and game on nose, sweet spices, very lush notes. Juicy and rich fruit up front, Zin-like fruit, round, rich mid-palate fruit, lots of raspberry, black cherry, a little blueberry in finish. A sexier wine than the ’13 but drink sooner with a grilled bird. **\$32**