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Guide**

Mud City *Weekender*

CALISTOGA

SEPTEMBER 2013



COURTESY PHOTO

Tofanelli Family Vineyard

Third generation grape farmer blends past with present

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Vince Tofanelli: Eyewitness to evolution of Napa Valley's viticulture

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

If you want to know what grape growing in Calistoga looked like 85 years ago compared to today, ask Vince Tofanelli.

The Calistoga native and proprietor of Tofanelli Family Vineyard is the grandson of Italian immigrants and a third generation Napa Valley grower. He's also an eyewitness to the evolution of viticulture at the northern end of the Valley. And along the way, certain events have had a profound influence on his career.

"They sold fruit in those early years to Beringer, Beaulieu, Charles Krug, and some of those old-old players," Vince said about his grandparents, Irene DalPorto and Sebastian DiGiulio, while welcoming visitors to Up Valley Vintners, the casual, art-adorned tasting room he shares with three other wineries in downtown Calistoga.

"There was a co-op of vintners

that took the grapes for many years. Gallo was behind that. In the 1960s it was Inglenook. At those times, usually we would align all the grapes with one winery."

These days, with help from his mother, Pauline DiGiulio Tofanelli, he supplies fruit grown in his family's two vineyards—DiGiulio Ranch and Tofanelli Vineyard—to a handful of winery clients.

Each year Vince withholds a small quantity of grapes from his 27 acres to produce about 1000 cases of artisanal wine under his family label. If you've ever noticed a wine bottle with a sepia-toned photograph of a young, dark-haired woman astride a vintage motorcycle next to a row of ancient-looking vines, you were admiring a cleverly repurposed snapshot of Vince's grandmother posing on her husband's 1915 Harley-Davidson. The Tofanelli label, designed by Vince's sister, Norma, has won design awards as well as many admirers. Its slyly humorous image is a visual nod

to the family's place in Calistoga viticulture. The fact that Sebastian ditched the Harley after crashing it near Greystone when Highway 29 was just a gravel road only adds to the label's backstory.

The juxtaposition of old and new is an everyday part of Vince Tofanelli's life and work. He was an American kid whose early childhood language was Italian. He farms his vines organically, not to charge more money for the fruit or for his own wines but because that's what his Tuscan-born grandfather did (as Vince put it: "It wasn't a decision that was good for the earth or bad for the earth. It was just the way it was always done.") And in Napa Valley, the presumed heaven for cabernet sauvignon, he grows old-school varieties—zinfandel, grenache, petite sirah, and the obscure charbono—to make wines that would leave any red wine-loving, bocce-playing Italian immigrant feeling like they had died and

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COURTESY PHOTO

Vince Tofanelli, third generation grower and winemaker, learned viticulture from his grandparents, Sebastian DiGiulio and Irene DalPorto.



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actually gone there. Vince has his feet firmly planted in Italian-American viticultural traditions.

No doubt the vineyard business is in his blood. Irene and Sebastian recognized decades earlier that the fruit and walnut orchard they had saved a nest egg to purchase in 1929 showed larger promise. “Even in 1929 and ‘30 it was pretty apparent that grapes were more profitable than, say, prunes,” Vince explained. “So they slowly phased it into more and more vines.”

He noted that, during that challenging era, his grandparents possessed an extra measure of business savvy. “The handwriting was on the wall that prohibition was going to be repealed,” he said, “and so people were planting vines, even when it wasn’t technically legal.”

With Prohibition 80 years in the past, it’s difficult to grasp that grape farming or winemaking in Napa Valley were ever furtive endeavors, especially watching Vince pour at Up Valley’s bar for a regular stream of locals and wine tourists. The convivial scene was about as far removed from a Prohibition-era Calistoga as one could imagine.

Vince’s own growing career got an early start. He went to work with his grandfather at 15, learning from the Tuscan immigrant the ins and outs of old-world grape farming. Sebastian practiced organic viticulture by default.

“I learned how to grow grapes from my grandfather, he being a real traditional, old-school grape grower. His knowledge, his skill at growing grapes coalesced in a time when there were no chemicals to apply: pre-World War II. So if you were to grow grapes in 1930 you had sulfur, and that was about it.”

By the late 1960s, when Vince became his grandfather’s fledgling assistant, DiGiulio Ranch was nearly 40 years old. The Zinfandel and Petite Sirah vines were already well-established in the gravelly soil, along with odd plantings of Mondeuse and the white varieties Sauvignon Vert and Burger. His training ground was a pesticide and herbicide-free environment.

“As the years went on, by the time I came along, he was still farming that old way, and so he



COURTESY PHOTO

Vince’s mom Pauline Tofanelli drives the tractor during harvest at the Tofanelli Family Vineyard.

couldn’t see any reason to bring chemicals in,” he said. He credits Sebastian with imparting the lesson of “Why put something on the vines if they don’t need it?”

Winery clients were in steady supply from 1930 through the 1980s, a trend that helped solidify Vince’s family’s reputation as dependable growers. In the 1970s, his role began to change at the same time as his outlook was maturing.

“My grandparents were maintaining and thriving in kind of an old world way,” he remembered. “The first Earth Day was around that time, and the sort of cry of my generation was, ‘We have to get back to the planet!’ And I’m just looking at my grandparents and thinking they never left it. They wouldn’t know the word ‘organic,’ but they were living it.”

For a guy not yet 20, he was developing an impressive awareness of where he fit into the scheme of his family’s business.

“That’s when I really felt what a treasure they were,” he continued. “As they were getting older, my grandfather couldn’t do as much hard, physical work, but I (was) in my physical prime. So I just stayed out there and helped him in his decline and learned farming from him, realizing his was a good, viable way to grow grapes.”

Vince carried this knowledge

and experience into the 1980s, a decade that would prove to be the most exciting—and tumultuous—of his career. In 1987, the esoteric grape variety Charbono entered the picture.

Touring the DiGiulio vineyard with Vince on a breezy August afternoon, he only half-jokingly referred to Charbono as California’s “original cult wine” as he told the story of how this mostly forgotten French variety ended up on his property.

“Long before Napa was a premier growing region,” he said while pulling and clipping leaves and dropping green grapes to the ground, “Inglenook used to make a varietal Charbono every year, probably since the repeal of Prohibition. And there was a following for it. They would sell it out every year, consistently. And then when Inglenook became a conglomerate and folded up the Charbono program, I would still get these aficionados saying, ‘Where’s the Charbono? I remember the Inglenook Charbono.’”

Like his grandparents guessing before Prohibition’s repeal that grapevines would be a good idea, Vince took a gamble on the variety.

“Charbono was such a risk at that time,” he said. “If Inglenook didn’t want it, I didn’t know if I could find another home, and

I didn’t want to be up the creek with having a ‘weird’ varietal.”

But Vince had a strong advocate in the legendary André Tchelistcheff.

“Tchelistcheff was the highly regarded winemaker for BV—he was involved with Inglenook at that time, too—and he visited the vineyard, looked at the dirt, kind of looked around, and said I should plant Cabernet Franc or maybe Charbono.”

After Tchelistcheff’s visit, Inglenook offered Vince a ten-year grower’s contract, which he confessed “was unheard of in those years.” As a bonus, he would be paid enough per ton that he didn’t feel pressured to plant Cabernet Franc, a variety more closely associated in consumers’ minds with Napa Valley. Vince’s grandparents had never grown Cabernet or any other Bordeaux varieties in their vineyards.

“So it was a shift, you know. I was trying to be sensible. Charbono kind of jibed with my Italian roots. I had a guarantee for ten years and just kind of went, ‘ok, let’s roll the dice put it in the ground.’ And I like the wines,” he added with a smile, “which is also important.”

To call Charbono “weird” isn’t too far off base, considering the

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TONY POER’S TASTING NOTES

Tofanelli Family Vineyard

“I love what Vince is doing both with the Tofanelli wines and the great old ‘off the beaten path’ varietals that are being maintained up there. It takes a lot of love and dedication this day and age to grow charbono, zinfandel, etc. in cabernet-happy Napa Valley.”

— Scott Brenner, Sommelier, Press Restaurant, St. Helena

2011 Grenache Napa Valley

The newest Tofanelli project, from vines planted in 2003. Pencil lead, leather, and tobacco notes on the nose. Dried cherries, candied fruit, and a spicy-earthy palate. Reminiscent of Côtes-du-Rhône. Vince’s wife Arminée’s favorite wine. 100 cases. \$40

2010 Charbono Napa Valley

Inky black in the glass (one of the few wine grapes with dark juice). Very aromatic, notes of dried cranberry, violets, and tar. Barbera-like. Bright, dried cherry and blueberry fruit on the palate with notes of orange rind and grilled meat. A Napa Valley original. 200 cases \$40

2010 Zinfandel Napa Valley

Vince Tofanelli’s signature wine has appeared for years as a single-vineyard bottling from Turley, Neyers, and Shrader Cellars. From the cool 2010 vintage, a wild berry, slightly gamey nose. Gorgeous, lush blackberry-raspberry on the palate, lively acidity, and an incredibly long, focused finish. An iconic Napa zinfandel. 500 cases \$40

2010 Petite Sirah Napa Valley

Saturated black color. Smoked meat, cracked pepper, and grilled fruit on the nose. Big and dense on the palate, though tannins are zinfandel-like and not harsh. Spiced plum and black cherry, very peppery. Firm and fleshy through the finish. A wine to lay down for several years. 200 cases \$50

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cabernet-centric mindset of most Napa Valley growers. Vince's version is a dry, dusty, decidedly old-world wine that the Napa-based Master Sommelier Chris Blanchard describes as "a wine with acid, earth and soul."

Blanchard and his partner, Kimberly Jones, market the Tofanelli Family wines to restaurants and retailers throughout California. "Wine buyers appreciate Vince because of his passion and dedication to producing wine varieties that break out of the monotony mold," he said via text message. "He offers wines with history and pedigree without following a formula."

Twenty-five years ago, when the Charbono vines were going in the vineyard, Vince might not have guessed that sommeliers—master or otherwise—would one day enthuse about his wines. The late 1980s were still a time of uncertainty. Charbono was a calculated risk, and he was having trouble selling the old-vine, field blend grapes like Burger and Mondeuse that his grandparents had built their reputation on with their longtime winery clients. It was a difficult period.

"I guess you kind of forget, and your memory for pain is short," he said. "That was a pretty tough transition. In fact, I can add that one of the toughest things I've done was pulling out a vineyard that my grandparents planted, and it was only for financial reasons."

Acknowledging that "the vineyard hadn't made money for four or five years," Vince's tone became rueful. "To see those vines come out, it forced me to look at the vineyard as a business, which I never thought about that way."

Fortunately, the late 1980s to 1995 proved to be a watershed period. Because of his and his family's long history in Calistoga, he had a high profile for a small grower. Wineries around the North Coast were suddenly looking for carefully managed fruit sources, especially for Zinfandel, but also for Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, the white grapes he had planted to replace his grandparents' vines. Vince started to become a sought-after grower.

"The shift really began in the late 1980s," he recalled. "The wineries I was selling to, they were becoming more and more interested in quality over quantity, and so we were transitioning in that direction."

In 1993, Vince began selling Semillon to Spottswoode Estate,



the well-regarded St. Helena winery. The Novak family used Tofanelli fruit as a blending component for their prized Sauvignon Blanc. Two years later, he did an even more significant deal with an up-and-coming Zinfandel producer, Turley Wine Cellars. "It

all changed because I started selling Zinfandel to Turley," Vince explained. "They were doing single-vineyard Tofanelli zin, and so all of a sudden our vineyard name (was) on a Turley bottle."

A year later, Turley added the 1996 Charbono to its lineup of single-vineyard wines (Vince's claim of cult status for Charbono had some precedent, after all). Larry Turley's soon-to-be-famous winery subsequently purchased fruit from Vince over 17 years, a string of vintages that helped create relationships with many other respected winemakers.

"It became much more symbiotic," he explained. "People like Greg Brown at T-Vine and Thomas Rivers Brown, who was with Fred Shrader at Shrader

Cellars, these are winemakers that are friends of mine. They understood that the better grapes that I can grow, the better wine that's going to be in the bottle. And also it flips back on me and the reputation of the vineyard, because my vineyard's name is on their bottles. So the symbiotic relationship was quite novel in our family's history. It was a very positive transition."

While the hard work of farming, supplying fruit, and making his own wine hasn't stopped, the last decade has been good to Vince. He's taken his foot off the pedal in terms of being a go-to grower, preferring instead to trade up on the Tofanelli reputation and shift his focus to his own wine-making. It's not a new venture: the first Tofanelli Family vintage was 2000. But he recently started to make the wines at Envy Wines' contemporary winery at the north end of Calistoga, a short drive from the vineyards. A 2011 Grenache, planted in 2003, joins the Tofanelli trio of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, and Charbono this fall. And Vince's first white wine, a 2013 Semillon-Sauvignon Blanc blend, will come out next year.

As he's done over the years with so many other clients, Vince has forged a strong relationship through his Sauvignon Blanc with the globetrotting St. Helena winemaker, Dave Phinney of Orin Swift.

Phinney, reached on his phone from Corsica, wrote that he thinks Vince is "among the best growers" farming fruit for him. "His approach to the vineyards is ex-

pressed in his wines, a complete respect for the terroir which is so often lost or blended away."

Vince's Sauvignon Blanc has always been the backbone of Orin Swift's proprietary white wine, Veladora. "As far as his Sauvignon Blanc he's irreplaceable," Phinney wrote, "and as the vineyard gets older it only gets better!"

The oldest Tofanelli vines are mature, indeed. At 83 years and counting, with gnarled trunks in the original blocks and, as Vince writes on the website, "not a drip line to be seen," the free-standing, head-trained vines are sturdy, impressive, and, in the late August heat, bursting with deeply colored bunches of fruit. Even the Semillon and Charbono vines in the DiGiulio vineyard, half a century younger than the oldest Zinfandel, seem to resemble their senior neighbors.

Back at Up Valley Vintners' tasting bar, while Vince pre-viewed his new Grenache for a Pinot Noir-loving couple from Portland, Oregon, he summed up his thoughts on how he'd arrived at this point in his career.

"I feel strongly that the way to succeed or thrive is by finding a niche," he said. "Zinfandel to me is a traditional Napa Valley grape, a California grape that comes and goes in popularity, but I'm in it for the long haul—there's always a base for it. Grenache is never going to be a hugely popular wine varietal. But, hey, if I can make 100 cases and find those wine aficionados that appreciate what I'm doing, then I've succeeded."

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