



Mud City Times

A complimentary guide for Calistoga visitors

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FILE PHOTO BY CLARK JAMES MISHLER

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VINCE TOFANELLI

Master of the Old Vine

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY TIMES

If *Antiques Roadshow* ever comes to Calistoga, they'll have some decisions to make.

Whether to linger on Lincoln Avenue or head straight out to Dunaweal Lane – with a stop on Lake Street along the way—is a big one. Calistoga's main drag has no shortage of shops full of collector's items to peruse, but the edge of town is where some truly rare antiques can be found.

Just two miles apart near Silverado Trail sit a couple of vineyards that offer up a different kind of antique: exquisitely maintained, century-old grapevines. And while they might not ever get featured on television, the Tofanelli and Falleri vineyards embody a living, viticultural history within Napa Valley. Through their farmer-owners, each has a story to tell.

These quintessential Calistoga sites, along with three others – Palisades, Canard, and Gaudi Carli Vineyards – are included on the website of the Historic Vineyard Society, a project launched 11 years ago to celebrate the existence up and down California of vineyards planted decades earlier, some dating back to the 19th century. The Society's trio of founders, Morgan Twain-Peterson, Mike Officer, and Tegan Pissalacqua, are, respectively, the winemakers for Bedrock, Carlisle, and Turley—wineries known for producing wines from heritage sites.

Full of information, the HVS website is a well-organized clearing house for over 150 California vineyards, all researched by the three founders with help from other vintners. The collective histories of all of them would fill volumes and require an even greater effort to complete. Still, the site works as a reminder that viticulture in this state represents a living history. Arguably, nowhere is that history more alive than at Tofanelli Vineyard.

"DiGiulio Ranch was my grandparents'," said grapegrower Vince Tofanelli on a recent February morning, referring to his family's property by its original name. "They're the ones who established it in 1929. So, as my mother said, I was almost born under a grapevine. I've always been out in this vineyard."

Leading a walk among his gnarled, head-trained vines, he wasn't exaggerating. Now 68, Vince started working alongside his grandfather, Sebastian DiGiulio, when he was 15 years old. He learned the ropes of organic grapegrowing at a time when it was the default practice, and when the rest of Napa Valley's vineyard landscape looked like Calistoga's: individual, un-trellised vines planted to many different varieties not called cabernet. "It's more open," he noted about the vineyard's layout, which has changed very little over the last nine decades. "It's more of a garden, or maybe a forest."

Compared to most, Vince's vineyard is a very unique collection of plants. The absence of wires and trellises allows the veteran grower to work in multiple directions around each thick vine, from mowing the grass and other cover crops to tilling the soil. "Then, from there it's hand-work," he said, "so it would be much more cost effective and easier on me to just strip-spray herbicide. But it goes back to what I feel is the correct method. And so, like I used to say, I like the fact that my grandkids could come around here and lay under a vine without me having to tell them, 'Get away from there!'"

While his plantings consist partially of grenache, charbono, and a single white variety, semillon, Vince and his grandchildren were more likely to have been lying under zinfandel or petite sirah, two vines



PHOTO BY TONY POER

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Vince Tofanelli, 68, started working alongside his grandfather, Sebastian DiGiulio, when he was 15 years old. He learned the ropes of organic grapegrowing at a time when it was the default practice.



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FILE PHOTO BY CHICK HARRITY

A Family Affair...Vince Tofanelli, left, oversees the 2013 harvest along with sister, Norma Tofanelli, Darius Sedigh and Pauline Tofanelli.

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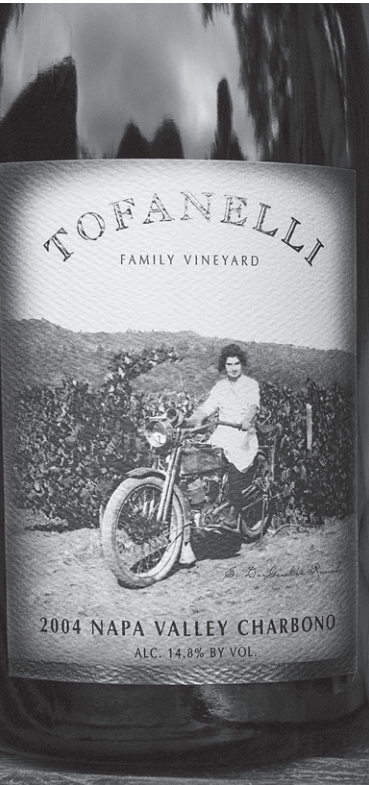
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closely associated with Calistoga as far back as anyone can remember.

It was, in fact, Turley Cellars’ vineyard-designated bottlings of these sturdy grapes that landed the Tofanelli property on wine enthusiasts’ radars in the mid-1990s. In Vince’s opinion, the Turley reds carrying his name on their labels were “big, rich, blackberry-driven wines” that helped define a Robert Parker-friendly style at that time.

Vince began playing with zinfandel as a hobbyist back in 1979. Then, starting with a commercial release in 2000, he launched his own label, complete with an old photo of his grandmother, Irene DalPorto, astride her husband’s 1915 Harley-Davidson. He settled on a decidedly un-Turley version of zinfandel, inspired more by one of Calistoga’s longtime producers, Jerry



Seps at Storybook Mountain, along with another legendary California winery, Joseph Swan Vineyards in Sonoma County. These were old-school, zinfandel-centric operations “that made this claret style kind of lighter alcohol wines that aged well,” as he explained it. Today, both wineries continue to release excellent zinfandel.


If his wines reflect a balanced approach to grapegrowing, it has earned Vince an impressive list of client wineries, including Duckhorn, Realm Cellars, and Mending Wall, along with highly sought-after consultants like Helen Keplinger and Thomas Rivers Brown. For her part, Keplinger is a fan of the sole Tofanelli white grape, which Vince planted in a relatively distant 1987. “I buy his old-vine semillon for Kerr Cellars. It goes into their sauvignon blanc,” she wrote in a text message. “I love working with Vince and his fruit.”

Chat old-school wine grapes with him for five minutes, and it becomes clear that Vince has an equally genuine love for nurturing the vines that produce them. “If it was cabernet sauvignon,” he said with a laugh and a shake of his head, “I could charge three times the amount. It’s just there’s an imaginary ceiling with some of these varietals.”

He acknowledged the massive popularity of Napa Valley’s best-known commodity. But, he emphasized, “I’ve always been a traditionalist, in the sense that I grew up working with my grandparents and my parents. We were



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COURTESY OF TOFANELLI VINEYARDS



FILE PHOTO BY CLARK JAMES MISHLER

Vince Tofanelli began playing with zinfandel as a hobbyist back in 1979.

all farmers out here, grapegrowers first. The varieties that were in the ground predated cabernet and all of the newer stuff.”

To Vince, the “newer stuff” meant charbono and grenache, not merlot or cabernet franc. Along with the sémillon vines in 1987, he planted another block of zinfandel and added the lesser-known charbono, a decision that he confessed was “based on emotion, maybe, and tradition, as opposed to finance.” Charbono had been a popular red grape in Napa Valley going to back to the years following Prohibition.

He stopped to indicate a slight slope east towards Silverado Trail, explaining that where he stood was the lowest section of the vineyard, and the one most prone to frost. This two-and-a-half-acre section was the oldest on the property, planted by his grandfather in 1930. “He and my grandmother were caretakers at Schramsberg prior to buying this place in

Budbreak on an ancient head-trained zinfandel vine. The wild, almost jagged appearance of thousands of head-trained vines — as opposed to manicured, trellised vine rows — could suggest that this is an older, more throwback way of practicing viticulture.

1929,” he recounted. “And the story that trickled down to me was that there was an old block of zinfandel at Schramsberg that he had farmed. So, when he bought this place, he was able to get grafting wood from up there and move it here.”

If that famous sparkling wine house ever bottled zinfandel back in the old days, it’s most likely a piece of lost Napa Valley history.

Pausing again to point out an exceptionally gnarled specimen of a vine, he continued, “With this zinfandel block that we’re in, you know, it’s sentimental. Our grandparents put these vines in the ground. So, for me to be still here, farming it and selling quality grapes to quality wineries, it’s like, ‘Yeah, OK, I’m not making as much money as I might, but I rest easier knowing that there’s continuity.’”

Over the years, Vince’s commitment to growing what some might think of as more marginal grape varieties hasn’t stopped Tofanelli Vineyard from operating as a profitable business. But the wild, almost jagged appearance of thousands of head-trained vines—as opposed to manicured, trellised vine rows—could suggest that his is an older, more throwback way of practicing viticulture. Spread out over 25 acres, the “garden” of his head-trained plants certainly provides him the space for a unique relationship to each one.

He shared a memory that related to this.

“As a young man, I was working out here six days a

week, but I was fascinated with bonsai,” he recalled. “So, I had four or five little bonsai plants in Calistoga, and, you know, the summers can get hot here. And I’d go home, and it was like, ‘Oh, my goodness, the bonsais are just desiccated.’ So I lost them. And it was like I was fighting this battle to try to grow bonsai. Then one day I just kind of looked out here and said, ‘Vince, you’ve got 17,000 bonsai trees! Why are you trying to do this in little containers?’”

The vineyard near the corner of Dunaweal and Silverado Trail that met Vince’s desire back then to work the land of his grandparents still accomplishes the same thing for him in 2022. And now there’s the cultivation of history in it for him, too. Nothing lasts forever, of course, which he addressed before heading off to yet another task among his vines.

“My granddaughter, Melissa, just turned 18. She just asked me out of the blue if she could come out here. She’s interested in grapes and the whole business. And, you know, she asked if I could teach her how to prune. I said, ‘Absolutely!’ So I got to tell her a bunch of old grandparent stories. She walked away after four hours with a rudimentary idea of how to prune old-vine zinfandel.”

“There’s no pressure,” he added, “but it’s here if she wants to pursue it.”

Editor’s Note:
End of Part One. Part Two on Sonya Spencer, Bob Biale, and the Falleri Vineyard on Lake

History of wine in the Napa Valley

Early Napa

Wild grapes certainly grew in abundance in early Napa Valley, but it took settler George Calvert Yount to tap the area’s potential for cultivating wine grapes. Yount built one of the homesteads in the area and was the first to plant Napa Valley grapes in 1839. Soon after, other pioneers such as John Patchett and Hamilton Walker Crabb helped introduce the first vitis vinifera grapes to the area.

Pioneers and Early Expansion

Charles Krug is credited with establishing Napa Valley’s first commercial winery in 1861. His success and leadership sparked a wave of new growth, and by 1889 there were more than 140 wineries in operation, including Schramsberg (founded in 1862), Beringer (1876) and Inglenook (1879).

The First Challenges

This tremendous expansion, however, was soon brought to a halt. By the turn of the 20th century the industry saw prices plummet amidst a sea of surplus grapes, and the arrival of phylloxera dealt vintners a stunning blow as more than 80% of the valley’s vineyard acreage fell victim to the destructive root louse. An even greater threat to the Napa Valley wine industry arrived in 1920 with the enactment of Prohibition. Vineyards and wineries were abandoned over the next 14 years with only a handful of wineries continuing to operate by producing sacramental wines.

Recovery

With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, Napa Valley’s wine industry began its slow recovery. During this time, John Daniel Jr. resurrected Inglenook, Georges de Latour re-established Beaulieu Vineyards (BV), Louis M. Martini built his winery and the Mondavi family purchased Charles Krug Winery. Andre Tchelischeff, a Russian émigré working in France, came to Napa Valley to work for BV and became one of the great figures and mentors in the history of Napa Valley wine.

The Last 50 Years

If a single event can be credited with putting Napa Valley on the map, it was the Paris Tasting of 1976. This blind, comparative tasting pitted Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay from California against the best wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy in a blind tasting. When the tasting was done, the judges had given top honors to Chateau Montelena Chardonnay and Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon. Napa Valley would never be the same, and the number of wineries would grow from a few dozen to several hundred today.

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