



Mud City Times

A complimentary guide for Calistoga visitors

VOL 19

APRIL

2022



Join Wellness Week activities

Page 9

PHOTO BY TIM CARL/COURTESY CALISTOGA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Old ladies, old friends	5	The Persistence of Beauty	10	Earl Thollander's art of the valley	17	Map of wineries, tasting rooms	19
----------------------------	---	------------------------------	----	--	----	-----------------------------------	----

From one old lady to another, a daily ‘hello’

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY TIMES

Every morning from her bathroom window, Sonya Spencer is greeted by the welcome sight of her friends the old ladies.

Describing herself more or less the same way, the “ladies” she gazes upon are her old zinfandel vines – very old, in fact, planted a century ago – spread out across Falleri Vineyard. The small patch of land sits at the corner of Lake Street and Falleri Drive next to her family home. Sonya grew up looking out that same kitchen window and for the last three decades has been one of Calistoga’s most exceptional grapegrowers.

Even for vineyards as small as hers, their historic significance can’t be overstated. Sonya’s property, and other old Calistoga sites like Canard, Palisades, and Tofanelli, could make for the subjects of a California wine history class, their still-planted acreages representing letters from Napa Valley’s viticultural past. Covering less than half an acre, Falleri is more like a postage stamp.

Since 1992, its grapes have gone to a single winery, Robert Biale Vineyards in Napa. Over that same time, Bob Biale’s family operation in the Oak Knoll District has built a reputation for its zinfandels, petite sirahs, and other old-school varieties. They’ve specialized in heritage sites like Falleri and the Gaudi Carli Vineyard, a slightly less tiny collection of ancient barbera vines across the street from Sonya’s house.

That her kitchen garden of a vineyard even exists in 2022 is pretty surprising. “It weren’t for Bob, these vines probably wouldn’t be here,” she shared while taking a recent morning stroll with him among the vines. “It made it easy for me when he started buying the grapes. I took care of them to a point. And when I couldn’t take care of them, Bob filled in the spaces. Now he does almost all of it, because I can’t really do as much as I used to do out here.”

The veteran vintner was quick to point out that, as a hands-on grower, Sonya still does plenty. He credited her with having a second-nature understanding for what her vines, planted way back

in the 1920s, need to continue to thrive and produce extraordinary red wine. “You have a good instinct, Sonya,” Bob said, gently admonishing her for her modesty. “Believe it or not, you do. And it goes a long, long way to taking care of a vineyard.”

That care extends a long way back into a colorful past. Sonya’s grandparents, Argentina and Alfredo Falleri, emigrated from Italy in the early 1900s and ended up running a hotel in the Mendocino coast town of Elk that catered to the lumber industry. Some Italian forebears of the Torrigino family, owners of the Gaudi Carli Vineyard next to Sonya, had been friends with the Falleris in their Tuscan hometown of Lucca. After emigrating, they settled in Calistoga and eventually reconnected with her grandparents, who purchased an adjacent property and house in 1924 and then planted a small vineyard. According to Sonya, the home near Lake Street had been built by a man for

his fiancée. She remembers being told he might also have been from Lucca. “But his bride jilted him! Don’t you love these old Italian stories?” she laughed.

During this story, Bob – an Italian-American who has no doubt heard his share of them – wondered to Sonya about the actual age of the surrounding zinfandel vines. “I always thought it was planted in 1920,” he said. That was the common understanding around his Napa winery. “What difference does it make? Who knows?” she chided him, laughing again that this part of her family history was nearly a century in the past. “My grandparents moved here in ’24, so these vines may actually be older than that.”

Bob then asked, “Did they plant the vineyard, or...?”

“Well, that I’m not totally sure of. It may have been here when they purchased it. But it makes a great story that they did!”

See **FALLERI** on page 6




PHOTO BY PAT HAMPTON

Sonya Spencer checks on the 300 zinfandel vines planted by her grandparents at the corner of Lake Street and Falleri Drive.



PHOTO BY TONY POER

Bob Biale and Sonya Spencer check on the 100-year-old vines at Spencer’s home on Lake Street.



Washington Street Lodging

*“The beginning
of wisdom
is to do away
with fear.”*

– Yohannes Gebregeorgis,
ETHIOPIAN PHILANTHROPIST

KENEFICK RANCH

*Family Owned
Handcrafted
Estate Wines
Grown in Calistoga*

KENEFICK RANCH VINEYARDS

Online orders available for
pick-up & virtual tastings

707-942-6175

www.kenefickranch.com
info@kenefickranch.com

THE BERGSON



A Charming Calistoga Inn Where Life Slows Down

1010 FOOTHILL BLVD., CALISTOGA, CA 94515
707-942-5755 | THEBERGSON.COM

Feel Welcomed, Well-Cared For & Refreshed!



**BW Best Western PLUS
Stevenson Manor**

1830 Lincoln Ave • Calistoga, CA 94515
(707) 942-1112 • stevensonmanor.com

Superior Customer Service & Value Beautiful & Spacious Guest Rooms Whirlpool Baths, Fireplaces, or Balconies available Full Gym Onsite Free Hot Breakfast

FALLERI
Continued from page 5

Passersby on Lake Street today, whether visitors or just those not familiar with the distinct appearance of a head-trained vineyard, might tell themselves their own story and mistake Falleri for an orchard full of odd-looking fruit trees. The array of gnarled, un-trellised vines doesn’t automatically suggest great red wine grapes, but that’s what Sonya and the Biale team coax from this little corner of Calistoga.

Sonya’s 300 zinfandel plants comprise just four-tenths of an acre and come up practically to the white stucco side of her house. A grassy field at the northern edge of the vineyard is also her property and was once filled with sauvignon blanc vines, or possibly Berger or golden chasselas. This was decades ago. She pointed out a single specimen of the latter vine still standing among the zinfandel plants.

“Interestingly, there’s barbera planted along the fence here. This vineyard is a field blend,” Bob said as he explained the interaction of the vines and soil. “These vines are in fine health, or even great health. And they’re dry-farmed, of course. There’s plenty of clay in the soil, so there’s lots of moisture still there. The vines retain that moisture, and they’re healthy. So it’s one of our smallest vineyards we work with. We love it.”

Motioning towards the Gaudi Carli Vineyard just a stone’s throw across Money Lane from her front door, Sonya joked, “These vines and the barbera over there are old friends. They’ve been here talking to each other for 100 years.”

But, was she joking? Like Bob, she expressed a love for the vineyard. An even closer relationship to it seems to inspire her to personify the vines, both her own and the barbera next door.

They range from being her fellow “old ladies” and “old friends” to something that transcends the wines Bob and his team at Biale produce from them. Since inheriting the property after her mother’s passing in 1991, they’ve been her constant companions. It goes beyond farming.

“I’m not really a wine drinker,” she confessed. “I just tell my friends it’s great wine. And when I take the zinfandel out for tastings, they fall in love with it. But I personally cannot distinguish one vintage from another.”


She moved closer to one of the plants and, recalling her grandmother, continued, “This is more where my enjoyment is. I like to come out and visit with the old ladies. I remember my Nonna because I was raised in this house, and she’d be out here talking to the vines as she was hoeing and doing all the work. And I thought, ‘Oh, that crazy old lady.’ But guess what? I do the very same thing! I come out and I talk to the vines. And after Bob harvests them, I walk around and thank each one of them for doing such a good job. So we’re friends.”

In his longtime role as Sonya’s only customer for the Falleri grapes, Bob and she have developed a strong working relationship, in addition to a genuine




PHOTO BY TONY POER

The Falleri vineyard sits between Falleri and Money on Lake Street. It consists of 300 zinfandel vines on four-tenths of an acre.



**1170 Tubbs Lane, Calistoga
707-942-4670
Open by appt. 7 Days a Week**



Imagine an afternoon on a sundrenched patio, laughing with great friends and tasting exciting new Napa Valley wines. Come on over, we’re waiting for you...

NILS VENGE, WINEMAKER * MARK CARTER, VINTNER

friendship. He shares her sense of appreciation for what the vineyard signifies as a piece of Calistoga’s living history, but in the end he also has to treat it as a functioning part of his winery operation. And yet, being such a small and old planting of zinfandel vines, he’s gotten adept at managing his and Sonya’s expectations for what it will yield in any given harvest, which lets them both re-focus on the concept of stewardship.

“Potentially,” he explained, “the quantity of fruit starts to diminish, which is fair enough. If people are really into this for commercial reasons – not that we’re not. I mean, we’re trying to run a business here – but you know, as the quantity starts to diminish after a certain point, we’ve found that these vines hit a plateau, and then they just kind of hang out at another level for a long, long time, as long as they’re taken care of.”

Sonya was a bit more succinct about her business approach. “I’m just so happy that he takes the grapes. I’ve often said I would give them to him, but I really won’t!” They shared a laugh over this.

“They really take care of themselves,” she added, her instincts kicking in. “We just sort of guide them, but they take care of themselves. And it’s just incredible when I look at that vine and think every grape that it produces is already in there somewhere.”

As they moved on to a different section of the vineyard, Bob made some observations about qualities of the Biale wines produced from it over the years. He wasn’t beyond his own personification of grapevines, both young and



PHOTO BY PAT HAMPTON

Sonya Spencer sits in the backyard of her home and small vineyard at the corner of Falleri and Lake Street where her grandaprents planted zinfandel vines in the 1920s.

old. He has plenty of experience with each. “In general, younger vines are like people. They’re very exuberant, they’re very expressive. Right away, they just show themselves really upfront, and they’re kind of one-dimensional. It’s kind of like, you know, there isn’t a whole lot of depth there,” he observed.

By contrast, from century-old vines like Falleri Vineyard’s, he expects the wines to show more delicacy and complexity—not unlike older people. “Believe it or not, they’re usually not the biggest, boldest wine on the table, but

they’re by far the most expressive and complex. They have depths of flavor, and they just kind of linger and go on. And that’s kind of what happens with this particular wine.”

Sonya agreed. “I love that analogy about the young vines. As we age, we become way more complex and wiser.”

On a separate day, Bob sat down to open a couple of Falleri zinfandels: the current wine from the 2019 vintage and a library bottle of the 2013. His winemaker, David Natali, joined him at a table outside at the Oak Knoll winery while groups of visitors were attended to by the Biale hospitality staff. Natali, a New York native and experienced Napa Valley vintner, noted that he had worked for a few different cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay-focused wineries since arriving in California in 2004 but came to Biale with a different goal. “I was really attracted to the heritage of this winery and working with these beautiful, old vineyards that are truly unique and worth preserving,” he said.

“They’re a more delicate and elegant member of our portfolio of wines,” he shared after tasting the Falleri wines with his boss. He echoed Bob’s comments about how they translate Sonya’s Calistoga location and very old vines. “It shines through partially from the age of the vines, and partially based on the soil. It just produces this beautifully elegant wine, whereas some of our zinfandels have a bit more power, a bit more oomph. They still maintain that

balance, but not quite on the floral and pretty side Falleri can show.”

“You know, it says something about those vineyards,” the winemaker Morgan Twain-Peterson commented on a recent phone call. The Master of Wine and owner of Bedrock Wine Company in Sonoma is, like Bob, a forceful proponent of old California vineyards. A decade ago, he and a pair of fellow vintners launched the Historic Vineyard Society to formally recognize over 150 such sites. “I think there’s a real sort of Darwinian element of survival that comes to them. So the fact that you’ve got this small group of vineyards, I think they’re our one last, little rubber band linking us to the past and to what California looked like, you know, 140 years ago.”

Twain-Peterson noted that Calistoga has a few vineyards listed on the HVS website, including Falleri and Palisades Vineyard, whose petite sirah he has bottled under his label. He described them as a “patchwork of older Napa

Valley vineyards that are still in the ground, in part just because cabernet hasn’t quite wiped everything out there.”

“That Falleri wine that Biale makes is delicious,” he added. “All 42 or whatever cases that they make of it. It’s really quite good!”

Back in Calistoga that morning, Sonya and Bob completed their tour around the vineyard—not a long walk, owing to its very small footprint, but still an important part of the process for managing a historic corner of Napa Valley. They got ready to say their goodbyes until the next meeting at Falleri Vineyard. One of the Biale viticultural staff, or Bob himself, would return soon enough to help Sonya with her springtime tasks as buds began to emerge on her friends, the old vines.

“I just see the beauty in them. I feel like I’m privileged to be able to take care of them, and to treat them properly and appreciate them,” she said. “I mean, what is more beautiful than that?”



PHOTO BY TONY POER

Falleri Vineyard zinfandel is made by Robert Biale at his winery on Big Ranch Road in Napa.

VAULT WINE + ARTIFACTS OFFERS GUESTS A DIVERSE PORTFOLIO OF BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED WINES IN A STUNNING SETTING OF ANTIQUES.

OPEN MON-SUN: 12PM - 7PM
TUES & WED: PRIVATE TASTINGS ONLY

1124 LINCOLN AVENUE
CALISTOGA, CA 94515

VAULTCALISTOGA.WINE 707-341-3321

25 BEERS ON DRAFT!

OUTDOOR BEER GARDEN

HOURS: Monday 2-8
Thursday 2-8
Saturday 12-9

Tues & Wed Closed
Friday 2-9
Sunday 12-8

Dog-friendly patio seating • **Dine In or Take Out available** • **Family-friendly Atmosphere**

Look for the Blue Awning off of Lincoln Ave.

1473 LINCOLN AVENUE, CALISTOGA, CA
(707) 403-5028 @LINCOLNAVENUEBREWERY