

REGION OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

with it. Like many areas in Italy, we have volcanic, red soil, a slight roll to the ground, and we're at 1,400 feet elevation. Also, I didn't want to plant conventional varieties, because I was planning to be very small. I wanted to do something unique, not be just one more Chardonnay producer. So that was the reason to go with Italian varieties. And the cute little story that goes along with this is that we were all having dinner with my Dad and talking. I told him that I was going to plant some grapes and where I was going to plant them. He says, "You gonna plant grapes, huh. You're crazy. Plant Barbera." It was funny because first he tells me I'm crazy, and then he tells me what to plant. Barbera was his favorite, and that's why we have this soft spot in our hearts for the variety. We've also planted Aglianico, Dolcetto, Barbera, Primitivo, Refosco, and Chardonnay, and we still have about five more acres to plant. We've been doing an acre at a time each year. Being the family operation that it is, we have limited capital, physically and financially. This year we'll be planting more Refosco. We planted Chardonnay, because before we moved up here to Lake County, we had made plans to do some replanting on the Sonoma property. Korbel had offered us a long term contract to grow grapes for their champagne program. When my Dad decided to go ahead and sell the place, we had already bought the grape vines. So when I moved up here to Lake County, I planted some of those vines because we already owned them. That's how I started to grow grapes up here.

You began planting in the 1990s, the beginning of the agricultural renewal of Lake County.

Yes, Lake County had wineries before Prohibition, but unlike Sonoma County, which had rail service, Lake County was surrounded by mountains and was isolated. Sonoma farmers

were able to ship grapes back East to the Rabbits, the Priests, and the home winemakers. They actually got better prices for their grapes during Prohibition than they did before. That's why you find so many old-vine vineyards between Santa Rosa and north toward Cloverdale. Because of the rail line, they didn't get torn out like they did up here in Lake County.

Your wines are relatively lean at 13.5% alcohol. How did you arrive at that style?

We're trying to make the old country style, but we're growing grapes in California, and differences show up, particularly with the Northern Italian varieties that wouldn't get as ripe there as they do in California. It's easier to express the California high-alcohol style than the more restrained European style. Even when the alcohol is the same, California wines are fruitier. I would like to say that I'm making the wines more in the European style, but they don't taste the same as European wines. Lately, our wines have been doing very well in competitions. For the first couple of years, we didn't enter many competitions because I didn't feel that it made a difference for us. But I'm amazed at how many winemakers do that. I think if you have lots of money and a good public relations department, it's a good tool. But we don't really utilize it, so it's easy to say that it doesn't make a difference. But it's nice to have those medals in the tasting room and brag a little bit.

You also planted olive trees, which have become a viable crop.

It's really interesting. When I first started planting olive trees, I had difficulty finding any. I got the first ones from Nan McEvoy's ranch in Marin County. She now has 8,000 trees planted. I bought 100 seedlings from her, and they were only 8 inches high. I had to order them

a year ahead of time and wait. I could get Mission olives for processing and canning, but not the high quality for oil. Since then, of course, a lot of people are propagating olives. But there's a big difference from what you get between olives and grapes. From an acre of mature olive trees, you might get 55 gallons of oil. We keep our grape harvest down to 2.5 tons per acre, but we get 350 gallons of wine. I planted olives because I thought they were complementary to grapes. I didn't want to have just one crop on the property. When you have the same crop on a property, and you develop disease problems, they spread more readily than if you have multiple crops. There's a beneficial wasp that takes care of some of the pests on the grapevines, and they like to over-winter in plum trees, so we planted 20 prune trees around the vineyard. We also have five acres of walnuts. But I'm removing some of them to plant more grapes.

Do your children all work with you at the winery?

No. But everybody, with the exception of my oldest daughter, has helped with planting, harvest, or different phases of what we're doing. Right now, my youngest one Emily is labeling wine bottles. Pietro is out pruning. Livia, my second to youngest daughter is in the tasting room today. And my other boys, Robert, Alfred, and Paul have helped either laying out the vineyard, planting, or driving stakes. They've all participated. The two older boys have professions separate from the ranch. Alfred is a finished carpenter, and he, Paul, and I built the tasting bar. Pietro, who is a chef and about to become a sommelier, is learning the winemaking and growing side. His approach is very complementary to what we're doing. The kind of wines we're making are all made to go with food. It all dovetails together very well.



YOUR ACCESS TO OUTSTANDING WINES FROM CALIFORNIA AND ITALY

California Winery of the Month



Rosa d'Oro Tasting Room in Kelseyville

Wines from Lake County's Golden Rose Rosa d'Oro Vineyard

Very few of us earn our livings the same way that our fathers and mothers did, probably because we are tempted by many other opportunities, unlike our 19th Century forebearers. For most of us, different occupations have been plentiful, so whatever work we do at a given time is the result of choice on some level. Instead, Nick Buttitta has devoted his working life to farming like his parents. But that was certainly a choice, probably one made at the deepest levels of his psyche, because he could easily have worked at some other occupation. With two older sisters and two younger ones, he scampered at his father's side through the family's apricot orchard in Palo Alto, where Nick was born. In 1953, as the tech sector was getting underway in Santa Clara County, the family moved north to Santa Rosa in Sonoma County and purchased land that was cultivated with 25 acres of vineyards and the rest in prunes. After growing up there, Nick leased the property from his father, who had moved on to other activities. Finally in 1991, the family sold the Sonoma ranch, and Nick

purchased 14 acres of his own in Lake County above Napa. Today, the Lake County estate includes a vineyard planted with Italian winegrapes, olive and walnut groves, and scattered prune trees and is very much a family winery. Nick has eight children, four daughters and four sons from 44 to 21 years of age, and all contribute to the enterprise. Even though most have careers of their own, they lay down the tools of other trades and come to the winery when needed, especially during planting, harvesting, wine making, and bottling. Life would appear to have been good to Nick. His face is unlined, his manner gentle, and his mind calm. Perhaps because he has chosen to farm like his parents had done, he has access to their stories, which he has added to his own, telling their continuous history with relish. I reprint our conversation with minor editing for clarity.

Why did you plant Italian winegrapes in Lake County?

Actually two reasons, and a cute story goes along
See WINERY back page



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