

## WINERY OF THE MONTH



### WINERY from cover

and, when he was 16 years-old, took him and his younger brother Richard to Europe. "If you're in Burgundy, and you're sticking your feet in those vineyards, and you don't feel anything, you're in the wrong business. The opportunity to taste a lot of special wines at a young age influenced me. I had a vision of what the wines could be or should be, and I think it was very instrumental in what I've produced. I've seen in Sonoma and in various parts of Europe that one of the most common problems among winemakers or producers is that they never see what's outside their village."

After graduating from the University of Santa Clara and taking classes in winemaking and viticulture at the University of California, Davis, Robert worked a harvest at Beaulieu Vineyards and got acquainted with the early legendary winemakers Andre Tchelistcheff and Dick Peterson. "I thought, 'Wow,' this is like going to a baseball game and getting to be in the dugout." He had been working in the family's import division, dealing with the French and Italian portfolios, and wanted to work for the European wineries that the company represented. "I got to spend time in Bordeaux and Burgundy and was especially fond of Burgundies."

Robert says that when he returned from Europe, his father had purchased a "broken-down" apple orchard in the Russian River Valley, and the only grapes planted there at the time were old pre-Prohibition Zinfandel vineyards or field blends of various grapes planted together. He remembers that his great uncle said to his father, "You bought land where? I would never buy grapes from that area. It's foggy and cold." His father answered, "I'm 50 years old, and I still don't get credit for anything." Robert points out that they didn't know what to plant on the property and consulted Dr. Kasimates, a professor of viticulture at the University of California, Davis, who recommended Chardonnay. "At the time, there were only 500 acres of Chardonnay in all of California. We were making wine lists for restaurants, and if people wanted Chardonnay, we offered them long lists of White Burgundy from France." But Kasimates thought that the market was ready for California Chardonnay

and that the varietal would do well in the cool climate of the Russian River Valley. Robert says that his father wanted a red wine as well and that Kasimates recommended Pinot Noir. "I didn't know much either," Robert says. "But I thought 'Oh, that's great, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. We can try and replicate the wines of Burgundy.' So basically, that's how it started."

Robert remembers that wine journalists were calling Pinot Noir the Holy Grail. But Californians were planting it without success. He says that after the first eight years, the family began to think that they had made a mistake, not just from a winemaking standpoint but also as a business decision because the market for Pinot Noir didn't exist. "We were getting \$1000 a ton for Chardonnay and \$250 for Pinot Noir." Robert asked his father if they shouldn't just give up and bud over the Pinot Noir to Chardonnay. His father said, "No. Just leave it the way it is." Robert says that the conversation didn't go beyond that one question. "What a mistake that would have been if my father had gone for the dollar and decided to bud over the vineyard. Today, Olivet Lane is considered one of the heritage vineyards for Pinot Noir."

But it's been a 35 year learning process, Robert says, that was marked especially by three events that taught him what he needed to know to produce extraordinary Pinot Noir. He had been making Pinot Noir like he would any other red wine, putting it into jugs as was the protocol in the 1980s, and labeling it "Vintage Red." He says that it was a "nice, simple-style, fragrant wine." But after selling his Pinot grapes to Burt Williams, Ed Selyem, and Tom Rochioli, who were using small scale, artisan methods, Robert saw the potential of his grapes and began to imitate their winemaking methods.

Another defining event occurred when highly respected winemaker Merry Edwards took over the winery. Until 2001 when the family built its own winery, it had been making its wines in other facilities. Robert was making Pellegrini wines at Vinwood Cellars in Geyserville along with luminaries Merry Edwards and Helen Turley, who

were both working on their own projects. Kerry Damskey was running Vinwood Cellars and complained that overseeing the growing Pellegrini production along with his other duties at Vinwood was becoming too taxing. Robert says that he offered to hire a consulting winemaker to help Kerry with the Pellegrini production and that both Merry Edwards and Helen Turley volunteered for the job. "Merry Edwards came on board, and we took it to the next level. She was our winemaker for 11 years and actually designed our winemaking facility. Now she has her own place, but she was making her wine in our winery up until three or four years ago. She's really good, and it was like working with a doctor. She's got the science behind her. She's a great winemaker."

The other defining event occurred in 1989, "the vintage from Hell," Robert says. They experienced torrential rains through harvest, and half the crop rotted. "We had this three-wire sprawl where all the grapes were incubating in this humidity under the leaves, and it forced us to rethink our viticulture. Within one year, we went to vertical shoot positioning and started removing leaves." In other words, they trellised the vines in such a way that air could circulate and prevent mold when wet weather occurred during the growing season.

During the years that Robert Pellegrini was establishing Pellegrini Family Vineyards as producers of super premium wines, especially Pinot Noir and also Chardonnay, the entire California wine industry was moving through the same learning curve, but the process never stops. Today, the Pellegrini Family is using native yeasts from the vineyard to ferment wines and using fewer new oak barrels that can impart too much flavor and disguise the personality of the fruit. In the last 15 years, science has handed winemakers an arsenal of tools that tended to diminish the individual qualities of the fruit that should reflect the environment, the soils, the climate where the vines grow. "Natural winemaking" is the new attempt at even greater quality. "So in a sense," Robert says, "we're almost wine shepherds instead of winemakers, and I think that really hits it on the head."



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### California Winery of the Month



## Finding the Holy Grail Pellegrini Family Vineyards

Robert Pellegrini has acquired an extraordinary education in the business and culture of wine that began with his grandfather and great uncle, landless peasants from Tuscany, who came to the U.S. as teenagers and became grape merchants during Prohibition in the years between 1919 and 1933. Their story is atypical among wine families. They were not farmers, who parlayed land holdings and crops into a fortune that succeeding generations managed and enlarged. Instead, they began their joint career as business people, who bought grapes from Sonoma County farmers, sending some in rail cars to immigrant communities in Chicago and New York but reserving most for the local market, selling grapes at the San Francisco produce terminal. Customers could not only buy grapes there but also crush them, then load them into small vats and barrels, and take them home to ferment into wine under the watchful eyes of Federal law enforcement, which permitted winemaking only for personal use. When Prohibition was repealed in 1933, Robert's grandfather and great uncle were the fourth in line at the Alcohol Beverage Control office in San Francisco to obtain a wine making license. Their grape merchant business then expanded into wine making, which they suspended in 1958 because the family's wholesale distribution network required all of its energy.

Robert Pellegrini is a story teller with shrewd judgment and a joyful laugh, and through the family business, he bears witness to the history of wine in California. He recalls that in North Beach, San Francisco's Italian neighborhood, many apartment buildings had gravity flow wineries as late as 1976 when he was living in a three-story building with a trap door in the garage floor. "They would roll a truck into the garage, put up a crusher, and crush the grapes straight down into fermentation

vats that were one floor down where they had aging barrels and everything. When I got into the elevator in September and October, I could smell the wine fermenting."

In the 1950s, Robert's father Vincent joined the business and expanded its wine distribution activity. The company sold the wines of Almaden, Italian Swiss Colony, Inglenook, and Beringer throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, together with the wines of smaller California producers and some of the foremost French and Italian imports. For 15 years, the family focused just on distribution, which it suspended only six years ago. But in 1969, the restaurant and hotel giant Heublein had branched out into whiskey and vodka distribution and then purchased Italian Swiss Colony, Inglenook, and Beaulieu. The Pellegrini family worried that their enterprise could suffer if they lost such a big client and decided to hedge against that possibility by getting back into winemaking. In 1970 after Robert graduated from college, the family purchased 70 acres off of West Olivet Road in what is now the Russian River appellation of Sonoma County and became pioneers in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir production.

Robert Pellegrini points out that he has spent almost as much of his career with wine distribution as he has with winemaking because, until recently, the two activities overlapped in the family business, which includes his brother Richard and sister Jean. As a wine maker and viticulturist, Robert has participated in a tremendous evolution in the quality of California wine. And what he learned about European wines through the family's distribution activity served him well as a California winemaker.

Robert recalls that when he was 12 years old, his grandfather began to teach him about wine

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San Rafael, CA 94901

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