

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

Which part of the wine business is especially interesting to you?

Drinking it. I don't have that sophisticated a palate. I prefer a wine that I can enjoy with most foods rather than getting caught up with food pairing. So our Sangiovese is one of my favorites, and I love our Pinot. And I like our blends. Our winemaker Alessio Carli does a very good job with them. The Vache and the Sassolino are both good. I love the Zin. We make a Dolcetto, but most people don't know what that is. They think it's a sweet wine because the name means "sweet" in Italian. We sell Dolcetto only through the tasting room. I love to cook too although I don't cook as much as I used to, but I've cooked a lot in my life. I've always loved wild game. My father was a great hunter, and I have two sons who are big-time hunters. One lives in Idaho and is a working farmer, and he hunts in a lot of places, New Mexico, Texas, and certainly here a lot. He brings people in to hunt pigs. There is a lot of wild boar here, and they're really a nuisance. So no one complains about their being hunted because they're very hard on farmers. They go after hay storage and rout up golf courses and lawns. I'm not Italian, but I came out of a sort of Italian heritage. Most of my friends that I grew up with in the Napa and Vallejo areas were Italian. I grew up with people who made their own ravioli and wine and hunted local ducks. There was a lot of fresh water fishing as well as ocean fishing in the Napa River and up the Delta. So we ate a lot of fresh fish.

You were born in Napa. What was it like then?

I was born in the Napa Valley in St. Helena. I had great grandparents there, and both sets of my grandparents lived there. One was a Texas transplant. They grew fruit and raised cattle. One of my uncles planted the first varietal vineyard on the Valley floor, a Chardonnay vine-

yard. So I grew up in the Napa Valley previous to wine specialization. Agriculture was very diverse then. My great uncle knew all the Italian people who lived on the fringes of the Valley, but they made wine only for themselves, and it was almost all red. That wasn't their source of income. My family farmed cattle, prunes, corn, tomatoes, potatoes, all the crops that used to be on the Napa Valley floor. I'm 75 years old, so they were two generations behind me. When I was a child, vineyards were planted only in the Napa foothills. My Mother's family farmed in the Napa Junction area, but my father ended up in the real estate and insurance business. Then I married a farmer who was actually from New York but did not come from a farming family. John Blackburn started in the dairy business as a very young person in the San Fernando Valley and ended up in an agricultural school down there and eventually Fresno State and from then on was always in the farming business. He grew oranges, lots of almonds, and certainly some grapes over there. But really we didn't get into the grape business seriously until we planted this vineyard on the Dunn Ranch about ten years ago.

You have been a witness to the farming business for many years. What changes have you seen over time?

Water is a huge issue in California now. Farmers have learned to be much more careful with their use. If we could just get the rest of the culture to be as careful as farmers are, it would be a good thing. Farmers are careful because water is very expensive. Water was \$25 an acre and now it's up to \$425. We have never done anything but drip irrigation on almonds or grapes for 30 years. It's not an issue over here. The Dunn ranch has lots of water. The ground water table is very high. But up in the Cienega Valley where the winery is, there's less water, and they have to be much more careful.

Sometimes it's not only the quantity of water but also the quality. When you get into areas like the San Joaquin Valley, there are places where the water table is so low that the water isn't usable for crops. But if you blend it with what comes through the Delta, it blends to such a degree that it doesn't matter. It's just fine.

We've been hearing a lot about problems with bees lately.

Bees are another huge issue in farming generally, but not grapes. They don't really know what's weakened beehive strength. Without bees, we won't have a lot of crops. The problem has impacted almonds big-time because almonds depend on bee pollination. Our bees for quite some time have come all the way from Mississippi. We're renting them. It's a very expensive part of the almond business. We bring in the hives and then send them back. John and my son are still farming almonds, and John has another son who is actually quite a large broker. Almonds are an interesting crop because they grow only in a few select areas in California, and in the U.S., California is the only state where they grow. It's a perishable crop, but it has a shelf life. It's not like a peach. You have a very small window of time to deliver a peach. In fact, most of the almonds that we have grown over the years, we have shipped over seas to the European market, and a lot of it goes to the Middle East through European brokers. Wine growing is also a very satisfying industry because you have a lot of control over the process. You nurture the grapes through what ever weather conditions are present. You get to choose when to harvest relative to the amount of sugar you want and the wine style you wish to make. If you have a good winemaker, he puts the juice into barrels or stainless steel tanks and develops it into the type of product that you want. For us, who grow it and don't have to worry about finding a buyer for our fruit, it's very satisfying to watch the whole process.



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Limestone, the Sacred Stone at Pietra Santa Pietra Santa Winery

A 455-acre wine estate, Pietra Santa is 1200 feet above sea level on the eastern side of the Gabilan mountain range, which runs the length of San Benito county's western border. San Benito shares this western border with Monterey County and, at that side, is just 25 miles from Monterey bay and the Pacific Ocean. Joseph Gimelli purchased the estate in 1989 and built one of California's most beautiful wineries, its façade a mosaic of brick, the doors and windows arched, its bell tower and tile roof framed against the sky. The building suggests a church as much as a winery. But inside, state-of-the-art equipment governs winemaking. One of just seven wineries in the immediate area, known as Cienega Valley, Pietra Santa was purchased in 2005 by local grape and cattle farmers, Phyllis and John Blackburn. After earning a degree in business from the University of California, Berkeley, Phyllis Blackburn subsequently raised seven children. But as the granddaughter of Napa Valley farmers and the wife of John Blackburn, mainly an almond farmer, farming has always been both the background and foreground of her life. I repeat our conversation with minor editing for clarity.

of Syrah and Malbec for blending purposes. Mostly, we maintain and nurture what we've got. We use the best help we can get to make sure the grapes have all the nutrition they need, and we're maintaining them at the best level we can. Certainly the farming background that John Blackburn has helps a great deal because although we can get a consultant, at least we know what he's talking about. Plants have a system of growth, and if you understand that system of growth you look for the things that would be causing problems and know where to look.

You have another farm nearby, right?

We have 450 acres of Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio on the Dunn Ranch about 14 miles from the winery. It's an 1100-acre property, and we also run a few cattle on it. We use the Pinot Grigio and a small amount of the Chardonnay for Pietra Santa wines, but we have a contractual agreement with Fetzer and sell most of the fruit to them. Soil conditions are quite different at the Dunn Ranch than they are at the winery. The soil there has a lot of limestone that gives the fruit much more character. I'm not saying that we couldn't make a good Chardonnay from the Dunn Ranch, and we certainly make a good Pinot Grigio. It's one of our favorite wines. But the limestone quality of the soil in the Cienega area where the winery is has a very appealing quality.

Have you made changes to Pietra Santa since the purchase?

We haven't made any changes to the facility itself, but we did tear out 40 acres of Merlot and replanted to Pinot Noir and small amounts



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