

PICK & CHOOSE

**JUST RED? JUST WHITE?
JUST CALIFORNIAN?
JUST ITALIAN?
HOW ABOUT A
COMBINATION?**

CALIFORNIA WINES

Artisan Series – \$29.50/month, a red and a white
Winemaker Series – \$59.50/month, 2 reserve reds
Artisan red–Winemaker red – \$46/month

ITALIAN WINES

Artisan Series – \$32/month, a red and a white
Winemaker Series – \$62/month, 2 reserve reds
Collector Series – \$112/month, 2 collectable reds
Artisan red–Winemaker red – \$48/month
Winemaker red–Collector red – \$87/month

CALIFORNIA–ITALIAN COMBINATIONS

CA Artisan red–IT Artisan red – \$33/month
CA Artisan white–IT Artisan white – \$29.50/month
CA Winemaker–IT Winemaker – \$62/month
Alternate CA & IT Artisan Series – \$29.50/\$32/month
Alternate CA & IT Winemaker Series – \$59.50/\$62/month

DOUBLE UP

You can also receive more than two bottles per month. California sales tax is included. Shipping is extra.

phased out the half gallons.” She explains that before the metric 750 ml bottle, all alcohol was sold in fifths of a gallon, which was phased out in the 1960s in favor of the smaller metric amount.

“My brother was his own walking PR. People would come here and became his friends, and then would promote the wine on a word-of-mouth basis. He did very well for 30 years and made a good living for his family.” Because Highway 128 is a back road from Napa to Sacramento, it became increasingly traveled from both ends, and many made Nichelini

Winery a destination or a stop on the way to elsewhere. Ever-loyal customers, who had known their father, continued to come. “My brother was self-trained. He took advantage of my father’s connections down in the Napa Valley, Andre Tchelistcheff, Joe Heitz, all of these fellows who were chemists, and he went to them for help to pull forward with what he was doing with the wines.”

When Jim died suddenly, the winery was approaching its centennial year. Four cousins, including Toni, who had retired from a banking career, decided that they couldn’t let the winery die and bought the license from Jim Nichelini’s estate in 1990. “I never though I was going to be involved in the business. I got behind the tasting bar, and

I had 24 hours to make up my mind. And I’ve never been sorry. I’ll probably go out feet first,” Toni laughs.

From coast to coast

Today, the wines are sold primarily out of the tasting room, from wine shops, and a few restaurants in California. But Nichelini also sells its wines in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Maryland. “We go from the west coast to the middle west to the east coast. New York’s a little big for us at the moment.” Perhaps the biggest change that is taking place at the winery is the

number of family members who now contribute ideas and energy to the business. Several members are highly trained with specialist educations, and others are part of a younger generation who will take the winery into the future, including Michael and Joseph Nichelini, Justin Boeger, and Roberta Wainright. Greg Boeger, whose mother was the youngest of the 12 Nichelini children, is

an enology graduate from the University of California at Davis as is his young son Justin, who did an internship in Germany before beginning as winemaker at both Nichelini and Boeger wineries. The winery is entering an exciting phase with new winemaking ideas and perhaps a new winery with a larger capacity. What Anton and Caterina Nichelini initiated so long ago continues to grow in fits and starts and in ways they could never have imagined. ■

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June 2004

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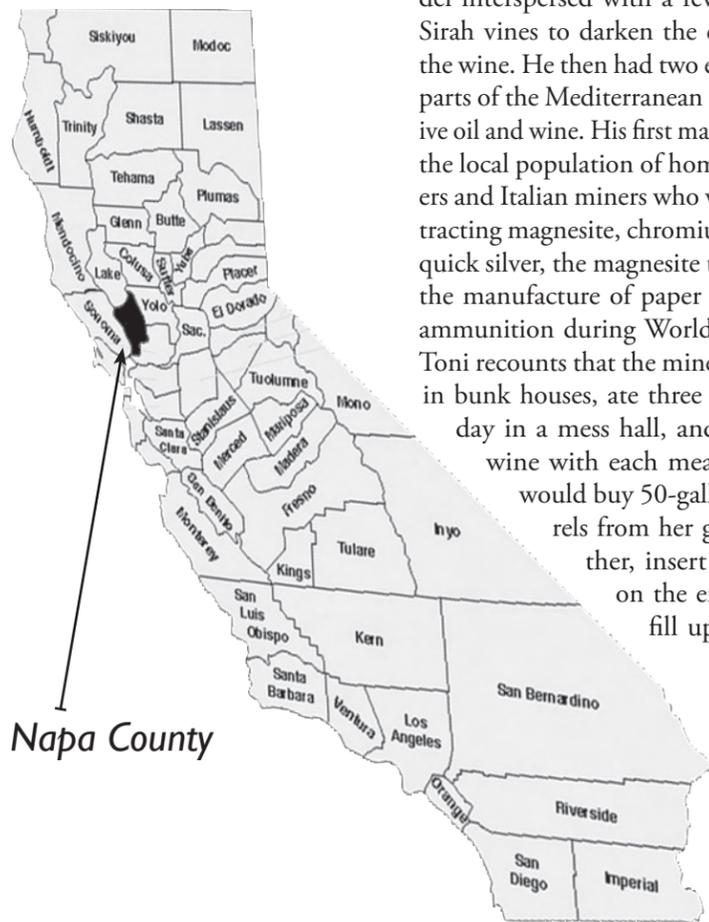
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While the family owns the land and historic buildings, individual members own businesses that spring from the land. Today, three first cousins and several of their children own the winery, which now produces annually between three and four thousand cases of Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petite Sirah, mainly from older vines, the oldest from a 100 year-old Zinfandel vineyard. Each of the first cousins is a grandchild of Anton and Caterina Nichelini, who had 12 children. Toni Nichelini-Irwin is director of sales and marketing. Dick Wainright is secretary/treasurer, and his daughter Roberta runs the winery's wine club. Until his death 18 months ago, Joe Nichelini was part owner and president of the winery and also farmed 100 acres of vineyards. His sons Michael and Joseph have now inherited his interest in the winery and the vineyards. Greg



Boeger together with his son Justin are the winemakers at both Nichelini Winery and their own Boeger Winery in El Dorado County. All of this participation is a marked expansion from the past when single family members ran the show.

Olive oil and wine

The Nichelini estate in the Chiles Valley may be only 12 miles up from the Napa Valley floor through the East Mountains, but it feels like another world. Unlike the Valley below, the terrain is densely forested with sudden, spectacular views of Hennessy Lake and the creeks and streams that run above and below it. In the 1840s, local people considered these hills to be superior sites for wine grapes rather than the Napa Valley, Toni says. In 1884, Grandfather Nichelini, born in the Italian part of Switzerland, homesteaded 160 acres there. After he built his cabin, he planted 40 olive trees and several acres of Zinfandel interspersed with a few Petite Sirah vines to darken the color of the wine. He then had two essential parts of the Mediterranean diet, olive oil and wine. His first market was the local population of homesteaders and Italian miners who were extracting magnesite, chromium, and quick silver, the magnesite used for the manufacture of paper and for ammunition during World War I. Toni recounts that the miners lived in bunk houses, ate three meals a day in a mess hall, and drank wine with each meal. They would buy 50-gallon barrels from her grandfather, insert spigots on the end, and fill up pitch-



Toni Nichelini, together with other cousins, is part owner of the winery that her Grandfather Anton Nichelini began to develop in 1884 in the Chiles Valley above Napa Valley.

ers to put on the tables. Caterina Nichelini baked their bread.

Busted but not broken

After Prohibition began in 1920, Anton's market expanded to Napa Valley residents who chugged up the hill for wine because initially the area was too remote for law enforcement. Most of the smaller wineries in the Valley had closed down, Toni says. Only four big ones remained operational, Beringer, Krug, BV, and Inglenook, because they had permits that allowed them to continue making at least sacramental wine for the Catholic Church. "There were markets for grapes though," she adds, "because the law allowed home winemakers in the Mediterranean community to make a few gallons per head of household for their consumption. So it wasn't illegal to have wine, but wineries couldn't sell it." Even after Anton served a six month-sentence, he continued to sell wine to those who made the trip up the hill. The feds had destroyed the wine in the new winery, which is still in use today. But the original winery was up on the hill above and consisted of just two stone walls in the side of the hill with a barn in front. So they piped the contents into the water line that ran down to the house. "When the adults wanted

to fill jugs for someone, they would send one of the kids up to switch the valve over, and the wine would come out of the faucet in the kitchen sink."

Passing the flag

Prohibition ended in 1933, and Anton could have renewed his wine-making license. But he was almost 70 years-old with various health problems and no longer had the desire to reactivate his wine business. Toni's father Bil, who was Anton's first son, was the only one of the 12 children who wanted to reapply for the license. Wine was still sold in barrels and gallon jugs, and Toni says that her father found another market like the family had served in the Chiles Valley. Bay Farm Island in Alameda, near the City of Oakland, furnished the entire Bay Area with row crops, farmed mostly by Italian immigrants. They too lived in bunkhouses and ate in a mess hall. Her father began to sell them barrels of wine that they stacked at the end of the mess hall like her grandfather had done for the miners of Chiles Valley. Much later, their children, who no longer had the time or the inclination to make wine themselves or even help their older parents make wine, became his customers, still buying wine in barrels from five to 25 gallons. "But the job that put food on the table in the 1940s was being a sales rep for BV from Bakersfield to the Oregon line. He would primarily spend his time in the Bay Area around

San Francisco. Then once a month he'd go to Sacramento and once a month down to Fresno. Then once a year he'd go to Lake Tahoe, selling his customers their wine for the whole year in barrels and jugs. That's how different the business was in those days. On weekends, he'd deliver Nichelini wine. He had a caretaker here, who would do whatever needed to be done in the vineyards."

From barrels to bottles

In 1949, when Toni's brother Jim graduated from high school, he wanted to prepare to run the winery and vineyards. Their father continued to work for BV, selling Nichelini wine on the side. "Because he was in the bigger world of

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wine, he saw coming what virtually happened, the resurgence of the wine industry in 1970. They started putting wine in fifths, so when he was selling BV, he would push his wine too and get it on the same shelves." Bill Nichelini died in 1959, and Toni credits her brother Jim for bringing the winery into its modern phase. Their father was out selling and delivering Nichelini wine while Jim managed the vineyards and winemaking. Without his father's help with sales, Jim decided to open a tasting room so that he could then bring people to the winery. "Little by little, my brother started eliminating barrels and then went from gallons to half-gallons. But he also had fifths that he was selling, and pretty soon he



Anton Nichelini's first house in the Chiles Valley where he brought his bride, Caterina, and then had four of their twelve children.

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