

REGION OF THE MONTH



AMADOR COUNTY



WINERY from cover

are although as you go north or to higher elevations, you can move to more cool weather grapes. When we bought the property, we knew that it was a warmer region. We talked to a number of people, including Darrel Corti (influential Sacramento wine shop owner and Italian wine consultant and enthusiast), who set up a trip to Italy in the fall of 1985. We went with our two and four year-old boys and spent two and a half weeks there, visiting a number of Chianti and Brunello producers as well as other vintners, Mastroberardino further south and some folks elsewhere that Darrel suggested. We'd been working with Italian wines, particularly Sangiovese during the prior year once we purchased the property. And from our trip to Italy, we came up with how we thought it worked and how we should grow it here and make the wine. At that time Italian wines were starting to come into prominence here, and we thought we could make interesting wine with the grape. Things go in spells. If we'd started 10 years ago instead of 20, I'd probably have looked at Spanish or Portuguese varieties, which now have some level of prominence.

What did you learn from the Italians?

We visited Isole e Olena, Castello di Rampolo, even Antinori's people, and a handful of other top notch Chianti and Brunello producers in Tuscany. We understood that to preserve the floral aspects of Sangiovese, we were better off using large-format cooperage than small. If you go to Italy and look under the covers, you'll see that some wineries are still using large tanks. We thought for the style that we were trying to make, using 500 liter puncheons, or 130 gallons, about 55 cases, instead of the typical 225 liter barrels, and then not swapping them out after two or three vintages, we'd get a wine that emphasized the fruit more and oak less, and the wine would be handled more gently than in smaller barrels. So the vast majority of our Sangiovese is aged in large format puncheons. But having said that, we have one or two specific lots out of 15 or 20 different clones or spots in the vineyard that do better in relatively new barrels. But by and large, our wines are aged in the larger format. We think that makes a difference. We also do cool fermentation, and we use Di Franceschini punch-down tanks for fermentation, which do a gentler job of extraction. We do roughly a week's fermentation rather than high extract. And we

try to stay within 13.3 to 14.5% alcohol, because we've found that as the wine gets to 14.5% alcohol, it doesn't last, and it's out of balance. If the fruit is real ripe and it's not a wonderful year, the wine loses its character and tastes like every other wine. And it's very important to preserve the acid for a food wine and Italian wines in general by not over-ripening the fruit.

You've struck a beautiful balance. I don't think that your Sangiovese could be easily confused with a lean Chianti because it's a riper, fruitier wine. But it's not an overly big California wine either.

We certainly tried hard not to make Italy disappear from it. But we've got the sun, and unless you work hard at it and pick really early, you're going to have the ripe fruit that's very hard for the Italians to get consistently.

How are energy prices affecting wineries?

We all have concerns about energy costs going up. By and large grape growers haven't increased prices over time. But the price of diesel to run tractors through the vineyards is significant. Glass has gotten a lot more expensive in the last three to five years and will continue to increase because of the energy to produce it. A box of empty bottles weighs about half of what full bottles weigh, and even if it's American glass, it's probably been transported some distance. Most of the time, we use American or Canadian bottles, but they're very expensive. If economic times are tough, and you want to sell your wine, it's not a good idea to raise your prices 10 percent. But the industry has gone through this before and will rally back. Grape prices haven't gone up yet, but I think we're going to see a shortage of grapes because demand will continue to increase. It appears to me that while traffic in this valley is less and not as lucrative, and certainly people are not spending quite as much money this year as they did a year ago, it's still not bad. And local businesses that are linked to tourism, like RV parks and Bed & Breakfasts are seeing some people, who would have gone perhaps overseas or at least a lot longer distance for their vacations. But now they're sticking a little closer. Time will tell, but we've seen tremendous growth over the last couple of years. This year is likely to be pretty flat, but we could certainly live with that.



YOUR ACCESS TO OUTSTANDING WINES FROM CALIFORNIA AND ITALY

California Winery of the Month



Learning from the Masters

Vino Noceto Winery



CelebrationsWineClub.com

Anna Maria Knapp, Owner
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moving themselves and their three children from the San Francisco Bay Area. Suzy subsequently retired from banking, but Jim continued his career until just three years ago. Both now work full-time at the winery and produce about 10,000 cases of mostly Sangiovese wines, 80 percent of which they sell directly to visitors at the winery tasting room and to those who receive wines from the Noceto wine club. Well known wine writer, Dan Berger, says that Vino Noceto is "the only California producer that consistently captures the true Sangiovese fruit character" and names Noceto Sangiovese "the best California Sangiovese." I repeat my conversation with Jim Gullet with minor editing for clarity.

Why did you choose to plant Sangiovese?

We've always had more freedom to do different things in the Foothills, partly because there isn't a clear road to success. While you can no longer just show up with a couple of extra bucks and start a winery in the Foothills, it is none the less a lot less expensive and painful than Napa and Sonoma. But having said that, in the end Mother Nature and soil conditions determine what you can do well in the area. This is a warm area; most of the Foothills

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If you want a break from Cabernet and Chardonnay, come to the Foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, one of the oldest grape growing areas in California, developed during the Gold Rush of 1849. Instead of maritime breezes that cool the coastal vineyards, cold air floats down mountain ravines at night and sweeps over Foothill vineyards. Nevertheless, Foothill appellations are warm weather areas and provide environments for the sunniest European grapes from mountainous Italy, arid Spain and Portugal, and the steep slopes and wide valleys along the Rhone River of Southern France. Most Foothill wineries, over one hundred now, are located in Amador and El Dorado counties. If you've never tasted wines from these areas, you have good reason. Most wineries are small, and much of the wine produced there is sold locally to customers, who visit from the greater Sacramento area. Vino Noceto is located in Amador County's Shenandoah Valley, a little winery with a big reputation for Sangiovese, or the "blood of Jove," as the Romans called this noble grape.

Owners Jim and Suzy Gullet both had careers as computer systems analysts and purchased their first 21 acres in 1984 and then 18.5 acres a few years later. But they didn't reside on the property until 1995,