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California
Winery of the Month



Olivet Lane Estate

On the Right Side of History

Pellegrini Family Vineyards



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The Pellegrini family has been in almost every phase of the wine business, beginning with Nello and Gino Pellegrini, who were grape merchants during Prohibition and later wine producers. Nello's son Vincent expanded the business into the wholesale distribution of imported and domestic wines and spirits and, at the same time, purchased a vineyard, at first selling the grapes and then developing the Pellegrini brand. Today, Vincent's children Robert, Richard, and Jeanne, the third generation to become active in the family business, concentrate on wine production.

We've all heard the adage, "It's better to be lucky than smart." But sometimes it's impossible to distinguish between the two. The family owns 65 acres of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay on West Olivet Road in the heart of the Russian River Valley, prime California *terroir* for those noble grapes of Burgundy. In 1973 when Vincent Pellegrini purchased the property and planted the vineyards, no one had heard of Pinot Noir or Chardonnay, nor did anyone outside of the neighborhood know the Russian River Valley. Later in 1988, a year before their father died, Robert, Richard, and Jeanne went looking for another vineyard site, where they could plant Cabernet Sauvignon, which was attracting followers. Their Russian River Valley property was ideal for Pinot Noir

and Chardonnay but too cool to properly ripen Cabernet. They settled on a 55-acre ranch in Cloverdale in the Alexander Valley of Sonoma County. Today, Alexander Valley Cabernet commands similar prices to Napa for premium Cabernet Sauvignon. In 1988, only the locals were aware of Cloverdale or the Alexander Valley. Whether the family is the beneficiary of luck, smart choices, or both is relevant only as entertainment. More important, they are producing the three most prestigious wines of California in appellations that are uniquely suited for those grape varieties.

Richard Pellegrini says that people often ask him which is his favorite red, Pinot or Cabernet. "It's like my kids," he answers. "It depends on what was up that day. They're their own persons and have their own personalities." I recount our conversation with minor editing for clarity.

You were in the Russian River Valley before the appellation had any recognition.

Yes, my father thought the purchase was a really good thing. "If worse comes to worse," he said, "sooner or later they'll build apartment buildings here if farming goes bad." If Sonoma County had not made the area an agricultural preserve, maybe none

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of this would have happened. The area was depressed at the time. He purchased the Olivet Vineyard in 1973, and it was planted and up and running in 1975. It was a diseased prune ranch with some apple trees on it too, I think, and my family cleared the land and decided what they wanted to do. In 1975, there was just very little going on there that was new. There was old vine Zin hanging around, head pruned vines, field blends, the wines that the original Italian immigrants were making. My father had actually looked for property in Napa, but Napa seemed expensive. The family had roots in Sonoma, so he thought it was a more logical place to be. He had very good people advising him as well. The University of California, Davis was instrumental, and he had a couple of old time friends, families, who had been friends for generations from the grape purchasing days, and they gave him a lot of good leads.

How did the Alexander Valley purchase occur?

We kept maturing and going forward, and the brand kept catching a little bit more fire. We were doing so much business on the distribution side with restaurants, so we were able to sell our Pellegrini wines to them. They were asking for Cabernet, and it's hard to grow in Russian River Valley because of cool weather. So we started scouting out a Cabernet vineyard, and the vineyard in Cloverdale became available. My brother, my sister, and I purchased that vineyard in 1988. People would say "Clover-what?" Healdsburg was just starting to be recognized. I can remember shortly after buying that vineyard and looking at shops on the square in Healdsburg. We could have bought them for \$75,000 each. But I thought, "Oh, god, they're all on unreinforced masonry. What if an earthquake comes?" But it would have been great to just tear them down and start over if that had been the case, but nobody had the foresight.

How would you compare that vineyard to Napa, or would you?

I find that Alexander Valley wines, not to say that one is better than the other, but I find that Cabernet tends to be softer and more approachable than Napa. Napa Cab is a little bit more Eucalyptus and has a tighter feeling. The wines are not as fruit forward as Cloverdale wines. That's my take on it.

I think it's all due to soil differences.

Pinot Noir is an easy sell these days. Is Cabernet maybe less so?

Depends who you talk to. It's a whole subjective thing. I have friends who will rave about my Cabernet. Then I have the Pinotphiles, and they don't want to know about Cabernet. Pinot Noir is a chameleon. It goes with so many different things. But the Cabernet market is alive and healthy, absolutely. It all depends on pedigree, where, who, how, what. And Cabernet has longer aging potential for those who want a cellar although for our wines, we really strive to make them very drinkable when they go to market. We're not into the trophy business. That's never been our claim to fame. "Oh, I bought it, and I have to lay it down for five years." That's not who we've tried to be. We're really very much on the old style, family sitting at the table. And if we don't like it, we don't want to sell it. Our wines are very much modeled after the family's taste. Everybody puts their two cents in about why they like this better or that better.

But doesn't taste change over time?

It does. People are more interested in food friendly wines now with lower alcohol, so you don't have to hang onto the table after you've had a glass, easier going wines. That's where we've tried to be. I can remember when Chardonnay was it, and nobody wanted to talk about anything else. I remember when Rose` became White Zinfandel and then got so beat up that everybody thought of it as box wine. All of a sudden, the new generation coming behind thinks they invented Rose`. We make a small amount of Rose` each year and most of it is sold in the tasting room or to our wine club members. But believe it or not, most people consider Rose a summer wine, May to September, because it goes so well with summer fare, but have Rose` with Turkey sometime. It's a Thanksgiving wine too, Rose` and Pinot Noir. If you had talked to someone 20 years ago, even 15 years ago, it had to be Chardonnay with turkey, come on. What else is there? Things do evolve. The more people travel, the smaller the world gets. They get exposed and come back with new habits. Who would have thought that Levi Strauss was going to dress the world? If you wore blue jeans in Europe in 1965, people would have looked at you like you were crazy. Now you go to

Europe, and everybody looks like they just came from the U.S. because they're all in blue jeans. And European winemakers come to the U.S. to look at the techniques that we're using here to modernize their ways of thinking and of production. The way to consider wine is that it is a living thing and changes constantly. People's tastes change constantly. It's the nature of it all.

So how do you keep your fingers on that pulse of changing tastes?

We get a lot of feedback from the tasting room. But the best barometer that I have about anything that's changing is my children. Listen to what they have to say, and they're going to tell you what that generation is looking for. My children are now 34 and 32. They've got the pulse on it, and they can program my telephone too. We just spoke about Rose`, and they were thrilled that we considered making it. We started about three or four years ago. Sauvignon Blanc is a comer in that crowd, especially in these last few years. Part of it is also the economic climate. You get to certain things a little easier than others. Every night's not Christmas. You need alternatives for Tuesday.

Are your children involved with the winery?

Not at this time really. They're pursuing other careers. My daughter was involved for a long time doing marketing and public relations, and she moved on to working for an investment bank. But they all have their fingers in the business. It's kind of like their second job. Again, they were born with it. The family is getting large. There are three of us and eight cousins in the next generation. It's good for some of the youngsters to have backgrounds in something else.

What's your prognosis for next year? Everybody says that 2012 has been a great vintage.

It's been a great vintage and a bountiful vintage, and I think consumers are going to be in the driver's seat because there's going to be a lot of wine for sale. And when there's a lot of wine for sale, prices are very competitive. The winner is the consumer. They're going to get a lot of good wine at very good prices. I think we're crawling out of the doldrums economy-wise, and that helps too.