

The Taste of Italy



Offering alternatives to traditionally California wines, some are looking to Italy for varietals off the beaten path

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SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE JOHNSTON

Between the cabernets of Bordeaux, the chardonnays and pinots of Burgundy and Rhône wines galore, France is well represented in the tasting rooms of the Central Coast.

Italy, however, hasn't enjoyed the same embrace, despite its reputation for great food and wine and the few varietals like sangiovese that pop onto tasting menus here and there.

But a handful of San Luis Obispo County wineries are seeking to give the country its due and prove that world-class Italian wines can be grown and made on the Central Coast.

It's a natural fit, Giornata's Brian Terrizzi argues.

"Lay out California and Italy, grab a globe, and they match up almost perfectly," says Terrizzi, noting the similarity extends to soil as well as latitude and climate.

But Americans aren't as familiar with Italian varietals and their often drier, more acidic style meant to accompany food.

"It's harder to sell 100 cases of nebbiolo than close to 20,000 cases of cabernet," says Terrizzi, who produces both. "But people who know what we're about, they're blown away."

Italian wines, with generally lower alcohol levels, offer a counterpoint to the riper, fruitier wines more common here. These winemakers see visitors eager to try something different, even something they've never heard of, much less ever tasted — a lagrein, say, or a montepulciano.

"A lot of people are tiring of the really big, high-alcohol wines," Pelletiere's Janis Denner says. "It's fun introducing people to something completely different."

Chris Ferrara of Clesi Wines agrees, noting that there are an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 wine varietals in the world.

"Why aren't we seeing more of these varietals in the supermarket?" he wonders.

"There are lots of grapes to make delicious wines out of."

"Once I get it into people's glass, they forget about the name or how to pronounce it," he says. "It doesn't matter what it's called, it's just beautiful wine."



GIORNATA:

Growing a reputation for high-quality Italian wines

If you want to make nebbiolo, move to Italy. You'll never make it here," an iconic Central Coast winemaker once told the Terrizzis about their plans for the Italian grape.

Good thing the couple decided to plow ahead anyway. Their nebbiolo is hailed as the most successful yet in the state by the San Francisco Chronicle's wine editor, Jon Bonné, in his book "The New California Wine."

The Terrizzis recognize that Italian varietals not well known outside the Old Country — grapes like vermentino and aglianico — can be a hard sell in a nation of cab and chard drinkers.

But their label, Giornata, has been gaining attention, despite offering more restrained, lower-alcohol compositions than many wine drinkers are accustomed to,

"When you pick on the early side, you keep varietal character, you keep acidity and you really reflect vintage and where it's grown," winemaker Brian Terrizzi said. "That's something we do a really good job of."

Critics seem to agree. In awarding Giornata's two aglianicos scores of 92 and 94, Wine Enthusiast noted, "Few are experimenting with this black grape variety, but Brian and Stephanie Terrizzi's bottlings ... suggest more should."

The Terrizzis' vision of producing high-quality Italian wines in California — starting with a single barrel of nebbiolo a decade ago to 2,000 cases today — sprang from Brian's Sicilian family roots and the Italian food he grew up eating. He worked at zinfandel producer Rosenblum Cellars, and then traveled to Italy to work at a respected Tuscan winery and visit cellars across the country.

He met Stephey, the viticulturist of the duo, while studying at Fresno State. The two even spent their honeymoon visiting top Italian producers.

Over many return visits through the years, they've brought back clay amphoras, a huge barrel called a botti and inspiration galore. But the aim is to produce, as one visitor from Italy who showed up on their doorstep described it, wines with one foot in Italy and one foot in California.

"That's exactly what we want," Stephey Terrizzi explains. "We don't want to copy what the Italians are doing, but you can walk through our cellar and see ideas and techniques that we brought back and put a different twist on."

While she already manages or consults with nearly every vineyard they use, Giornata will also soon feature estate fruit. She planted 4 acres last year at the family's Templeton home, where their twin 9-year-old daughters often help in the vineyard as well as the winery in Paso's Tin City complex, including with punch downs on the label's Gemellaia blend (gemelli means twins in Italian).

"They have since they were 2," Stephey Terrizzi says. "They think it's their wine."

Italian wines may be their passion, but they aren't the Terrizzis' only adventures in winemaking.

The couple founded another label, Broadside, which attracted investors and has grown to 25,000 cases. That has allowed the Terrizzis to focus just on producing the wines — cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay in the \$18-\$30 range — and growing Giornata.

Stephey Terrizzi also manages a westside Paso Robles vineyard, Luna Matta, whose fruit, including the nebbiolo she planted, is now coveted by producers including Villa Creek, Herman Story and Barrel 27. On top of that, she's a certified sommelier, teaches wine education classes, is sought out for vineyard consulting and was recently nominated as San Luis Obispo County's winegrower of the year.

To the Terrizzis, these are all small steps on the long journey to making really great Italian wines in California.

"To really master something, you can't just do it all at once," Stephey Terrizzi says.

"It's a lifetime pursuit," Brian Terrizzi adds. "If it takes us forever, that's OK."





GIORNATA WINES *at a glance*

WINES: \$20-\$45

FIND GIORNATA WINES: giornatawines.com
or 805-434-3075

To taste, call or make an appointment online.

BRIAN AND STEPHY TERRIZZI of
Giornata Wines in Paso Robles, top. At
left are the Italian amphoras, right, and
an upright fermentation tank, left, at
the winery. Opposite page, a selection
of wines from Giornata Winery.



PELLETIERE ESTATE:

Going luxe in Paso's Willow Creek region

Janis Pelletiere Denner had already launched and sold a successful, 29-year-old market research firm in the Bay Area when she moved to Paso Robles five years ago.

The goal was to spend time with her grown children here, ride horses, play golf and find a small-business venture to serve as a family legacy.

That venture turned out to be not so small. Pelletiere Estate winery debuted early this year with a chic tasting room pouring distinctive Italian varietals, an inviting patio and posh vacation rental, all overlooking the property's scenic vineyards.

"I had been looking at anything at all," Janis Denner says. "I had looked at avocados, I had looked at olives, I was looking at wine. I was looking for an opportunity."

A deal to buy another winery fell through, then the AJB/Berardo Vineyards property — planted with Italian varietals — became available.

"It was perfect," she says. "The location was perfect. The Italian varietals were perfect. Not only is that my heritage so using my family name would work beautifully, but I also thought Paso was probably ready for some variety."

With just a few months between close of escrow in the fall and a planned opening date in mid-January, Denner set to work.

She hired Amy Butler, an up-and-coming winemaker who's earned acclaim for her own label, Ranchero Cellars, as well as others who have hired her. She brought on Mindy Allen to oversee the vineyards. And she brought in contractors to rehab the original farmhouse as well as the tasting room and patio area.

"It was a whirlwind," Denner says. "We were renovating the house, we were harvesting, we were rebranding, we were re-landscaping, we were bottling, we were doing the tasting room."

Butler plunged into AJB's barrels to create Pelletiere Estate's first release — a 2010 sangiovese, lagrein and montepulciano from 2012, and 2013 zinfandel and viognier.

Denner's daughter designed the labels, tasting menus and other visuals and now oversees the wine club.

Denner, meanwhile, brought her own design eye to transforming the farmhouse into an upscale vacation rental and creating a lavish spot to sip wine in the tasting room.

In her experience, Italian wines often tend toward the homespun — "It's the nature of the tradition," says Denner, who remembers her grandfather's homemade wine at all the family gatherings growing up in a Chicago suburb.

"Doing something fresh, more a luxury product, was what I wanted to do," she says.

As beautiful as it is, though, it's also a working winery.

Those barrels in the tasting room? They aren't just there as

PELLETIERE ESTATE *at a glance*

WINES: \$28-\$46

FIND PELLETIERE WINES:

www.pelletiere.com
or 805-239-9432

Visit the winery at
3280 Township Road,
Paso Robles, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.
Thursday-Monday;
Tuesday and Wednesday
by appointment.

decoration — that's Pelletiere's actual cellar. So when a barrel needs to be moved, the massive tasting table gets pushed aside and the forklift drives right into the tasting room.

Out front, the tranquil patio overlooking the vines is now host to picnic lunches and a summer music series, but it's also the winery's crush pad and will be host to huge bins, hoses and messy machinery come fall.

"Come back at harvest and this will look very different," Denner warns with a laugh.

Denner plans to add additional Italian varietals — "more uncommon than common," she says — and eventually expand production, now about 1,000 cases, to bottle all the fruit from the estate's 10 planted acres.

"We want to grow into our fruit and see where that takes us," Denner says. "I don't even know what the potential is in the future."



WINES from Pelletiere Estate Vineyard and Winery in Paso Robles.



JANIS PELLETIERE DENNER

CLESI WINES:

Bringing the Old World to the New

Looking back, it seems almost inevitable that Christopher Ferrara would wind up making unusual Italian wines.

He grew up farming citrus in the Sierra foothills where his Sicilian forebears had emigrated around 1920. He traveled to the mother country frequently in his early 20s, driving around and reveling in the food, wine and culture of the different regions.

He fell in love with malvasia bianca in his first job at Wild Horse Winery under Kenneth Volk, a staunch promoter of eccentric varietals. He started making wine anywhere he could and even remembers pumping wine in the streets outside his grandmother's home in Cayucos.

But it was his now-wife, Adrienne, whom he met working at Wild Horse, who persuaded him to stop just giving his wine away to friends and go legit.

"She is every reason I have a label on the bottle and we are where we are today," he says.

That label, with his grandmother's maiden name of Clesi and stamped with a modern version of the 3-legged Sicilian trinacria, now produces an array of Italian wines: malvasia bianca, dolcetto, barbera, sangiovese, aglianico and montepulciano — many fermented and aged in the hand-hewn clay amphoras that date to Roman times.

Greco di Tufo and sagrantino will soon join the lineup of about 3,000 cases, with more novel varietals likely in the future. His favorites, Ferrara says, are "the most challenging ones."

"Right now, I'm trying to crack the code of Nero d'Avola," says Ferrara, who can often be found flipping through reference books describing the 2,000 or so grape varietals found in Italy, many in just one town. "The idea is to figure out how this wine should be made and stay true to the varietal."

Making wine isn't as glamorous as it might sound, Ferrara says.

"My first job was scrubbing drains, and I'm still scrubbing drains," he says.

He spent about five years in the cellar at Wild Horse, then moved to the farming side, managing the estate vineyard and working with about three dozen Wild Horse growers through 2007.

He made his first official vintage, six barrels of dolcetto, at Linne Calodo in 2004, then in 2006 set up shop at the back of Filipponi Ranch, just off Highway 101 at the southern edge of San Luis Obispo.

CLESI WINES *at a glance*

WINES: \$20-\$45

FIND CLESI WINES:

clesiwines.com or 805-286-5073

Visit the winery at
1850 Calle Joaquin, San Luis Obispo,
11 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday to Sunday.



CHRISTOPHER FERRARA

In the early days, Ferrara would hop on his Vespa, tuck a couple cases between his feet and peddle his goods around town. The scooter mostly sits out back these days, but nearly a decade later, he's still working with many of the same growers he worked with at Wild Horse.

With such niche varietals, Ferrara can't just buy grapes like many small wineries do. He contracts by the acre and often oversees the farming himself.

"It's the only way to talk someone into doing these crazy grapes," he says. "There's not a whole lot of spec planting of grapes people can't pronounce."

There may not be as much wholesale potential either, but that's OK with Ferrara, who prefers to go direct to the consumer and has never really advertised the label.

Adrienne, an MBA who lectures at Cal Poly on wine marketing and sales and worked at Laetitia and Southern Wine and Spirits, handles the business side of things, leaving Chris to play with obscure varietals he has discovered during his travels.

With their third child set to arrive around harvest (they always seem to come at harvest, Ferrara notes), the couple expects they'll be busy juggling parenthood and the demands of running a small winery for some time to come.

But that doesn't stop Ferrara from dreaming about what's down the road.

"Sitting on the slopes of Mount Etna (on the coast of Sicily) making Nerello Mascalese," he says, a wine he describes as really finicky but exceptionally charismatic.

Could it actually happen?

"Why not?" he says. "I never thought I'd be doing this."



WINES from Clesi in San Luis Obispo.



FERRARA samples some nebbiolo wine from his Italian-made amphora.