

Dusi Family Vineyards

With pride and respect of our family's heritage, I would like to share some facts about the Dusi family and the land that they love to farm. Today, four generations still work in the vineyards. Rarely a day goes by that vines, tractors, weather, dogs, or politics are not discussed between Dusi family members. We are exceptionally close, and we continue to carry on the traditions started by Sylvester and Caterina Dusi, almost a century ago.

By the year 1910, four of the Dusi brothers had emigrated to America from a small village in the mountains of northern Italy, Ono Degno. From Pennsylvania, to logging in Eureka, then working as a waterman for the Southern Pacific Railroad, Sylvester Dusi continued to move south. Teaming up with his brothers: Guiseppe, Lorenzo, and Domenico, together, they acquired property on York Mountain in Templeton, where they planted cherry trees and vineyard.

Sylvester's second venture was a restaurant business, called the Hotel di Italia, on Pine Street in downtown Paso Robles. With an entrepreneurial spirit, this was the beginning of a dynasty built by one man.

Young Caterina Gazzaroli lived in the town of Casto, Italy, which sits at the foot of the mountain where Sylvester grew up. Caterina heard that Sylvester needed a cook. She saw an opportunity and made the long journey across the ocean, to Paso Robles. The couple were married in 1922. Through the years, they bought, sold and traded local business, including the Highway Hotel on 13th Street in Paso Robles, the Rio Grande Restaurant, (where Villa Creek stands today); Stags Liquor and Pool Hall in San Luis Obispo, a competitive charcoal business in both Paso Robles and Templeton, a sausage making business on York Mountain, and the property they planted in grapevines in 1925, Dusi Ranch, located off of Highway 101.

The vineyard presented the "American Dream" for Sylvester and Caterina. It was an opportunity to farm their own soil, bring in a harvest and make a living. They believed that America was the land of opportunity; if you worked hard enough, you could make it. On this property, they built their home, planted the vineyard and raised their three sons: Guido, Dante and Benito.

There were several other local Italian families planting vineyards. Times were hard and they all helped each other: The Pesenti's, York's, Nerelli's, Martinelli's, Rotta's and the Casteel's. The grape business was growing, but it came to an abrupt halt with the onset of Prohibition.

Prohibition made for tough times in the vineyard. What do you do with more than 100 tons of grapes when alcohol is illegal? Sylvester got creative and sold small batches of fruit to many people, each of whom could make 200 gallons of wine per year under the law, for personal use. It was a difficult time, but the family survived in the grape business. After prohibition, Sylvester began to expand his vineyard acreage.

Sylvester bought the Gahan property, located directly across the highway from Dusi Ranch. Highway 101 was little more than a two-way street. The family could work at the home ranch, then drive their tractor straight across Highway 101 to work the newly purchased hill that Caterina loved. (Caterina's Hill is now owned and operated by great-grandson Matt Dusi.)

Sylvester expanded their vineyard acreage again, in 1945, when he bought 100 acres located across Highway 101, about a mile south of Dusi Ranch. When Guido and Dante returned from the war, they joined Sylvester and Benito in clearing the land, moving rock, making charcoal, and planting the hundred acres to vineyard. The field blend planted is the same as the home ranch: the majority is Zinfandel, with some Carignane, Mission, Alicante Bouchet, Petite Sirah and Grenache. It is head pruned, dry farmed, with 12 foot spacing. The vines are hardy, the roots go deep looking for moisture, and they produce good intense fruit. Dante bought the land from his father and continued to dry farm the Zinfandel grapes, keeping consistent with a farming practice that has worked well, since the first vines were planted by Sylvester.

Fifty years ago, vineyard work was backbreaking. For example, during harvest, the Dusi men would hand pick grapes into wooden boxes placed in the dirt next to the vine. When the boxes were full, they would lift the boxes onto a small flatbed truck to get them out of the field. Next, they would move each box onto a larger flatbed truck for transport. The boxes would be unloaded and carried to the crusher. These fifty pound boxes were moved, by hand, five separate times.

Another practice fifty years ago, wineries did not pay for the grapes until the wine was sold. To earn more, Dante and Benito traveled to the Salinas Valley and to Bakersfield with five tons of grapes on the truck, and a mobil crusher, selling to home winemakers. Sylvester and Caterina instilled the value of money, survival, integrity, and the love of the land in their three sons.

In the 1950s, Sylvester saw that the price of wine increasing, and the price of grapes decreasing. He told young Benito that he could take sixty tons of grapes to make his own wine. Dusi Winery opened their cellar doors and winemaker Benito sold his Zinfandel wine for \$1.10 a gallon. Eleven years later, Sylvester saw the price of grapes increase while the price of wine decreased. The businessperson that he was, he closed the cellar doors and sold the grapes. Dusi Ranch is now owned by Benito Dusi, who continues to grow grapes, doing the work himself, surrounded by his greyhound pups. He has come to personify Dusi Ranch.

One particular small winery made an appearance in 1967 that would lead to a long and beneficial relationship. Dave Benion, winemaker for Ridge Vineyards, stopped by the home ranch and bought a small batch of fruit on a trial basis. The rest is history!

The notoriety of Dusi Vineyards is due to the intensive pride we take in farming, keeping our farming practices the same as our ancestors before us. Sylvester chose to grow grapes in the heart of the Templeton Gap that enjoys great temperature swings which in

turn produce intense and rich flavorful grapes. The fruit smells like bright cherries, the lack of water makes them more intense.

The goal of the Dusi family and the vineyard, is to produce the highest quality fruit possible, which enables the winemakers to produce some of the best Zinfandel wine in California. We take great pride in seeing the Dusi name on the following labels: Tobin James, Turley Cellars, J Dusi Wines, Four Vines Winery, Chumeia, Stephen Ross and Meridian. The grapes are sold with a handshake. Dante Dusi Vineyards do not have contracts. These wineries will tell you that Dusi fruit is unique in a way that the grapes come out of the field with the perfect sugar/acid ratio. The vineyard's soil is diverse: sand, gravelly loam, rocky, calcareous, and limestone. All of our farming practices are essential in maintaining the flavor profiles and integrity of the vineyard.

Four generation of family have been working the land for the past seventy years. Dante is the family Patriarch. At 85, he is out in the vineyard every morning at 6:20 a.m.. He still prunes the old vines, drives the tractor, and takes an active part in whatever needs to be done throughout the year. He and his wife Dorothy have been married 61 years. Dorothy took on the task of overseeing the harvest for many years, as Dante went to work in road construction to support the farm. Dante and Dorothy raised three children: Rick, Mike and Kathy. The vineyard was and still is a family affair and it takes every pair of hands to make it thrive. Dante has passed ownership of his vineyard down to his sons Mike and Rick.

Mike has managed the vineyard since 1972 following the same farming practices past down from his father and grandfather. Mike's priority is maintaining the soil, concentrating on the health of the vines, and quality control of the fruit. He communicates with the wineries that buy the grapes, and he makes sure Dusi grapes are delivered in perfect condition. The entrepreneurial gene has definitely been passed down through the generations. Mike and Joni's three children, Michael, Matt and Janell have chosen careers in the wine industry.

Michael owns a trucking company, hauling everything from fresh grapes, to barrels, bottles, juice, and equipment. He operates a wine warehouse, storing wine for more than one hundred wineries. He and his son Dante, together own "Dante's Benzina" as well as several other wine related businesses.

Matt and his wife Ali have two children, Delaney and Parker Benito. Matt is a banker by trade, but every spare minute is spent taking care of his vineyard; planted to Zinfandel and Syrah grapes. The vineyard is the same property that Sylvester and Caterina bought in 1944, and appropriately named "Caterina's Hill."

For the first time since the 1950s, a member of the Dusi family is a winemaker, making wine from the family's vineyards. Great-granddaughter Janell Dusi started her own label, J Dusi Wines. From picking the grapes, crushing, fermenting and bottling, Janell is blazing a trail, using knowledge passed down from her great-grandfather Sylvester, her grandfather Dante, and her uncle Benito. She makes Zinfandel wine, but she has

also taken the other vines on the property and made some different varietals, including Syrah, Petit Sirah, and Carignane, Zinfandel Port and Zinfandel Grappa.

She respectfully follows the family traditions and their history, but with a twist, she is doing it her way: "A family tradition with a new perspective."

Janell has made a very special wine that she will bottle this year in honor of her Auntie Kathy. Kathy is the daughter of Dante and Dorothy. Kathy traveled the world, a free spirit that one would meet and never forget. Our family lost Kathy to breast cancer in 2005.

One Hundred percent of the proceeds from the sale of J Dusi Rose will be donated to the Susan G. Komen foundation, dedicated to the fight against breast cancer.

Rick retired in 1997, giving him the opportunity to spend each day in the vineyard. Rick works to keep the vineyard groomed, and performs the daily operations that the vineyard requires. He does the tractor work, keeping everything clean, and weed free. Rick and Teresa own a portion of the vineyard and participate in every aspect of the farming operation. They have two sons, Kyle and Trevor. Kyle is working in San Diego in marketing. Trevor attends Chico State, minoring in Viticulture.

The vineyard is truly a family affair. The entire family comes home for harvest. Everybody picks the grapes, and each member of the family drives a tractor with a crew. On any given day during harvest, you will find four generations in the field.

Dante, still dusty from working in the field, remarked how his life has always centered on the daily farming of the vineyard. Dante says, "You have to remember that in my time, the vineyard was just a lot of hard work." He said that it is good that his descendants farm with devotion, but they have gone a step further: they also add travel and other adventures to their lives.