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MARTINELLI 2011 FALL RELEASES



Fall 2011 Newsletter

A Dollar A Box

by Julianna G. Martinelli

It was Fall of 1947, Prohibition had been repealed 15 years earlier, folks in the good old U S of A had never stopped appreciating the tilt of a fine glass in hand, the Martinelli family had been growing wine grapes for five decades, and my father at eight years old was receiving his early grooming on the mechanics of farming Jackass Hill.

At this particular time in California's history, Sonoma County wineries were paying a low of \$12 a ton for wine grapes. The small acre vineyard of Zinfandel that my grandparents owned and farmed themselves was their sole livelihood. One September day, my Nono, Leno Martinelli, set out in search of a better price for his grapes. Driving south, he took some handpicked boxes full of Zinfandel clusters to the farmer's market in San Francisco. There were many Italian immigrant families in the city that made wine for themselves, and were paying one dollar for each box. A dollar per box equated to \$40 a ton, a far cry above the set commercial price of \$12. Word of mouth soon spread at how good Leno's grapes were and the demand for his Zinfandel increased.

The night before hauling grapes to his customers in the city, Leno stacked the 1938 International flatbed truck with 200 wooden boxes filled with Jackass Hill Zinfandel. During these delivery days father and son would leave home in Forestville at 5:00 a.m. and return at 8:30 p.m. With his young son, Lee, riding shotgun, they headed south towards the Golden Gate Bridge. With 5½ tons of grapes on the truck, my father remembers climbing the hill above Sausalito just before the Golden Gate Bridge, moving at about three or four miles per hour, and saying that he could get out of the truck and walk alongside at the same speed. At eight years old it was not my young father's first visit to San Francisco, but this could definitely be classified as Little Lee's first run in the delivery of grapes, and would become one in a lifetime of many.

A couple of interesting notes: The 200 grape boxes stacked on the truck weighed 50 pounds a piece when full, and Leno loaded each one himself by hand. The entire load of grapes amounted to 5½ tons. A forklift would have been an impossible expense at that time. In fact, Nono still worked the vineyard with his horse, Jerry and a plow. Nono's northern Italian heritage stood him at six feet and three inches tall, a lean man with hands as large as dinner plates but made of iron. He was reputed as being enormously strong. I said that my father was riding shotgun, because he really was, as Nono always kept a shotgun in the cab of his truck.

At each stop, Leno would unload the boxes from the truck and carry them down steep steps into each home winemakers basement. He brought with him his electric crusher and carried

it down with a hand cart. In the damp depths beneath the foggy city he crushed these grapes for his customers, using his hands to guide the clusters between the grinds. His large hands were covered with the smooth silken tanned hide that he had sewn himself from a deer skin. Once the grapes were dumped into the press, Little Lee's job was to carry the emptied boxes up from the basement and out through the low narrow walkways to the 1938 International, then lift them onto the truck, and climbing up on the bed, stack them five high.



Leno Martinelli's Basket Press

Some things have changed with grape growing in the last 70 years. The Martinelli family no longer uses wooden grape boxes; the boxes are heavy and cumbersome and leak precious juice. They have been replaced with plastic micro-bins. The absolute science of grape growing, harvesting, and vinification has progressed in ways that my Nono would never have dreamed of. There were years that he and my grandmother, Noni Alma, picked the entire vineyard of Zinfandel by themselves, their children (Joyce and Lee) were set down on a blanket beneath the shade of a Zinfandel vine while their parents worked. It usually took them seven to eight days to pick the 12 acre vineyard.

Today we sometimes begin picking at 1:00 a.m. and the harvest crew wears headlamps to see in the dark. If one is lucky enough to be up before the sun and driving past local vineyard sites during harvest season, it may sometimes appear as if alien spaceships are hovering low over the land. In actuality these large bright lights hang over the vines on giant steel poles, illuminating the rows for the harvest crew. This scaffolding type structure is wheeled by tractor and trailer from row to row following the pickers as they move along. The micro-bins of fruit are then loaded into a refrigerated truck and hauled to the winery. The grapes are not "crushed" as in the old days, but are de-stemmed and put into a stainless steel tank where they receive a week long cold soak, then the juice is gravity fed into French oak barrels to finish fermenting. Crushing the berries releases unwanted tannins and flavors extracted from the seeds, stems and skins. We desire at least a 50% whole berry fermentation which delivers and protects fruit quality and varietal character.



Harvest at 1 a.m. for the 2010 Vintage

There hasn't been a napping baby seen sleeping under a grapevine in Jackass Vineyard in a very, very long time. The old '38 International is now retired and sits quietly behind the old horse barn. My father, Lee Sr., is now 72 years old, and not any closer to being retired than he was in 1947 during those long rides to the city hauling grapes with his father. Lee Sr. is the third generation to farm the 60 degree slope of Jackass Hill and has groomed my two brothers in the mechanics of its cultivation in the family tradition. Nono's handmade wooden grape boxes still sit in the old horse barn at the bottom of Jackass Vineyard and his old basket press now sits happily on display in our tasting room. And oh yes, my father still has Nono's old shotgun.

Buona giornata,

Julianna Martinelli ~ Fall 2011