



### **Zio Tony Meets Gianna Marie**

The *Zio Tony Ranch* is named after my great-uncle, Tony Bondi. “*Zio*” means ‘uncle’ in Italian, pronounced ‘tseo’. Uncle Tony was the first generation in the family to be born on American soil. As a second generation farmer, he became very involved in the agricultural community. Tony was a very charismatic man always full of generous laughter. He had a broad beaming smile beneath dark flashing eyes, all gloriously featured upon a setting of golden olive skin. His hearty love of a good time is still legendary in the old farming community of west Sonoma County. Zio Tony was the entrepreneur of the family and began buying individual properties in the 1950’s and planting apple trees, eventually establishing the largest apple orchard in the county.

The late 1960’s was the beginning of a fresh and festering future of money spending tourists and a population growth that would drastically affect the production of agricultural products in the region. It became apparent to Uncle Tony that farming apples in this part of the world would have its eventual death. So he did two things, he planted rootstock on which he planned to graft Pinot Noir cuttings, and acquired a permit to establish a mobile home park just 300 yards distant of the proposed vineyard. The push for commercial development here in Sonoma County was even strong back then and farmers were beginning to feel the pressure and anxiety of being able to continue making a living off of their land.

Zio Tony passed away in 1971 before his dream of becoming a grapegrower was fulfilled. His nephew, Lee Martinelli, Sr., was a High School teacher at that time and was also farming Jackass Vineyard. He was forced to make a decision regarding the fate of his uncle’s estate, but his strong connection to his family’s long heritage and his love of being outside riding in the tractor seat, enabled Lee to turn down offers to sell the property. Although, it was very difficult for him to choose between his two passions, being an educator or being a caretaker of the soil, when the last school bell rang in June before the summer season, Lee chose farming. To educate himself on how to farm these acres upon acres of apple trees bequeathed to him, Lee, Sr. visited some of the old timers in the area and gathered information. Very soon, true to his late uncle’s prediction, the apple market grew unbearably soft. (*The trailer park was never erected, by the way*). In the early 1970’s Lee Sr., planted Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in place of the apple orchard.

Having just recently stepped up to the tractor’s seat is my brother, George Martinelli. He is fourth in the familial line to join in caretaking our family’s farm. In the year 2000 he planted two acres of Syrah on the old apple ranch. George named the new Syrah block after his firstborn daughter, *Gianna Marie*, for whom also a spot on the tractor seat has been reserved (*I could be Scarlett O’Hara in a pinch, but might as well leave the dusty work for the younger generation*). Syrah is a new grape varietal for our family and George has learned how labor intensive it can be because Syrah vines have the inherent longing to grow very aggressively, creating jungle, jungle, jungle. Despite the galloping meaty flavors of Syrah, it is even more finicky than Pinot Noir, as it is very susceptible to

soil deficiencies and dehydration during hot spells. George tries everything he can with Syrah to “shrink its head” to make it believe that it is a Pinot Noir vine instead. A year long effort goes into a constant arm wrestling match against the plant's relentless vigor, with canopy management, pruning, suckering, thinning, dropping crop, and regulating moisture content in the soil by planting a crop cover of red clover.

*Cheers, Julianna Martinelli Spring 2005*