

VINO NOCETO



Our Story & The History of Sangiovese

Suzy and Jim Gullett have established Vino Noceto as “California’s Sangiovese Specialist” following a pathway considerably different than other Sangiovese producers, yet similar to many small, “boutique” operations. It began when Jim, still in his teens, caught the “bug” while visiting Napa wineries with family and friends.

The “bug” grew into a “passion” over the years as the couple took regular wine-county outings and several wine-related courses. While on a family vacation in California's Gold Country, they stumbled upon the Shenandoah Valley property where their winery and home currently reside. With the September 1984 purchase of this 21-acre property and the subsequent 1987 acquisition of the neighboring 18.5 acre original homestead, the “passion” became “reality.”

Jim and Suzy had always wanted country property – a getaway where they could eventually retire and grow a few acres of grapes. Suddenly, they were blessed with twenty acres of prime grape-growing property in the middle of one of the oldest viticulture areas in the country. Their analytical minds went into first-gear as they shifted from their sleepy, retirement plans to commercial grape growing and winemaking.

The Hunt for the Right Varietal

They quickly understood that their property’s potential was greatest for warm weather, red wine grapes. So, for the next year they undertook the “difficult” task of sampling southern Rhone and northern Tuscan varieties every night with their meals. With a predisposition toward being different and an emerging consumer interest in everything Italian, the Gulletts decided to focus on Sangiovese, a relatively untried grape in the United States and a far-cry from the Zinfandel vineyards that surrounded them. Many of their neighbors thought they were “nuts.” But, the Gulletts had fallen in love with the grape and were confident that their passion for Sangiovese combined with the right location would bring success.

With the advice of Sacramento grocer and wine expert, Darrell Corti, the family, including two and four year old boys, embarked in September 1985 to Radda in the center of Italy's Chianti Classico region. There they spent almost three weeks visiting the vineyards and cellars of respected Chianti and Brunello producers like Castello dei Rampolla, Argiano, Isole e Olena, and Badia a Passignano.

They learned how these Tuscan producers grew and made their wines. Their children learned how to nurse baby kittens, entertain their new Italian buddies with the latest in American toys (Transformers), and sleep on chairs in the wee hours of the night at Italian trattorias. The Gulletts



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returned convinced that high-quality, varietally accurate Sangiovese wine with a touch of California sun could be made from their Shenandoah Valley property.

Renewing Agricultural Roots

Jim's agricultural roots ran deep - his grandfather was a farmer and his mother was an award-winning gardener. He naturally understood that good wine started in the vineyard.

Once again, Darrell Corti came to the rescue, as he knew exactly where to find source grapes. Jim arranged to secure cuttings from neighboring Montevina winery, the proud owner of nine Sangiovese plants brought into this country via an early '70s briefcase import. The Gulletts began planting the vineyard with just 2/3-acre in 1987, applying the knowledge gathered from the Italians and local experts. The Sangiovese vineyard slowly grew to 12 acres by 1994 and then to 21 acres by 1999.

For the first nine years, Vino Noceto made its wine in other facilities, with Scott Harvey making seven of first nine vintages at Santino Winery and later at Folie a Deux Winery. Vino Noceto moved its operation in-house with the building of its own winery for the 1999 harvest. Winemaker Rusty Folena runs the day-to-day operations; Stacey Gregersen serves as consulting enologist.

Vino Noceto's goal has always been to produce a food-friendly, Chianti-style Sangiovese that is true to its Tuscan roots. The Gulletts' passion for Sangiovese has never waned. Wine critic Mike Dunne calls Vino Noceto "the state's go-to house ... and most respected producer of sangiovese wines in California."

Vino Noceto Today

On their nearly forty acres they now have twenty-five acres of grapes, almost all Sangiovese, five acres of olive trees, 200 lilac bushes, and two acres of walnut trees, each contributing revenue to the farm. Buildings include their 1887 renovated ranchhouse, winery and tasting room buildings, and several rustic barns and out-buildings. From only 110 cases of Sangiovese in its inaugural 1990 vintage, the winery now produces 8,000 cases of wine annually. This includes 5,000 cases of nine different Sangioveses, 1,500 cases of a lively Moscato blend called Frivolo, plus an old vine Zinfandel from the Original Grandpere Vineyard, Barbera, Aglianico, and Pinot Grigio. Then there's always some grappa when you're needing a nightcap -- but that's another story!



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The History of Sangiovese in California

Although they are one of the main producers of Sangiovese in California today, Vino Noceto was not the only California pioneer of the Sangiovese varietal. In the mid-80s four diverse vintners set out to pioneer Sangiovese as a staple in the California wine market. Briefly touted as the “next Merlot” in 1999 by wine writer Randall Murray, Sangiovese has had a checkered journey toward this goal over the past twenty-five years.

The tribulations of the Sangiovese grape in California take root in the early trend of French varietals dominating the palates of American consumers over other euro-styles, essentially snubbing those from Italy or even Germany. Simply put, in the post-WWII period Americans overwhelmingly perceived French food and subsequently their wine to be the best in the Western Hemisphere, if not the world.

In the early 1980s California vintners began pursuing what have now become known as “ABC” wines: Anything But Cabernet/Chardonnay/Champagne—all popular French varietals that still dominate the market today. After experimentation with growing some obscure Bordeaux varieties such as Merlot, popular Rhone and Italian varieties came into consideration.

For several reasons, Sangiovese was adopted by several vintners as part of the ABC movement. Chianti and Brunello di Montalcino already had international reputations, well-defined styles, and appellations that dated back to the 13th century. Italian growers and vintners had just initiated steps to improve their wine quality and marketability—the emergence of Super Tuscans, the Chianti 2000 experiment, and revisions to the staunchly traditional Chianti and Brunello formulas are examples of the varietal’s climb in international popularity.

Sangiovese Emerges in the New World

The first California winery to grow and bottle a varietal Sangiovese wine—a 1986 vintage labeled “Brunello”—was Caparone in Paso Robles. Their Sangiovese grapes were sourced and planted in 1982 from nine vines at Montevina in the California Shenandoah Valley appellation; the Montevina vines were propagated from cuttings smuggled into California by Alceo di Napoli, the late proprietor of Castello dei Rampolla in the Chianti Classico region. The cuttings can be traced back to the Brunello producer Il Poggione, which was founded in 1890.

Shortly following Caparone, Atlas Peak, Robert Pepi and Vino Noceto entered the field as early producers of varietal Sangiovese in California. Vino Noceto, founded by Jim and Suzy Gullett in Shenandoah Valley, California, took the direction of producing food-friendly Chianti inspired Sangiovese wines. Their first vines were planted in 1987 in a fallow grain field, including scion wood from the Montevina-Il Poggione source as well as Biondi Santi (Brunello), Altesino (Brunello), and Isole e Olena (Chianti Classico) sources.



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The aforementioned Napa producers introduced their first commercial Sangiovese vintages in 1989, while Vino Noceto followed shortly in 1990. Quantities of total cases produced and the number of vintners who produced the varietal grew fairly quickly in following years. However, initial reception for the wines was mixed. Most Italian varietals, even grown in California soil, tend to make medium to full bodied wines with higher acid levels and different aromatics than their counterparts.

Identifying Ideal Sangiovese Vineyard Locations

A pressing issue was that many California producers anticipated a quick, high-ticket success—they soon learned that growing and producing California Sangiovese was anything but simple. Sangiovese has proven to be very site specific. On more traditional farming soils, Sangiovese vines tend to overproduce, yielding weak flavored grapes and therefore wines. Properly grown, California Sangiovese vineyards produce less than 250 cases per acre, as opposed to 600+ cases for Napa Valley's Cabernet.

In an attempt to produce the stronger flavor associated with California wines, some vintners attempt to blend Sangiovese with stronger red varieties, such as Cabernet, Merlot, or Syrah. However, Sangiovese rapidly assumes the characteristics of those wines at percentages well below 10%. The varietal's feminine feel and floral aromatics are quickly lost with popular aggressive winemaking practices such as blending, acid adjustments, and lengthy aging in new cooperage.

By 2000 many North Coast vintners produced Sangiovese wines. At an annual Napa Wine Library Tasting in 2001, nearly 40 wineries presented Sangiovese wines. However, several years later there were only three. Simple economics were the driving force behind the fading of Sangiovese's fad status. When vintners can produce twice as much wine per acre for a 50% price premium, falling back on ABC wines over Sangiovese was the obvious path.

New World Sangiovese Today

A current listing of Sangiovese producers still includes pioneers Caparone and Vino Noceto. However, Atlas Peak has abandoned Sangiovese altogether and Pepi is now a member of the Jackson Family Estates' properties. Several small producers throughout the state consistently produce and market a varietal Sangiovese. In the North Coast long time producers include Acorn and Monte Volpe, which released its first varietal Sangiovese in 1992. In the Napa Valley Benessere and Luna still produce varietal Sangiovese, while several larger operations produce limited amounts for their clubs or for the restaurant trade. In the Central Coast Pietra Santa remains a consistent producer, and successful Sierra Foothill producers include Obscurity Cellars and Chatom.



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Vino Noceto may be the only California winery focused primarily on Sangiovese, and continues to do so in the California's Shenandoah Valley, in the Sierra Foothills of Amador County.



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