

Jim (left) and John Pedroncelli in their Dry Creek Valley winery. The brothers took over from their father more than 50 years ago and plan to keep the business in the family.



A Sonoma Tradition

With a commitment to both land and family, and good value in the bottle, Pedroncelli Winery has endured

By Tim Fish // Photographs by Sara Sanger

If you're driving fast down Canyon Road in northern Sonoma County, there's a small Zinfandel vineyard that's easy to miss. It's only half an acre in size, and there isn't anything ostentatious about its 400 or so big, bushy vines, but for generations it has produced good wine at a reasonable price. • Owned by the Pedroncelli Winery, the vineyard symbolizes everything the Pedroncelli family stands for. It is among the last of the holdouts: an old Italian family that grows its own grapes and, without a lot of fuss, makes wine that people can afford to drink every day.



"Wine is a part of our culture," says Jim Pedroncelli, 80, "so we think wine should be on every table every day." Brother and winemaker John Pedroncelli, 87, adds, "We like people to drink our wines, not put them away."

While many of Sonoma's Italian winemaking families—some dating to the 19th century—have taken their businesses upscale or have sold to large companies, the Pedroncellis have stayed the course. Most of their contemporaries have long since retired, but John and Jim look a spry 10 years younger than their ages, and they remain hands-on at the winery their father, Giovanni Pedroncelli, founded 85 years ago. The operation is an authentic slice of old-school Sonoma County.

The winery, located just west of Geyserville, is historic and unabashedly utilitarian. The family homestead, where both John and Jim were born, is surrounded by a modest complex of buildings and has been converted to offices. Jim's desk is in his old childhood bedroom.

In the increasingly affluent world of wine, you have to admire the family's devotion to old-fashioned frugality. Not a single bottle that it produces costs more than \$25.

Of the 50,000 cases that Pedroncelli makes a year, red wines represent 80 percent. The complete lineup includes Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot, Sangiovese, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon, but Zinfandel dominates production, and it's the varietal the family does best.

The Dry Creek Valley Mother Clone 2009 rated 88 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale and retails for just \$15. It's balanced and elegant, with appealing black cherry and pepper aromas and zesty herb flavors. The Dry Creek Valley Bushnell Vineyard 2009 (88, \$20) is bigger and more briary, with appealing ripe raspberry and toasty spice aromas.

When it comes to keeping prices low, the Pedroncellis have two key advantages: They have owned their vineyards for decades, and keep things very much all-in-the-family. Three generations now work in the business. On a recent spring day, nine members of the Pedroncelli clan gather around a large table to share wine and lunch at the winery. John is joined by his wife, Christine, and Jim is accompanied by his wife, Phyllis, and their three grown daughters, Julie, Lisa and Joanna. Julie's husband, Ed St. John, is vice president of sales and marketing, while Lisa's husband, Lance Blakeley, serves as vineyard manager. Another key member of the team is John's stepson, Richard Morehouse, vice president of sales.

"We're able to do better pricing than most wineries because we've been here so long," Jim says. Since 1927, in fact—that was the year Giovanni bought the home ranch. And Giovanni's sons plan to keep the winery in the family, gradually handing the business over to the third generation.

Giovanni, who was born in a tiny town in the Italian Alps and was a World War I veteran, borrowed \$11,000 to buy the property. The ranch had a winery and about 25 acres of Zinfandel, but then Prohibition hit and the winery was converted into a barn. At the time, home winemakers were allowed to produce a limited amount to drink, and Giovanni—or John Sr., as he became known—decided to keep the vineyards and sell grapes.

It wasn't the easiest way to make a living, particularly during the Depression. John remembers an arduous trip he took with his dad when he was 7 or 8. Hauling a load of grapes with a Ford Model A,



Winery founder Giovanni Pedroncelli with sons Jim (left) and John toast the elder Pedroncelli's retirement in 1963.



Pedroncelli draws fruit from three locations totaling 180 acres in Dry Creek Valley. Above: The 50-acre home ranch includes old-vine Zinfandel and other grapes.

they set out for Dunsmuir, about 250 miles to the north. "We were near Red Bluff and I heard a noise ... then I see the car's back wheels passing us by," John says, with a laugh. "We had broken an axle."

Although more than a few Sonoma wine families became bootleggers during Prohibition, the Pedroncellis stayed on the right side of the law. "We never made moonshine," John says. He does, however, remember a stormy February night when there was a knock at the door at 2:30 a.m. "Someone had built a still on the hill across the road, and a fellow was making a sugar delivery. The truck slid off into a ditch and got stuck. The driver knew that Pop had a team of horses, so we pulled him out." The man knocking on the door, John says, was a prominent pioneer of Sonoma County winemaking, but he won't say who it was. "I don't want to speak ill of the dead," he says.

When Prohibition was repealed in 1933, the Pedroncellis already



The Pedroncelli clan, with their dog Syrah. Front row, from left: John Pedroncelli, Christine Pedroncelli, Phyllis Pedroncelli, Jim Pedroncelli, Julie Pedroncelli St. John and Ed St. John. Back row, from left: Joanna Pedroncelli, Richard Morehouse, Lisa Pedroncelli Blakeley and Lance Blakeley. The winery remains a family affair, from farming to sales.

had wine in the cellar, like many savvy wine families in California. They were granted bonded winery number 113. Through World War II, Giovanni made wine in bulk and delivered barrels to grocery stores and sold to local families and ranchers. "The customers were mostly Italian," Jim says.

There weren't a lot of vineyards left in Dry Creek Valley after Prohibition. Many vines had been replaced by other crops or simply left to the wild. "The whole valley was full of prunes," John remembers. While picking grapes is considered hard work, harvesting prunes can be worse. As children, he and his brother helped neighbors and relatives bring in the prune crop. "One of my happiest moments was when they finally pulled out those prunes," he says.

John took over as winemaker in 1948, and in the following year he made a varietal bottling of Zinfandel for the first time and released it under the Pedroncelli label. Jug wines and hearty blends, however, remained the core of the business. "Claret," "Burgundy," and "Sauternes" were the best-sellers. The reds were mostly made of Zinfandel and, as Jim recalls with a smile, "the 'Sauternes' wasn't even sweet."

The winery's first tasting room opened in 1955. It was really just a table in one corner of the cellar, but the gregarious Giovanni enjoyed chatting with customers who happened by. "In those days we had a spigot on a barrel, and you could bring in your own jug and fill it up," Jim says. A gallon sold for 50 cents.

Jim followed his older brother into the family business in 1957, taking on marketing and sales duties, and six years later the brothers officially bought the winery from their father. Giovanni died in 1969, just as the California wine industry was beginning to mature. By the early 1970s, Pedroncelli was starting to make vintage-dated wines and, within a few years, was phasing out jugs in favor of 750ml bottles. Following the industry trend, the winery increasingly replaced generic blends with varietal wines such as

Cabernet, Chardonnay and Merlot.

The family owns 180 acres of vines in three sites in Dry Creek Valley. The home ranch, in the rolling hills east of the valley, has 50 acres in vines, 30 of which are planted to Zinfandel with budwood from the ranch's original vineyard—the Mother Clone. The vines range in age from six to about 100 years; all are head-pruned and planted in shallow, rocky soils on hardy St.-George rootstock.

Dry Creek Ranch is a few miles west and situated along the creek itself. It's planted to Bordeaux varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc, a total of about 105 acres. The soil there is fertile sandy loam, and St. John says that the biggest challenge is limiting the vigor of the vines and controlling vegetal aromas and flavors. The vines range in age from four to about 30 years.

Bushnell Vineyard, which has supplied fruit to Pedroncelli since the early 1940s, sits on the benchland east of and above Dry Creek. Totalling about 25 acres, it is planted to Petite Sirah, Carignane and Zinfandel from the Mother Clone budwood. The family purchases its Chardonnay and Pinot Noir fruit from a vineyard that straddles the line between the Dry Creek and Russian River valleys.

In recent years, the family has completed an extended replanting of the home ranch site and has become stricter about managing herbaceousness and tannins. "We're making more intense wines, more flavorful wines than we used to," John says. The 2009 Zinfandels are riper and carry 14.8 percent alcohol, compared with 13.5 or less in wines from previous vintages. Yet the house style remains fruit-forward and easy to drink, just as Giovanni liked.

One thing the family doesn't anticipate changing much is the price of a bottle of Pedroncelli wine. Asked about their longstanding commitment to value, the Pedroncellis are plainspoken. "Well," Jim says, "we don't think you always have to push the price envelope." □