



SANGIOVESE IN CALIFORNIA

OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES, CALIFORNIA GROWERS AND VINTNERS HAVE PURSUED MANY GRAPES OUTSIDE OF THE ANYTHING BUT CABERNET/CHARDONNAY SPECTRUM. SANGIOVESE, THE WINE OF CENTRAL ITALY AND PARTICULARLY THE TUSCAN APPELLATIONS OF CHIANTI AND BRUNELLO, HAS BEEN ONE OF THOSE. THIS PRESENTATION EXPLORES THE ITALIAN ROOTS OF THE NOBLE VARIETY AND TRACES ITS EMERGENCE IN CALIFORNIA.

NOBLE BEGINNINGS IN ITALY

THE FIRST DOCUMENTED MENTION OF SANGIOVESE WAS IN THE 1590 WRITINGS OF GIOVANVETTORIO SODERINI (ALSO KNOWN UNDER THE PEN NAME OF *CIRIEGIULO*). IDENTIFYING THE GRAPE AS "*SANGIOGHETO*" SODERINI NOTES THAT IN TUSCANY THE GRAPE MAKES VERY GOOD WINE. WHILE THERE IS NO CONCLUSIVE PROOF THAT *SANGIOGHETO* IS SANGIOVESE, MOST WINE HISTORIANS GENERALLY CONSIDER THIS TO BE THE FIRST HISTORICAL MENTION OF THE GRAPE. REGARDLESS, IT WOULD NOT BE UNTIL THE 18TH CENTURY THAT SANGIOVESE WOULD GAIN WIDE SPREAD ATTENTION THROUGHOUT TUSCANY, ALONG WITH MALVASIA AND TREBBIANO THE MOST WIDELY PLANTED GRAPES IN THE REGION.

IN 1738, COSIMO TRINCI DESCRIBED WINES MADE FROM SANGIOVESE AS EXCELLENT WHEN BLENDED WITH OTHER VARIETIES. THE WINEMAKER AND POLITICIAN, BETTINO RICASOLI FORMULATED ONE OF THE EARLY RECIPES FOR CHIANTI WHEN HE BLENDED HIS SANGIOVESE WITH A SIZABLE AMOUNT OF CANAILOLO.

IN THE WINES OF CHIANTI, BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO AND VINO NOBILE DI MONTEPULCIANO, SANGIOVESE WOULD EXPERIENCE A PERIOD OF POPULARITY IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY. IN THE MID 19TH CENTURY, A LOCAL FARMER NAMED CLEMENTE SANTI ISOLATED CERTAIN PLANTINGS OF SANGIOVESE VINES IN ORDER TO PRODUCE A 100% VARIETAL WINE THAT COULD BE AGED FOR A CONSIDERABLE PERIOD OF TIME. IN 1888, HIS GRANDSON FERRUCCIO BIONDI-SANTI-A VETERAN SOLDIER WHO FOUGHT UNDER GIUSEPPE GARIBALDI DURING THE *RISORGIMENTO*-RELEASED THE FIRST "MODERN VERSION" OF *BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO*, WHICH WAS AGED FOR OVER A DECADE IN LARGE WOOD BARRELS. BY THE MID 20TH CENTURY, THIS 100% VARIETAL SANGIOVESE WAS EAGERLY BEING SOUGHT OUT BY CRITICS AND WINE DRINKERS ALIKE.

IN THE 1970S, TUSCAN WINEMAKERS BEGAN A PERIOD OF INNOVATION BY INTRODUCING MODERN OAK TREATMENTS AND BLENDING THE GRAPE WITH NON-ITALIAN VARIETALS SUCH AS CABERNET SAUVIGNON IN THE CREATION OF WINES THAT WERE GIVEN THE COLLECTIVE MARKETING SOBRIQUET "SUPER TUSCANS."

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ALSO, CONSCIOUS EXPERIMENTATION WITH DIFFERENT CLONES OR SELECTIONS OF THE VARIETY BEGAN IN THAT DECADE. THAT LED TO THE CHIANTI 2000 PROGRAM. THE GOAL WAS TO IDENTIFY THE “BEST” CLONES OF SANGIOVESE IN ORDER TO IMPROVE WINE QUALITY FOR THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET. OF THE THOUSAND CLONES, ONE HUNDRED WERE APPROVED, SEVEN HUNDRED WERE DISCARDED.

CONCURRENT WITH VINEYARD IMPROVEMENTS AND CREATIVE BLENDING, ITALIAN VINTNERS ADOPTED WINEMAKING PRACTICES AND EQUIPMENT FROM THE FRENCH AND AMERICANS. QUICKLY SANGIOVESE WINES, ESPECIALLY CHIANTI, UPGRADED THEIR IMAGE AND, THUS, THEIR FINANCIAL RETURNS. A RENAISSANCE WAS QUICKLY UNDERWAY, ESPECIALLY IN TUSCANY.

COMING TO CALIFORNIA

MOST THEORIZE THAT ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS BROUGHT SANGIOVESE TO CALIFORNIA IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY, POSSIBLY TO THE SEGHESHIO FAMILY'S "CHIANTI STATION," NEAR GEYSERVILLE. BUT IT RECEIVED LITTLE ATTENTION UNTIL THE SUCCESS OF THE SUPER TUSCANS AND MODERNIZATION OF CHIANTI IN THE EARLY 1980S SPURRED NEW INTEREST IN THE GRAPE. IN 1991, THERE WERE NEARLY 200 ACRES (80 HA) PLANTED WITH SANGIOVESE. BY 2003, THAT NUMBER ROSE TO NEARLY 3,000 ACRES (1,200 HA) WITH PLANTINGS ACROSS THE STATE, MOST NOTABLY IN THE SIERRA FOOTHILLS, NAPA VALLEY, AND SONOMA COUNTY.

ALWAYS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING NEW, IN THE EARLY '80S CALIFORNIA VINTNERS BEGAN PURSUING ABC WINES – ANYTHING BUT CABERNET/CHARDONNAY/CHAMPAGNE. RIGHT AFTER SOME OBSCURE BORDEAUX VARIETIES SUCH AS MERLOT, VINTNERS CONSIDERED RHONE AND ITALIAN VARIETIES. THEY QUICKLY FOCUSED ON NEBBIOLO AND SANGIOVESE BASED WINES AMONG THE ITALIANS. BAROLO AND BARBARESCO FOR THE FORMER AND CHIANTI AND BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO AS WELL AS THE NEWLY MINTED SUPER TUSCANS, THE FORMER LATTER ALREADY HAVING INTERNATIONAL REPUTATIONS, WELL-DEFINED STYLES, AND APPELLATIONS. ITALIAN GROWERS AND VINTNERS' STEPS TO IMPROVE THEIR WINE QUALITY AND MARKETABILITY WERE BEGINNING TO HAVE AN IMPACT.

THE FIRST CALIFORNIA WINERY TO GROW AND TO BOTTLE A VARIETAL SANGIOVESE WINE COMMERCIALY WAS CAPARONE NEAR PASO ROBLES. THEIR FIRST VINTAGE WAS 1986 AND LABELED BRUNELLO. CUTTINGS FOR THEIR 1982 PLANTINGS CAME FROM NINE VINES AT MONTEVINA, NEAR PLYMOUTH IN THE CALIFORNIA SHENANDOAH VALLEY APPELLATION. THESE VINES WERE PROPAGATED FROM CUTTINGS SMUGGLED INTO CALIFORNIA BY ALCEO DI NAPOLI, THE LATE PROPRIETOR OF CASTELLO DEI RAMPOLLA IN CHIANTI CLASSICO. THE CUTTINGS WERE SOURCED FROM BRUNELLO PRODUCER IL PIOGGIONE, FOUNDED IN 1890.

LITERALLY RIGHT BEHIND CAPARONE'S EFFORTS CAME VINO NOCETO IN AMADOR COUNTY'S SHENANDOAH VALLEY, AND ATLAS PEAK AND ROBERT PEPI IN NAPA VALLEY. THESE THREE OPERATIONS DEFINED THE EARLY CALIFORNIA EFFORTS WITH THIS VARIETY.

SUZY AND JIM GULLETT FOUNDED VINO NOCETO IN 1985 TO PRODUCE CHIANTI STYLE SANGIOVESE WINES. THEY PLANTED THEIR FIRST VINES ON A FALLOW GRAIN FIELD. SCION WOOD FOR THESE OPERATIONS INCLUDED THE IL PIOGGIOINE SOURCE AS WELL AS BIONDI SANTI (BRUNELLO), ALTESINO (BRUNELLO), AND ISOLE E OLENA (CHIANTI CLASSICO) SOURCES.

ATLAS PEAK BEGAN AS A CONSORTIUM OF BRITS AND THE ANTINORI FAMILY, A SIX CENTURY CHIANTI PRODUCER. THEY BUDDED EXISTING VINES TO SANGIOVESE IN A MOUNTAIN BOWL TO THE EAST OF THE SILVERADO TRAIL WITH THE GOAL OF MAKING WORLD CLASS WINES. THE PEPIS, AN ESTABLISHED FAMILY WINERY, FIRST PLANTED A STONY HILLSIDE TO SANGIOVESE AND THEN BUDDED OVER VALLEY FLOOR GRAPES TO SANGIOVESE. THEIR GOAL WAS TO ADD AN ITALIAN VARIETY TO THEIR ALREADY WELL-RECEIVED STABLE OF NAPA STANDARDS.

SANGIOVESE VINES DID EXIST IN CALIFORNIA PRIOR TO THE ARRIVAL OF THE ABOVE CUTTINGS. THE FOUNDATION PLANT MANAGEMENT SERVICE (FPMS) AT UC DAVIS HAD THREE OR FOUR SANGIOVESE CLONES OF UNCERTAIN PARENTAGE DATING BACK AT LEAST FIFTY YEARS. TRENTADUE AND SEGHEISIO IN ALEXANDER VALLEY IN SONOMA COUNTY HAD SANGIOVESE VINEYARDS THAT LIKELY PREDATED PROHIBITION. SEGHEISIO INCLUDED THESE GRAPES IN ITS CHIANTI STATION WINE FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS.

MORE RECENTLY FPMS HAS HAD ACCESS TO A NUMBER OF PROVEN ITALIAN SANGIOVESE CLONES FROM THE CHIANTI 2000 EXPERIMENT, INCLUDING R-10 AND R-19 SELECTIONS. THESE TWO CLONES ARE PROMINENT IN THE NEWEST CALIFORNIA SANGIOVESE PLANTINGS.

SANGIOVESE HAS PROVEN TO BE VERY SITE SPECIFIC. ITS BEST WINES – ITALIAN OR OTHERWISE – HAVE COME FROM MEDIOCRE SOILS OR WORSE. PRODUCERS IN CALIFORNIA SOON LEARNED GROWING AND PRODUCING SANGIOVESE WAS ANYTHING BUT EASY. ON MOST FARMING SOIL, SANGIOVESE TENDS TO OVERPRODUCE, YIELDING WEAK WINES. MOST SUCCESSFUL CALIFORNIA VINEYARDS PRODUCE LESS THAN 250 CASES OF IT PER ACRE. (THAT’S VERSUS 600 OR MORE FOR MANY NAPA VALLEY CABERNETS.) AND ITS FEMININE FEEL AND FLORAL AROMATICS ARE QUICKLY LOST WITH AGGRESSIVE WINEMAKING PRACTICES, IN BLENDS, OR WITH LENGTHY AGING IN NEW COOPERAGE.

BECAUSE OF THE DECOMPOSED GRANITE CONDITIONS OF THE SOILS, AND DRAMATIC DIURNAL TEMPERATURE FLUCTUATION, CALIFORNIA’S SHENANDOAH VALLEY IN THE SIERRA FOOTHILLS HAS PROVEN TO BE A PRIME GROWING LOCATION FOR THE BEST AND MOST “AUTHENTIC” SANGIOVESE IN CALIFORNIA. VINO NOCETO IS THE ONLY SMALL PRODUCER NOW FOCUSING PRIMARILY ON SANGIOVESE. WITH TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF HISTORY WITH THE VARIETY, IT HAS A WELL-EARNED REPUTATION AS THE “GOLD STANDARD” FOR SANGIOVESE PRODUCTION IN THE USA.

ATTRIBUTES AND ACCOMPANIMENTS

WINES MADE FROM SANGIOVESE TEND TO EXHIBIT THE GRAPE'S NATURALLY HIGH ACIDITY AS WELL AS MODERATE TO HIGH TANNIN CONTENT AND LIGHT COLOR. BLENDING CAN HAVE A PRONOUNCED EFFECT ON ENHANCING OR TEMPERING THE WINE'S QUALITY. THE DOMINANT NATURE OF CABERNET CAN SOMETIMES HAVE A DISPROPORTIONATE INFLUENCE ON THE WINE, EVEN OVERWHELMING SANGIOVESE CHARACTER, WITH PERCENTAGES AS LOW AS 4 TO 5% OF CABERNET SAUVIGNON OR SYRAH.

AS THE WINE AGES, FLAVORS CAN SOFTEN AND REVEAL MORE SANGIOVESE CHARACTER. DIFFERENT REGIONS WILL IMPART VARIETAL CHARACTER ON THE WINE, WITH TUSCAN SANGIOVESE HAVING A DISTINCTIVE BITTER-SWEET COMPONENT OF CHERRY, VIOLETS AND TEA, WHILE CALIFORNIAN EXAMPLES TEND TO HAVE MORE BRIGHT, RED FRUIT FLAVORS WITH SOME ZINFANDEL-LIKE SPICE. BOTH WILL EXHIBIT LEATHER OR CEDAR AND SOMETIMES DRIED LEAF AROMAS OR FLAVORS AS THEY AGE. THE DOMINANT COLOR WILL MOVE TOWARD BRICK AND EVENTUALLY EVEN A DEEP ORANGE, LIKE A FINE BURGUNDY OR NEBBIOLO. OFTEN A FINE SANGIOVESE-BASED WINE WILL SHOW BORDEAUX QUALITIES IN IT LATER YEARS.

SANGIOVESE BASED WINES HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO AGE BUT THE VAST MAJORITY OF SANGIOVESE WINES ARE INTENDED TO BE CONSUMED RELATIVELY EARLY IN ITS LIFE. NEW WORLD SANGIOVESE HAS SO FAR SHOWN A RELATIVELY SHORT WINDOW OF AGING POTENTIAL, WITH MOST EXAMPLES BEST CONSUMED WITH 3 TO 5 YEARS AFTER HARVEST. HOWEVER, VINO NOCETO'S FIRST WINE, A 1990 VINTAGE, SHOWED VERY WELL FROM MAGNUM BOTTLES IN MARCH 2010.

SANGIOVESE'S HIGH ACIDITY AND MODERATE ALCOHOL MAKE IT A VERY FOOD-FRIENDLY WINE WHEN IT COMES TO FOOD AND WINE PAIRINGS. ONE OF THE CLASSIC PAIRINGS IN ITALIAN CUISINE IS TOMATO-BASED PASTA AND PIZZA SAUCES WITH A SANGIOVESE-BASED CHIANTI.

VARIETAL SANGIOVESE CAN ACCENTUATE THE FLAVORS OF RELATIVELY BLAND DISHES LIKE MEATLOAF AND ROAST CHICKEN. HERB SEASONING SUCH AS BASIL, THYME AND SAGE PLAY OFF THE HERBAL NOTES OF THE GRAPES.

SANGIOVESE THAT HAS BEEN SUBJECTED TO MORE AGGRESSIVE OAK TREATMENT PAIRS WELL WITH GRILLED AND SMOKED FOOD. IF CABERNET, MERLOT OR SYRAH PLAYS A DOMINANT ROLE, THE FOOD PAIRING OPTION SHOULD TREAT THE SANGIOVESE BLEND AS ONE OF THOSE FULLER-BODIED REDS AND PAIR WITH HEAVIER DISHES SUCH AS STEAK AND THICK SOUPS LIKE *RIBOLLITA* AND PURÉED BEAN SOUP.

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