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Slow and steady at Sangiacomo vineyards



Steve Sangiacomo, left, and his brother Mike of Sangiacomo Family Vineyards on Thursday, August 22, 2013 in Sonoma, California. (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)



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BY VIRGINIE BOONE FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT September 2, 2013, 4:52PM

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La Follette Wines, Landmark, MacPhail, Neyers, Ram's Gate, Ravenswood, Saintsbury, Sojourn, Ten Acre Winery. What do all these highly respected wine producers have in common? They all source grapes from Sangiacomo Family Vineyards, a longstanding grower based in the cooler, southern stretches of Sonoma County.

Now run by its third generation (brothers Mike and Steve Sangiacomo and their brother-in-law, Mike Pucci), with most of the second generation (Buck, Lorraine and Angelo Sangiacomo) still involved, Sangiacomo is a study in how, in the grape-growing business, slow and steady can win the race.

"They are the ultimate handshake kind of people," said winemaker Jeff Gaffner, who sources Sangiacomo chardonnay and pinot noir for Ram's Gate as well as for his own label, Saxon Brown.

"Their goal is to under-promise and over-deliver and they obviously know their ground. They do stuff before you have to ask for it," Gaffner added. "And they farm some challenging areas, which is why I admire them even more."

It all began in 1927 when Italian-born patriarch Vittorio Sangiacomo found a 52-acre fruit-tree farm for sale in Sonoma. That Carneros ranch, known as the Home Ranch and where dusty bays of orange tractors await

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the call to harvest, remains the heart of the family's operations to this day.

Vittorio soon became the biggest pear producer in the county, enlisting his four kids to work the orchards and further expand the family business. It is they who also saw the coming interest in wine grapes, planting the first Sangiacomo vineyards in 1969. By the mid- 1980s, pears were a thing of the past.

By the 1990s, the third generation was stepping in, eager to keep up with Sonoma County's flourishing reputation for fine wines. Mike Sangiacomo came on board after college in 1992. Steve followed suit in 1997.

"I always had the urge to come back and do it," said Mike. "I knew in my heart I wanted to farm since I was a young kid."

This despite the fact that the matriarch of the family, their grandmother Maria, Vittorio's wife, would always counsel them to grow up to be doctors or lawyers.

"She'd say, 'You don't want to be a farmer,'" Steve recalled. "Farming is something that has to be your passion, in your blood. You go through a lot of trials and tribulations."

Today the family farms 1,600 acres of grapes, mostly pinot noir, chardonnay and syrah, with a coveted handful of pinot gris, and employs a full-time staff of 50 (up to 150 during the peaks of the season).

The brothers say that what they've learned most from their elders, and from their own decades in the grape-growing business, is to stick to what you do best.

"My dad and uncles and aunts and grandparents when they were alive agreed that you don't want to chase the market," Mike said. "You grow the best grapes for your site."

The family's vineyards lie in the Carneros, Sonoma Coast and Sonoma Valley appellations. The last is where the warmer-minded fruit like zinfandel and cabernet sauvignon is grown, most of it sold to feed the larger needs of larger producers and not as often vineyard-designated, as are the family's chardonnay and pinot noir.

The family also sells grapes to several sparkling-wine producers, like Domaine Chandon and Gloria Ferrer, winery clients since the 1980s, as well as Simi, Saintsbury and Rombauer.

"It's always good to have partners you've been through a lot of (economic) cycles with," Steve noted. "They get it. They're willing to go through them with you and not jump ship."

In return, the Sangiacomos offer custom farming to fit a range of wine programs.

"We have one-ton clients, two-ton clients all the way up to the bigger-production clients," Steve said. "We're able to farm individual rows and to meet all those custom needs. Not all Sonoma County wine can be sold for \$40 or \$50 a bottle."

Their diversity of vineyard sites, blocks and clones also allows the Sangiacomos to offer a variety of options to wineries looking to make wines not only at different price points but in different styles.

Mike is equally attuned to the increased attention to detail that wineries require today.

"There's more research being done. We're learning new things and implementing new things. Everybody's trying to hone in, and winemakers and farmers are speaking the same language," he said. "Our family philosophy is if our winery clients aren't selling their wines, then we're not going to have a home for our grapes. We're on the same page."

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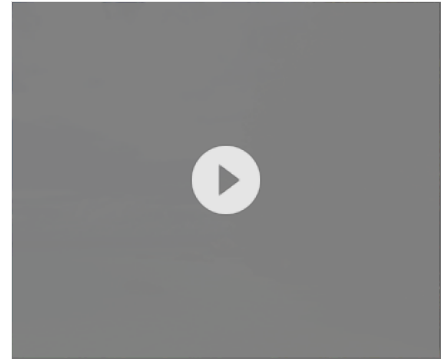
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