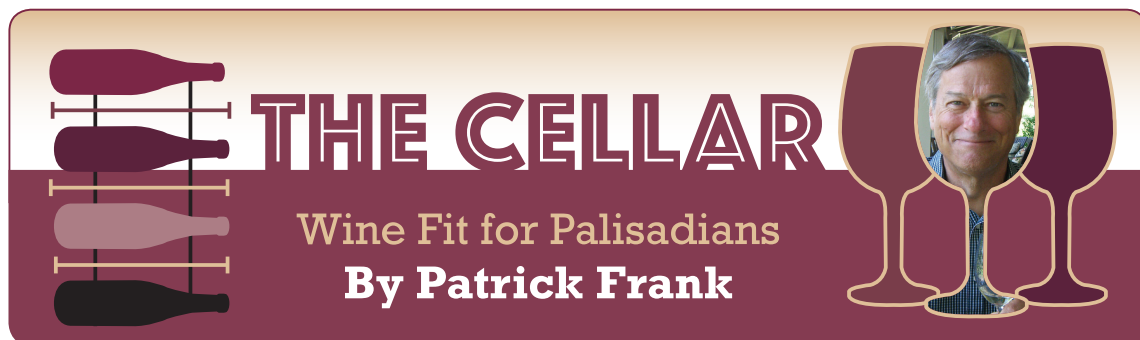


ALL FOR WINE AND WINE FOR ALL



THE CELLAR

Wine Fit for Palisadians
By Patrick Frank

Tasting Palisadian History: Cosimo Pizzulli's Home Vineyard Sangiovese

One recent Wednesday, a few select wine experts attended one of the most unique tastings ever staged in Pacific Palisades where the professional palates would learn a great deal about the Palisadian microclimate and what makes this town and its terroir so special.

Longtime Palisadian Cosimo Pizzulli was pouring 12 vintages of wine he made from grapes he grew in his backyard.

Architect and designer Pizzulli moved to the Palisades in 1989, buying an all-but-abandoned lot on Marquette Street overlooking Las Pulgas Canyon. After spending years restoring the house as an architectural project for his fledgling firm, he looked down the hill in his backyard toward Bienvenida Avenue in 2002 and imagined a field of grape vines.

No, he was not hallucinating. His father and grandfather had made wine for home consumption, and he wanted to follow in their footsteps.

So he terraced the hillside as much as he could and then engaged a scientist from UCLA to assess the dirt and suggest improvements. Following the specialist's prescription, he dug up the soil and remixed it, adding zinc, iron and calcium before planting the slope with 200 vines of the Sangiovese Grosso variety. This is one of Tuscany's most prized varieties, which goes into Brunello di Montalcino, chosen because the climate of the Palisades is similar to that region of Italy.

But Pizzulli still lacked the most important piece of knowledge: how to make wine from his new grapes. So, he began visiting other wineries and winemakers in Malibu, which was very much an upstart region in 2002. They shared knowledge and experiences, while he helped with harvest and cellar work.

Many Malibu winemakers at that time had their cellars in

a collective garage in an industrial park near Highway 101 in the Valley. Pizzulli made them an irresistible bargain: He designed a new facility nearby, to be called Camarillo Custom Crush, cleared all the permits and utilities, and negotiated a lease, in exchange for five years' worth of free cellar space and continued coaching. That made him a winemaker.

The location in Camarillo also provided enough space for him to make wine for retail, which he has done with some success. Buying Italian grape varieties from the Los Alamos region of Santa Barbara County, his commercial wines have won several medals and awards.

In 2012, for example, his 2008 Nebbiolo won a gold medal and best of class award at the Los Angeles International Wine Competition. His 2015 Santa Barbara Sangiovese is available to retail shoppers at Wine Expo in Santa Monica.

However, none of those wines were what drew the august group of tasters to the offices of the *Palisadian-Post* that cool day at 10:30 a.m.—the hour when professional palates are at their most acute.

The group consisted of Palisadian Anthony Dias Blue, publisher and editor of *Sommelier Journal* magazine; Philip Cavanagh, retail manager for Rosenthal Winery in Malibu; Paul Warson, vineyard manager for Rosenthal and several other Malibu wineries; local connoisseur and winemaker Joseph Shields; and Roxanne Langer, retail manager for media mogul Rupert Murdoch's Moraga Estate in Bel Air.

The 12 vintages that Pizzulli poured that day came from his home production that has heretofore been shared only with friends and family: one bottle each of his wines from 2005 through 2016.

They were carefully decanted off of their sediments

and poured liberally. As befits a professional tasting, no one swallowed anything; all was spat back out into cups and buckets.

Pizzulli makes his home-ranch Sangiovese nearly organically. This means that in the vineyard he uses only organic techniques, though the land is not officially certified as such. In the cellar, he uses only spontaneous fermentations with ambient yeast, rather than inoculating with a commercial strain.

"If you start playing chemist with wine, you ruin it," he said. He ages the wine in mostly used oak barrels to minimize woody flavors, and he bottles without filtering. Until the tasting, all the bottles had slumbered in a temperature-controlled cellar.

As the vintages were swirled and sniffed, notes were made and many discussions ensued. The vineyard manager wanted to know about the exposure and the soil amendments. The magazine editor clarified exactly which clone of Sangiovese was in play. The managers and media people traded adjectives to describe what they were sniffing.

And what did the tasters find? In a word, history. Here are some consensus tasting notes, in the order of uncorking:

2005, 2006, 2007: These were the senior citizens of the bunch. Old but still lively, red-brown in color, they showed herbal notes, orange peel and dried flowers, their fruits and tannins smoothed out by bottle age. The 2006 was in the best shape of the three; a wondrous wine.

2008: This wine had a younger bouquet, with cherries showing along with some bramble.

2009: A weaker year, with only half as much production. Some funky notes along with earth tones.

2010: This wine had the most potential for further de-

velopment, as it was still somewhat closed-in. Cherries, herbs, peaches and a firm texture augur well for the future.

2011: In fine shape and marking a jump in quality, this vintage showed black cherry and bright herbs in a plummy texture.

2012: One of Pizzulli's best, it brought cherries and spices ahead of a tannic finish. The most abundant production at 30 cases.

2013: A solid wine, with good fruit, though a touch of funky acidity weakened it somewhat.

2014: Another top year, this was the darkest in red-garnet in color. It was both ripe and fairly tannic, showing some power.

2015: A disaster. The drought-affected vines were soaked in with fog that year, which brought mold and limited production to just one case. Volatile acidity (vinegar) notes dominated.

2016: Recovery! Yields were still low at only seven cases, and the wine is purple with youth, stemmy and mineral, with good black cherry. Will improve.



The home cellar

Photo courtesy of Cosimo Pizzulli



Home crushing facilities

Photo courtesy of Cosimo Pizzulli



Pizzulli home vineyard

Photo courtesy of Cosimo Pizzulli



The tasters: Pizzulli, Marion, Langer, Frank and Dias Blue

Photos by Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer



Roxanne Langer and John Harlow



Cosimo Pizzulli



Some years are better than others



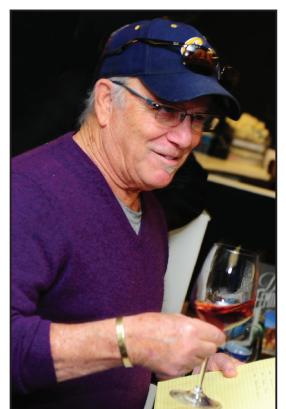
Paul Marson



Anthony Dias Blue



Patrick Frank



Joseph Shields