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## A jug full of tradition

### Wine Country vintners serve up wines straight from the barrel

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Friday, July 4, 2008



On Sundays, Lou and Susan Preston open up the cellar under their tasting room, put on some Italian music and ready their jugs. At the northern end of Dry Creek Valley, Preston of Dry Creek is reviving a very local tradition of pouring wine straight from the barrel into jugs. Many customers come every week to refill their jugs with a blend the Prestons named in honor of their late neighbor, Jim Guadagni, who they say epitomized the hardscrabble style of early Sonoma winemakers.

"The story is steeped in the history of Dry Creek Valley," says Lou Preston, who established the winery in the 1970s. "We've always sort of appreciated the uniqueness of our neighborhood. It's our story. Why not share it?"

From the California wine industry's early beginnings in the 19th century, wines were primarily bulk, sold generically by the barrel to Northern California and East Coast retailers, where they were often bottled and labeled with euphemistic names like Chianti and Chablis. Immigrants thirsty for a taste of the old country flocked to their local wineries to fill up gallon jugs for their tables, which is how the name evolved. After Prohibition, more efficient farming methods allowed growers to make bulk wine on an even bigger scale, especially in the Central Valley. But as varietal, cork-finished bottles gained in popularity in the 1960s and beyond, the term "jug wine" soon became synonymous with a mass-produced, inferior product.

"Bulk wines have always had a very strong place in the (California wine) business, starting with the immigrant demand and moving on through the '60s and '70s," says Jon Fredrikson, a Bay Area wine industry consultant with Gomberg, Fredrikson & Associates. "It was largely a jug wine business that was generic based."

#### Romance of the jug

Preston is among a handful of Northern California wineries that are restoring some of the romance to jug wine, while upholding a decades-old tradition in the process. Martin Ray in Santa Rosa, which took over the century-old Martini & Prati in 2003, continues the original winery's tradition of serving jug wine direct from the barrel to a dedicated band of customers. Several larger California winemakers, such as Three Thieves, have experimented with modern-day versions of higher-quality wine in a jug.

At the same time, the state's bulk wine industry keeps evolving. To respond to consumer demand for premium wine, classic jug wine producers Almaden and Inglenook just switched from bulky glass to more contemporary Bag-in-Box packaging. And the Charles Shaws of the world, which are generally higher in quality than large-format jug wines, are carving out an increasingly large slice of the economy wine market.

"People say Two Buck Chuck is cheap, but it's still twice as much as jug wine," says Fredrikson. His Gomberg-Fredrikson Report shows that economy jug wines - sold in 1.5- to 5-liter containers at the equivalent of less than \$3 per 750 ml - made up more than one-fifth of California's 2007 table wine market, though they are continuing on a downward trend during the past two decades.

"The 5-liter wine is going to be consumed either for a party or by people who are basically penny-pinchers," says Fredrikson. On the other hand, "extreme value" wines - 750 ml cork-finished bottles that retail for around \$2 in California - have a different image.

"There's more of a perception that this is a premium wine at a bargain," says Fredrikson. The few holdouts of California's jug wine tradition are a reminder of the days when the term jug wine didn't carry such a stigma.

### **Italian winemakers**

Early commercial winemaking in Northern California is largely a story of Italian immigrants. During the first waves of immigration in the second half of the 19th century, Italians tended to make wine wherever they landed, simply because they needed to make it in order to drink it. While some were drawn to California for the Gold Rush and turned to commercial winemaking when they didn't strike it rich, a later group came in the 1880s and afterward for the express purpose of working in California's burgeoning wine industry.

One popular destination was the Italian Swiss Colony, a long-gone vineyard and winery near Cloverdale established in the 1880s. The facility offered immigrants jobs working the field and in the wine production, room and board and even part ownership. Workers eventually saved up enough to bring families over and buy land of their own.

Giovanni Foppiano arrived in Healdsburg from Genoa in 1855 and grew vegetables and fruit before purchasing an existing winery in 1896. He produced bulk wine, using generic names evocative of the Old Country, such as Burgundy, Claret and Chablis, a common practice at the time. The wine was actually a blend of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah and Carignane, with some Mission grapes thrown in. It was sent by the barrel to Northern California grocery stores or by train farther afield.

Giovanni drew on his experience back in Italy, recalls his grandson, Louis J. Foppiano Sr., 97.

"Everybody made wine in Italy at home," he says.

Giovanni's son and Foppiano Sr.'s father, Louis A., soon joined the business and bought his father out in 1910.

Like their fellow California winemakers, the family struggled to stay afloat during Prohibition.

### **Dark days of prohibition**

"We closed up during Prohibition. We didn't sell any wines," says Foppiano Sr.

"Yeah, right," quips his son, Louis M. Foppiano Jr., 61, currently the winery's general manager and vice president. Foppiano Jr. points out that his great-uncle was arrested during Prohibition, when federal agents reportedly forced the family to dump 100,000 gallons of illegal wine in a nearby creek.

More aboveboard activities included selling wine grapes to home winemakers as far away as New York, a common practice during Prohibition. At the time, individuals were allowed to make up to 200 gallons a year of homemade wine for personal consumption.

After Prohibition, many locals began coming to the winery to refill their own gallon jugs. Customers would ring a bell, and Mathilda, Foppiano Sr.'s mother, would come out, wash the jugs, then help the customers fill them up. There were three barrels, with prices ranging from 10 to 20 cents a gallon. Customers tended to choose the more expensive one, though each barrel contained the same product - or so the story goes.

George Greeott's father came from Italy's Piedmont region (his original surname was Greotti) and opened a small winery in 1893 outside of Santa Rosa in Alpine Valley, where he produced strictly bulk wine.

### **Horse and wagon days**

"He had to haul all the wine out of the valley to Santa Rosa with horses and wagons, and it was very rough, tough steep road in those days," says Greeott, 98, of Healdsburg. His father moved the winery into two warehouses in Santa Rosa with a storage capacity of 250,000 gallons, right next to the railroad tracks so that he could send it by barrel to New York, where it was bottled. Meanwhile, local customers came to the facility, jug in hand, to fill up on wines.

Many other Sonoma Valley Italian American winemaking families - the Seghesios, Sebastianis and the Pedroncellis - share similar stories.

Martin Ray in Santa Rosa is located on the site of an old winery established by the Martini family in 1902. When Courtney Benham bought it in July 2003, he asked if they had to continue Martini & Prati's traditional jug wine program.

"I explained to him that we have locals that come to this tasting room the same day of the week every week, and they get their jug," says Tiffany Garcia, manager of sales and marketing.

Though the winery doesn't actively promote it, customers can still come in during tasting room hours and buy a 3-liter jug for \$13. They often are allowed to follow employees down into the cellar, where they fill the wine from the barrel. Most customers are either older locals or their descendants, says Garcia, and sales add up to as many as 200 jugs a month.

Like the original jug wines, Martin Ray's is a blend of odds and ends and varies with the season. In winter, it will typically be a little heavier, with more Cabernet Sauvignon, and in the summer the winemakers will add lighter varieties like Sangiovese, says Garcia.

The popularity of the old-fashioned jug wine inspired Martin Ray to offer its own 1-liter screwcap jug wine, called Red, for \$14.99. In the first 18 months after its 2005 release, the winery sold 40,000 cases nationwide.

A few wineries offer jug wine on a more ceremonial basis. In Half Moon Bay, La Nebbia Winery (formerly Obester) holds Bottle & Cork events nine times a year. Customers can bring in clean bottles to fill with table wine; 750 ml bottles cost \$4.95. Guiglielmo Winery in Morgan Hill holds a similar event each quarter (see "Filling your jug," page F4, for details), based on a winery tradition that goes back decades.

A relative newcomer to jug wine, Preston of Dry Creek introduced the 3-liter Guadagni jug wine in 2002, around the time it downsized its overall wine production from 25,000 cases to 8,000 cases and decided to focus more on direct sales as well as farming. The jug is only available at the winery on Sundays.

This year it's a mix of Zinfandel, Carignane, Petite Sirah and Mourvedre, which Lou Preston says is keeping with the spirit of the original jug wines. In the old days, different varieties were planted and picked together and called field blends. Now, the winery uses a more modern method of picking grapes individually before blending them but selects traditional varieties.

### **Local following**

Preston likes how having the cellar open on Sundays brings in customers to talk about the old days. Though many of the area's old-timers are no longer around, those that are left have plenty of stories to tell.

Over at Foppiano Vineyards, one of the favorite stories is about how Foppiano Sr.'s father was responsible for deliveries to stores in North Beach, which wasn't easy in the pre-Golden Gate Bridge days. While dropping off barrels of wine at Canata Grocery Store at Columbus and Bay, owner John Canata invited him over to dinner, hoping to score a husband for his sister, Mathilda.

They were married two weeks later.

"If it wasn't for the jug wine they would have never met," says Foppiano Jr.

### **Today's jug wines**

Here are some examples of how California bulk wine has evolved since its humble beginnings:

#### **NV Almaden Mountain Chablis of California**

**Price:** \$8.70 for 5 liters

Originally founded in 1852 in Los Gatos, Almaden became one of California's iconic jug wines. After being purchased by the Wine Group of San Francisco, it recently changed from 3- and 4-liter glass jugs to 1.5- and 3-liter Bag-in-Box technology. The wine is sealed in a bag with a spout that extends outside of the box and keeps the wine fresh for several weeks in the refrigerator.

#### **2007 Bandit California Pinot Grigio**

**Price:** \$7 for 1 liter

From St. Helena's Three Thieves brand, this line of table wines comes in several varietals. It's packaged in shelf-stable Tetra Pak, or laminated cardboard, with a screwcap.

#### **2006 Charles Shaw California Merlot**

**Price:** \$1.99 per 750 ml bottle at Trader Joe's

Also known as Two Buck Chuck, this wine represents the category of extreme value wines that retail around \$2 per bottle in California, such as Oak Leaf Vineyards, which is available at Wal-Mart. This category grew by 15 percent from 2006 to 2007, with 7.9 million cases sold in 2007.

#### **NV Carlo Rossi Burgundy California table wine**

**Price:** \$4.49 per 1.5-liter jug

From E&J Gallo, this is a classic example of California jug wine, complete with a "100 percent grape wine" guarantee.

#### **2005 365 California Merlot**

**Price:** \$16.99 per 3 liters at Whole Foods

Also available in Chardonnay, this table wine from Whole Foods is presented in BIB.

- Tara Duggan

### Filling your jug

**Foppiano Vineyards.** 12707 Old Redwood Highway, Healdsburg; (707) 433-7272, [foppiano.com](http://foppiano.com). Tasting room open 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily. No longer sells jug wine, but holds barrel tasting weekend each March.

**Guglielmo Winery.** 1480 E Main Ave., Morgan Hill; (408) 779-2145, [guglielmowinery.com](http://guglielmowinery.com). Tasting room open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Next Cork Equity Day is August 9, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Bring in a clean 750 ml bottle to fill for \$5; \$6 includes cost of bottle.

**Martin Ray Winery.** 2191 Laguna Road, Santa Rosa; (707) 823-2404, [martinray-winery.com](http://martinray-winery.com). Tasting room open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily in summer; jug wine (\$13-\$14.99 for 1 to 3 liters) available during tasting room hours.

**La Nebbia Winery** (formerly Obester Winery). 12341 San Mateo Road (Highway 92), Half Moon Bay; (650) 726-9463, [obesterwinery.com](http://obesterwinery.com). Tasting room open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Next Bottle & Cork jug wine day is September 13, when jug wine will be available for \$4.95 if you bring a 750 ml bottle; \$1.50 for new bottle.

**Preston of Dry Creek.** 9282 West Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg; (707) 433-3372, [prestonvineyards.com](http://prestonvineyards.com). Tasting room open 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily. Guadagni Red (\$32 for 3 liters) sold on Sundays during tasting room hours.

### Today's jug wine

Hey, paisano, you think that jug wine is a thing of the past? Think again. Americans still like to drink inexpensive table wine as much as ever. The packages may be a bit different - unlike a jug, you can't turn a Bag-in-Box into a lamp. But the idea lives on, even if there's more Chuck than Carlo in the mix these days. We consider some modern incarnations on page F4.

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This article appeared on page **F - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle