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It'll take more than amore to shine

Steve Clifton is the rare California winemaker who believes that Italian grape varieties can succeed here.

By Corie Brown

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STEVE CLIFTON sits down at the long wooden tasting table in the front office of Palmina Wines to explain that he's not totally crazy.

Despite his success with Brewer-Clifton wines — celebrated Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays that have helped make Santa Barbara a hotbed for those Burgundian varietal wines— the 42-year-old winemaker is dedicating himself to an unlikely winemaking project for this region: making a dizzying array of Northern Italian varietals including Malvasia Bianca, Nebbiolo and Dolcetto. Though he continues to make Brewer-Clifton wines, his heart, he says, belongs to Italy.

Clifton makes both lines of wines in rented garages tucked inside the warren of corrugated steel in Lompoc, Calif., that operates as an incubator for Santa Barbara's "garagiste" winemakers. It's affordable, not luxurious — just right for a guy who's risking everything.

It's true, he says, few Americans have heard of his favorite wines from Friuli and Piedmont. And, yes, there has been little success producing them here in the U.S. But that's exactly where Pinot Noir was in the 1980s.

"Pinot is now the fastest-growing varietal in the country," he says. "The same thing will happen with Italian varietals when we make them right."

Clifton is a rare American winemaker to get this excited about the possibilities of such grapes as Tocai Friulano.

Dismissively referred to as Cal-Italians, Italian grape varieties have been treated like lower-class Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. Instead of being cultivated in cool climate regions reminiscent of their home turf, they were planted in the heat of Napa Valley. "Heat is the enemy of acid and these wines are all about acid," Clifton says. "When you lose the acidity, they are just another muddy California wine that's high in alcohol."

But American wine critic Robert M. Parker Jr. recently singled out Clifton for "fashioning the finest dry Italian-styled whites in the New World," and said they are "wonderful wines for drinking as aperitifs or matching up with food." So perhaps Clifton's 11-year obsession is starting to pay off.

Clifton's youth and personal charm were his only calling cards when he first moved to Santa Barbara in 1991. A singer in a Los Angeles rock band, the Movement, he had never ventured far from his boyhood home in San Clemente or his alma mater, the University of Southern California. He drank his first wines in 1989 during a visit to his sister's home in Milan, Italy.

Overnight, wine became Clifton's abiding passion. He moved to Santa Barbara eager to learn how to make it himself. "A good friend of my family gave me a place to stay, helped me get my feet on the ground," he says. His patroness' name was Palmina.

Clifton followed a familiar path, working in several wineries in the Santa Barbara region, becoming assistant winemaker at Rancho Sisquoc Winery, then winemaker at Beckmen Vineyards. By 1995, he was making Sangiovese in his basement and he'd started talking to Greg Brewer (then working at Melville Vineyards and Winery) about making Pinot Noir and Chardonnay under their own label.

"Greg and I were making wines for wineries that wanted to make nothing but Santa Barbara County blends, not individual vineyard bottlings," Clifton says. "We created Brewer-Clifton to show that the interesting thing was vineyard designation."

Working at jobs that paid \$10 an hour, Clifton and his partner financed Brewer-Clifton out of their back pockets. "We didn't have family money or investors," he says. "I don't know how we survived those years."

The financial pressures eased in 2002 when critic Parker declared Brewer-Clifton wines "the single greatest revelation of my 2001 tastings." Overnight, the pair were wine industry stars.

A small crop

MEANWHILE, Clifton's dream of producing high-quality wines using Italian grape varieties such as Pinot Grigio, Barbera and Refosco was running up against the reality on the ground in California. The state's wine industry had been founded by Italian immigrants who initially planted nothing but Italian grape varieties, but wines made from those grapes had long since fallen out of favor.

Today, so few American winemakers work with Italian grapes that the Wine Institute, the wine industry's lobbying arm, doesn't even track them. A flurry of interest in Italian varieties followed "Super Tuscan" producer Marchese Piero Antinori's decision to plant 120 acres of Sangiovese on Napa Valley's Atlas Peak during the 1980s. But it was so short-lived that those vineyards remain the largest single planting of Sangiovese in California.

And would-be converts are pulling back. According to Richard Mitchell, a wine enthusiast who created the website <http://www.cal-italia.org>, production of Italian varieties is down among the 160 California wineries working with Italian grape varieties. The state produced twice as much Sangiovese, the most popular Italian varietal, 10 years ago as it does today. Only Pinot Grigio is on an upswing.

Swimming against that tide since he bottled his first Palmina wine, a blend of Sangiovese and Merlot in 1995, Clifton now produces 10,000 cases of Palmina wines a year. It's a tiny operation, just big enough to be profitable, he says, which is accomplishment enough. "I didn't think it would take this long."

He makes a total of 17 Palmina wines. To preserve acidity, he works with grapes from vineyards in the cooler climate regions of Santa Barbara County, where marine influences simulate the cooling effect of the Alps. Clifton makes an Arneis, from the grape variety native to Piedmont; Malvasia Bianca in the Friuli style; three vineyard-designated Pinot Grigios; a Tocai Friulano; a Traminer; a blend of Refosco, Cabernet Franc and Merlot he calls Mattia; two Nebbiolos; two Barberas; a Sangiovese; a Dolcetto; a Savoia, which is a blend of Nebbiolo, Syrah, and Barbera; a blend of Sangiovese and Merlot he named Alisos, after the vineyard where he sources the grapes; and a dessert wine called Santita made from Malvasia Bianca raisins.

Why so many wines? Clifton smiles, chuckles, then shrugs, saying that, obviously, he hasn't been following a business plan.

"We're excitable," he says, referring to the partnership between himself and his wife, Chrystal, who came to work for him in 2000. Business turned personal and they were married three years ago. "We find something we like and then we've got to add it to the list," Clifton says. "We were married in Friuli, so we've got to make Tocai Friulano. Weeding wines out, making fewer varietals, um, we're not very successful at that."

In the early days, Clifton worked with whatever grapes he could find. Too poor to afford vineyards of his own, he would cajole growers into maintaining Italian grape varieties they thought were worthless. He'd talk others into planting vines that would produce a crop only he wanted to buy.

"I probably would have gotten rid of those vines," says Steve Zotovich, owner of one of the vineyards that is a source of Dolcetto, Barbera and Pinot Grigio grapes for Palmina. Clifton's enthusiasm changed his mind.

As Clifton scoured Santa Barbara County for Italian grapes, he discovered that Jim Clendenen, owner of Au Bon Climat, was experimenting with Italian varietals. Clendenen sold him grapes and became a mentor.

Learning curve

EVERY grape variety poses challenges, Clifton says, but Nebbiolo is the most idiosyncratic of the many he's experimented with. This tannic grape from Piedmont, used to make Barolo and Barbaresco, is, he says, more reflective of variations in soil and climate than even finicky Pinot Noir. Clifton learned the hard way that it is the opposite of the Burgundy red grape in other respects.

"If Nebbiolo gets direct sun, rather than enriching the color, the sun bleaches out the fruit," he says. And during fermentation, it needs lots of oxygen. "If I did the same things with Pinot Noir, it would be brown muck," he says.

"There was no one down the street to ask for help with this," Clifton says. "You can't learn this stuff in the States. They don't teach it at Davis." So he started going to Italy two, sometimes three times, a year. Through his friendship with Joe Bastianich, partner in Mario Batali's restaurants (including the just-opened Mozza, where Nancy Silverton is a partner too), he began meeting winemakers, eventually learning from Barolo producers Giacomo Conterno and Luciano Sandrone and, from Friuli, Valter Scarbolo.

"Our friendship began because of a shared passion for Italian wines," says Bastianich, who owns a winery in Friuli and more recently with Clifton, one in Tupungato, Argentina. "Steve's wines have become authentic even though they are California interpretations of Italian wines."

A believer in the important contribution of climate and soil, Clifton says he never wanted to imitate Italian wines. "I'm trying to translate these grapes in California, to make the best wines we can here," he says.

For Palmina to emerge from the shadow of Brewer-Clifton, however, Clifton needed to make more wine. But he still couldn't afford to buy a vineyard. "The coup was Honea Vineyards," he says. In 2002, Clifton struck a deal with owner Milt Honea to plant 20 acres exclusively to Italian grape varieties selected by Clifton. "We made our first wines from those vines last year. This year, the vineyard allows us to expand our production from 5,000 cases a year to 10,000 cases."

Two weeks ago, Clifton picked his last acre of Sangiovese, the end of harvest. It was a busy season. In addition to the 17 Palmina wines, there are 13 Brewer-Clifton wines and he consults for a winery in Walla Walla, Wash.

That's enough, Clifton says. "I'm focusing on my current vineyard sources, going deeper with them, learning how to improve these wines." Last summer, he took two of his vineyard managers to Italy for seminars on Italian viticulture.

But even if he adds more projects, he may never leave the wine ghetto in Lompoc. "If I ever had the money to build a winery," Clifton says, shifting his linebacker's 6-foot-2 frame to get comfortable on the end of the wooden bench, "I'd build a place like this, with space for other winemakers to work near me." Utopia, he says, is being able to walk next door to borrow a piece of equipment, ask another winemaker for advice, or just share an end-of-the-day beer.

Some of those neighboring winemakers may even be making Italian varietals. Clifton says Sashi Moorman, the winemaker at Stolpman Vineyards, is expanding his Sangiovese program. "It's not a tidal wave," he says, but it's a start.

"It's tough, what Steve's doing," Bastianich says. "Not everything in life makes the most sense at first."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Santa Barbara County

Steve Clifton sources grapes for Palmina wines from vineyards in Santa Ynez Valley and Santa Maria Valley appellations.

Vineyard varieties

1. Rancho Sisquoc Winery - Nebbiolo
2. Alisos Vineyard - Traminer, Pinot Grigio, Barbera, Nebbiolo, Sangiovese
3. Zotovich Vineyard - Dolcetto, Barbera, Pinot Grigio
4. Stolpman Vineyards - Nebbiolo
5. Honea Vineyards - Moscato, Pinot Grigio, Tocai Friulano, Arneis, Dolcetto, Barbera, Nebbiolo, Lagrein, Sangiovese
6. Eleven Oaks Vineyards - Sangiovese