

Scene

Giving Italian Wines a U.S. Passport: Palmina goes from the “Wine Ghetto” to the White House

By Tyler Blue NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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IF YOU GO

Palmina Wines

1520 E. Chestnut Ave., in Lompoc,

735-2030

Hours: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday through Sunday, by appointment Monday through Wednesday

www.palminawines.com

Behind the walls of a Lompoc industrial park, American winemaking is taking leaps and bounds. Amidst the mastery of French varietals, attempts to grow Italian grapes on U.S. soil have repeatedly been met with failure. It took a musician from San Clemente and an Italy-fanatic from the Bay Area to make it look easy.

Steve and Chrystal Clifton might beg to differ. The two paid their dues as Palmina's entire workforce from 2000 to 2005. "There were a couple of years where neither of us went home for weeks at a time," says Steve. "We would work from 5 a.m. until 1 a.m. and sleep on a fold-out couch."

The couple's romance is integral to their winemaking. They met while Chrystal was the wine manager at Bouchon and Steve was looking for someone to help translate Italian. She had learned the language and fallen for the wines while spending two years studying abroad. He developed his own Italy fetish while working for an Italian restaurant.

Steve's thirst for knowledge led him to winemaker Steven Beckman. After working at Beckman Winery and Domaine Santa Barbara, he was ready to make his own wine. It was a barrel of sangiovese in his basement and it whetted his appetite for more. Named in honor of a dear, departed friend, Palmina Winery was born.

A key to the winery's success has been using varietals exclusively from the Piedmont and Friuli regions of Italy, since the climates and soil composition are similar to Santa Barbara County. Over time, it became a challenge to grow them in small blocks. In 2005, the Honea family offered Palmina the opportunity to plant 100-percent Italian vines in its vineyard located on Alamo Pintado Road in Solvang. "Suddenly the quality of the fruit exploded," says Chrystal.



Palmina owners Chrystal and Steve Clifton, far left and far right, have a laugh over a glass of wine them with assistant winemakers Matt Duggan and Alison Thompson in the Palmina cellar in Lompoc. TYLER BLUE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Palmina now gets half its grapes from the Honea Vineyard and the other half from four separate vineyards. They grow seven core varietals from which there are 22 bottlings. "We do some crazy experiments," Chrystal says.

The Cliftons are champions of the Italian mentality whereby food and wine are intertwined. "We never intended to just be a winery and tasting room," Chrystal explains. "The process we enjoy is educating and inspiring people to see how the connection between food and wine happens between season and region."

Along with their frequently smiling assistants, Alison Thompson and Matt Duggan, the Cliftons formulate recipes that can be downloaded from their Web site to pair with each new release.

Amongst all the varietals, Nebbiolo is Palmina's ultimate muse. "It's like the Dalai Lama in the form of liquid," Chrystal gushes. Steve figures, "We have 17 other wines that support our Nebbiolo habit." This challenging yet rewarding varietal takes four years to make. The investment has been paying off as Palmina has been the only American producer invited to present at the Nebbiolo Symposium in Italy.

The Cliftons have deflected much skepticism validating domestic Italian varietals.

"If we only attempted to emulate wines from Italy it would defeat the purpose," Chrystal reasons. "We're translating the experience; not just the technique."

In less than a decade, Palmina Winery has grown from producing 1,500 cases a year to over 12,000. It is enjoyed in 22 states and five different countries. In his spare time, Steve produces 8,000 cases of pinot noir and chardonnay with Greg Brewer on the Brewer-Clifton label.

Palmina's reputation recently attracted the wine buyer for the State Department's Office of Protocol. He informed them that their wines would be stocked for Secretary Clinton to serve for diplomatic occasions.

July brought even bigger news ñ President Obama delivered a lineup of Palmina wines to Italy's President Napolitano at that month's G8 Summit. Presented in a box made of wooden planks from the old Oval Office floor, they symbolize America's prowess in producing superb Italian wines.

Chrystal admits, "It's amazing to see our dreams come true," but there is hardly time for rest. Harvest is just around the corner. "We're trying to translate a consumable art to a glass," she says. "We're bringing the soul back to wine."