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Italian immigration in the United States has been a well-documented event in American history for nearly 200 years. Between the years 1880 and 1920, over four million Italian immigrants crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search of one thing: opportunity. Fleeing from unemployment and poverty, Italians came in pursuit of “The American Dream” and the promise of a new life.

Many of them found it. Neighborhoods known as “Little Italy” began springing up in major cities like Chicago and New York and newspapers, such as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, catered to the growing Italian-American population. Italian restaurants and bakeries popped up in all-Italian neighborhoods and of course, there was wine, an ever-present staple on every Italian-American table.

Not surprisingly, it didn’t take long for a few entrepreneurial Italian immigrants to see a winemaking potential in their new country. As far back as 1773, an Italian named Filippo Mazzei planted vineyards for Thomas Jefferson at the President’s mountaintop home in Monticello, Virginia. A few years later, many Italians headed west to California, immediately recognizing it as prime viticultural territory and as a chance to start their own business adventure.

In the years since, Italian-founded wineries such as Gallo and Mondavi have become household names in America and around the globe, proving that passion and vision go a long way in making dreams come true. Additionally, organizations such as Consorzio Cal-Italia help to promote Italian wine, heritage and lifestyle in California. Today, the land of opportunity’s love affair with Italian wines and culture continues with many independent American wineries undertaking the worthy task of preserving and promoting an important piece of the Italian culture, and for some their heritage.

## Italian-American Winemakers

*The Realization of a Dream*



Bottling at Palmina

## PALMINA WINERY

The names of Steve and Chrystal Clifton don't exactly reverberate with an Italian lilt, but their winery in Santa Barbara County is as Italian as an American winery can get.

Situated in the small city of Lompoc, California, Palmina is a haven for all varieties Italian. Besides being hailed as "The City of Murals," Lompoc's cool climate, long growing season and sandy and limestone soils sparked a dream for Steve and Chrystal Clifton: to bring their love of Italian wine and culture to the central coast of California.

But the going wasn't easy, as the Cliftons quickly learned. Steve Clifton's fascination with the wine industry began in 1992, when he decided to abandon his career as a musician and nightclub entrepreneur. Soon after, he found himself virtually begging for a job in any wine tasting room that would listen to him and was eventually hired by the Rancho Sisquoc Winery in Santa Maria, California. "Little by little, Steve forced his way into the cellar and in time worked his way up to Assistant Winemaker under Stephan Bedford [now of Bedford-Thompson Winery]," recalls Chrystal.



Steve and Chrystal Clifton and their Malvasia Bianca grapes at Palmina.



Chrystal Clifton and her grandfather, Bill Kaiser, join together to pick the Malvasia harvest at Palmina.

By 1995, Steve felt confident enough to make his own wine, purchasing Sangiovese grapes that resulted in the first wines to be released under the Palmina label. Two hundred cases were made during that first vintage. Today, the winery has grown to 10,000 cases producing over 15 different varieties.

While Steve was slaving away in the cellar of the young Palmina, Chrystal was exploring her own love of Italian culture in Bologna, a city in Emilia-Romagna associated with such gastronomical legends as Bolognese sauce, Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. After extending her stay for two years, Chrystal returned to Santa Barbara to work in the wine industry. She met Steve in 2000 and they were married in Italy four years later.

The success of the first few barrels of Sangiovese wine made in the basement of Steve's house fueled more

interest in discovering other Italian varieties. Over the years, Steve and Chrystal have expanded their vineyards to include Pinot Grigio, Arneis, Dolcetto and Nebbiolo, among others – grapes that strongly represent northern Italy's viticultural heritage and which thrive in the cool climate of Santa Barbara County. "We truly believe that Italian varieties are perfect for Santa Barbara County," says Chrystal. "While we respect the traditions of Italian producers with these varieties, we hope to also translate the beauty of these wines in California."

Palmina winery has come to be respected not only for the quality of its wines, but also for the ambassadorial approach to promoting Italian culture through wine. "While our wines are definitely based on Italian varieties of grapes, the intended expression of the wines is more focused on the approach and mindset toward wine in Italian culture than emulating Italian wines," says Chrystal. Sounds like a recipe for success.