

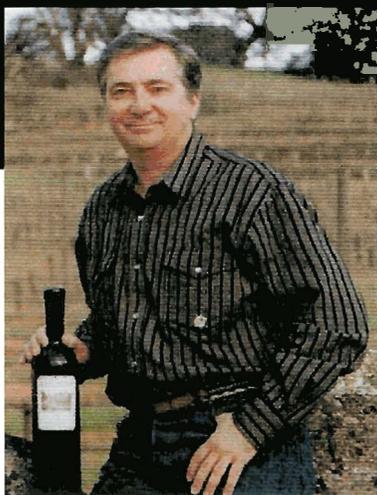
# WINE ENTHUSIAST

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## CAL ITALS COME OF AGE

After a century of acting like star-crossed lovers, Italian varietals and California are starting a modern-day romance. The result is some excellent wine—not all of which is Sangiovese.



Frank Altamura of Altamura Winery in Napa

BY  
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and for good reason: The wines are good and getting better. Over the past decade, growers have found the right terroirs and viticultural practices needed to grow these sometimes finicky grapes while winemakers have developed techniques to boost quality.

But now, at the dawn of the 21st century, that may be changing. So-called Cal-Ital wines (the phrase colloquially used in California) are now enjoying the most popularity they've ever had,

**W**hy is it that, with Italian-American immigrants practically founding winemaking in California in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we Americans drink so few Italian varietal wines?

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and Syrah are our favorites—all French grapes. Where's the Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, Trebbiano, Dolcetto, Refosco, Pinot Grigio, and the rest of the Italian varietals California growers could have chosen from? Why were the grapes in those "field blend" vineyards also overwhelmingly French? "I've never been able to figure it out," says Frank Altamura, who makes Sangiovese at his Napa Valley winery. I've asked this question of lots of California vintners, and nobody knows, not even the old-timers. Whatever the reasons, California never developed a history of Italian varietals the way it did with French ones.

The most successful Cal-Ital grape by far, from a qualitative point of view, is Sangiovese. But when Californians first began experimenting with it on a widespread basis, about 15 years ago, they encountered disaster. Difficult to grow and vinify even in its native Tuscany, where it's responsible for the 100-percent varietal Brunellos of Montalcino, and in Chianti, is blended with other grapes. Sangiovese presented Californians with challenges they neither anticipated, nor at first were able to solve.

"People planted it in all the wrong places, yields were astronomical, and the wines were bitter with acidity and tannin," says Pete Seghesio, CEO of Seghesio Winery.

Bob Pepi, whose family, in 1985, was among the first to plant Sangiovese in the Napa Valley in modern times, also notes that the vines grow like weeds, sending out masses

of leaves and grape bunches. Without controlling this vigor, he warns, "There are problems getting concentration, and with extracting color and phenolics," chemical compounds that add to a wine's aromas and flavors.

To counter that excessive vigor, growers reduce crop levels through aggressive pruning and thinning of bunches of grapes, thereby concentrating flavors.

Growers also are planting the vines in nutrient-poor soils, often on water-starved mountain hillsides that naturally limit a vine's vigor.

Limiting crop loads, however, isn't the only solution to this hard-to-deal-with varietal. Unlike say, Chardonnay and even Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese is acutely sensitive to its terroir, a trait it shares with Pinot Noir. But it isn't always easy to determine just where the right place is. Frank Altamura, whose Altamura Sangiovese is coveted among aficionados, credits his "rocky, well-drained soils" in the mountains above Napa Valley with limiting yields. Even so he has to "thin three or four times a year."

Even with good grapes, however, Sangiovese winemakers have their work cut out for them. Further improvements have been made thanks to better enological techniques, some of them home-grown, others borrowed from the Tuscans.

Even with these improvements, Sangiovese remains comparatively rare in California, with only 2,943 acres under vine in 2001. That's fewer even than Cabernet Franc, and less than 4 percent the acreage of the number one red grape, Cabernet Sauvignon.

Sangiovese's modern era in the state didn't begin until 1987, when the Italian winemaker Piero Antinori, with the backing of European business interests, bought land on a mountain above Napa Valley and established Atlas Peak.

Antinori's move into California also focused attention on the tremendous success he had enjoyed in Italy, and around the world, with his Tignanello wine, a non-traditional blend of Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon. (Alberto Antinori, Amador Foothill's consultant, used to make Tignanello.) First introduced in the mid-1970s, Tignanello not only became one of the most expensive wines in Tuscany, it inspired a new breed of Tuscan wines, included Solaia, Ornellaia and Sassacaia, that came to be called super Tuscans.

The high price these wines fetched was reason enough for Californian vintners to add a little Cabernet

Sauvignon or something else to their Sangioveses, and market them as California-style super Tuscans. But as it turned out, there was another reason to do so. With Sangiovese so site-specific, so difficult to craft on its own, blending in a strongly flavored wine like Cabernet was like adding salt and pepper to an otherwise bland dish.

That's the approach many California wineries eventually took, and are still taking. Cabernet Sauvignon remains the varietal of choice to blend into super Tuscans. But "Cabernet makes Sangiovese too Cabernet-like, even in small quantities."

Over the past 18 months, I've given my highest scores ever to unblended, or nearly unblended, Sangiovese wines. In addition to Altamura and Benessere, I've been impressed by Babcock's lush and dependable "Eleven Oaks" bottling from Santa Barbara. Grown under California's warm sun, and with almost no danger of rain or hail to mar a vintage, the best Sangiovese here ripens to reveal intense and succulent red and black cherry flavors, with a smoky, tobaccoey, sometimes tarry edge. They have more acidity than Cabernet and are drier, but are also light and silky on the palate, like a fine Pinot Noir.

The future of Sangiovese, both unblended and in super Tuscan form, is an open question. "To be honest, it's a hard sell," says Altamura. Even Dearden acknowledges that, good as it can be, "Sangiovese will never take the place of Cabernet or Merlot." Acreage actually fell in California between 2000 and 2001. Several Napa Valley wineries that used to make it, including Swanson and Sterling no longer do, while others, including Pepi, now source their fruit from outside Napa Valley. With average prices for Napa Sangiovese grapes at \$2,400 compared to \$4,000 for Cabernet Sauvignon, you can't blame them.

But fans are optimistic. "I think Sangiovese has the potential of being an alternative wine [to other reds]," says Glenn Salva, who was general manager of Atlas Peak for many years before going out on his own: he's now a consultant for Piero Antinori.

My own recommendation for Wine Enthusiast readers is to branch out and try a good Sangiovese or super Tuscan the next time you're at a restaurant, or buy yourself a bottle for home. These wines may not get the high scores or attention that Cabernet Sauvignon does, but they deserve a place at your table, and the best are definitely worth searching out.