There are times when sheer hedonism influences a wine selection—no need to impress friends or drink the wine currently in demand or in style. You just want a wine that tastes good with barbecue, roast turkey, green and red chile, or any other comfort food that calls for red wine. And indeed, there’s a wine that can do that—Zinfandel. Not the pink stuff, White Zinfandel, but the wine that’s been produced in California for over 150 years. And among producers, one of the best for this varietal is Seghesio.

The Seghesio Family Vineyards’ history begins with the arrival in Sonoma in 1886 of Edoardo Seghesio. Born in 1860, Edoardo left Piedmont (Piemonte) in Northern Italy in 1886 and emigrated to Sonoma. He purchased a house and 56 acres, and planted his “home vineyard” in Alexander Valley some years later, establishing the winery’s life-long love affair with Zinfandel. The varietal was cherished by the farmers transplanted from Italy because the wine can be prolific and retains its acidity in warmer climates. In 1902, Edoardo opened the family winery. Later, he bought an additional 120 acres in Northern Sonoma, an area Italian families likened to their homeland in Tuscany. There, Edoardo planted the now-oldest vineyards of Sangiovese in North America, and his business continued to thrive. Prohibition began to have its effect in 1920—of the 2,000 wineries in operation in the United States, only 100 survived. Alas, Seghesio was one of them, but it re-opened to begin a successful bulk-wine business that continued until 1993.

Even after Edoardo’s death in 1934, his widow, Angela, continued to run the winery successfully. Finally, in 1983, the family bottled its first wines under the Seghesio name. Within 10 years, production had grown to 130,000 cases, but the portfolio lacked focus. The family eliminated all but the wines that came from grapes grown on the estate and from specific growers, eventually reducing production to 30,000 cases. Edoardo and Angela’s great-grandson, Ted Seghesio, is a fourth-generation winemaker. He and several other family members are involved in the vineyard’s day-to-day operations. Despite the sale of Seghesio to the Crimson Wine Group, one cannot help but feel it’s still very much a family business.

Crimson bought Seghesio in 2011 and has applied its philosophy of “Quality, focus, and growth” to the brand. Lately, larger corporations are known to spend millions on brand names that do not include wineries or vineyards. Crimson, however, purchases wineries and vineyards, along with labels and brands. Ted Seghesio said he had “one foot out the door” after the sale, but was soon convinced the new owners wanted to preserve the culture and quality of the name. He stayed on as winemaker.

Twelve wines were eliminated, and the portfolio was trimmed to include the wines that were done best: nine Zinfandels and several Italian varietals. There are no plans for increasing the production of a wine, unless its quality can be maintained. Harvested grapes that arrive excessively ripe are rejected, no matter who the grower is. The best vineyards, which have been collected for over 100 years, now make up 300 acres in the best of Sonoma County, representing some of the region’s oldest vines and proprietary clones.

Seghesio Family Vineyards prides itself on its commitment to sustainability. This concept is often parodied by a winery’s PR department, but Seghesio “walks the walk.” Onsite solar panels power one quarter of the winery, which uses two gallons of water to produce every gallon of wine—low by industry standards. The winery’s great recycling advocate, from cardboard and glass to kitchen grease. In the vineyards, raptor boxes and hawk perches are put in place to reduce pesticide use. Seghesio uses native and seeded cover crops to reduce dust, which in turn reduces mite populations. Extensive vine-canopy management promotes airflow to achieve the same result. Farming is done within the restrictions of the Fish Friendly Farming Certification Program to prevent detrimental runoff and help soil retention. Drip-irrigation is judicious, and pumice is composted. “We are minimalists in the vineyards,” Ted Seghesio says. With 300 acres of grown grapes, and 40 different growers, they feel these practices are challenging but necessary.

Sustainability also requires new ways of doing business and extends to personnel and employment; the winery’s efforts are especially noteworthy here. They continue to provide homes for farm superintendents on their ranches, a plan started by Ted Seghesio’s grandfather. In addition, since 2008, they have traveled to Mexico to hire vineyard workers and help them acquire temporary work visas. This is accomplished through the US Government’s H-2A Agricultural Program. The winery provides safe and legal transport north for these workers who work for nine months in California, then return home. The winery built a hacienda 15 years ago on their Home Ranch where those workers can live, if they choose. This helps them withstand the rising cost of housing in Sonoma County.

For Zinfandel, harvesting is a challenge, and requires exhaustive sampling, because the varietal is notorious for irregular ripening. Most varietals take 10 days to proceed from bloom to fruit set. Zinfandel can take three to four weeks, plus there can be raisined, ripe and under-ripe berries all on the same bunch. “It is our most difficult cultivar to grow,” Ted says. So many California Zinfandels try to impress you with their body, alcohol content and almost port-like quality. Seghesio’s gained a reputation for producing Zinfandels that are relatively restrained, with
A Taste of Life in New Mexico

SEPTEMBER 2016

Cortina Vineyard

Ted Seghesio

Home Ranch Vineyard
alcohol levels that are controlled. “You have to know the vineyards, pick at the optimal time—not two days later,” Ted explains. Seghesio takes pride in “pulling the trigger and moving quickly at harvest.” This is their specialty.

The Italian-American heritage would not be complete without varietals made from grapes originally from Italy. Barbera, Aglianico, Vermentino, Sangiovese (in a wine labeled Venom, after Rattlesnake Hill at Home Ranch) and Arneis, the indigenous white grape of Piemonte, are also produced. Some additional single-vineyard wines will also be available at the winery and for those on the winery’s mailing list.

Such focus brings to mind the small winery philosophy so prevalent in Europe. Make a wine that shows off the terroir, the place. Produce a wine from there, do it well, and people will buy it. You will not see a Seghesio Cabernet, Chardonnay, or new release of Pinot Noir, three of the more popular entries in the American wine list of best sellers, because even though the categories include wines that sell, they are not what Seghesio does best. What you will see are impressive Zinfandel and Italian varietal wines from older family vineyards that carry on an Italian-American wine making tradition. To meet Ted Seghesio, the 2016 Santa Fe Wine & Chile Fiesta Honoree, and to taste his wines, come to the Fiesta, Sept. 24-26. It will be worth the trip.

Tasting Notes from the Vintner


Seghesio Zinfandel Old Vine (Dry Creek & Alexander Valley): 7% Petite Sirah, which adds structure. Briary black raspberry and black cherries. Purity of fruit. Persistent, synergistic with layered complexity. [Ted’s favorite wine because of complexity that grapes from two viticultural areas give it.] The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The vines’ root system is devirginated, due to the age of the vines producing less fruit, and the wine has the best expression of Zinfandel’s intrinsic spiciness.

Seghesio Zinfandel Cortina (Dry Creek): 100% Zinfandel. Significant diurnal swings preserves acidity laying the foundation for Cortina’s richness and structure. Raspberry essence exemplifies typicity. The Cortina vineyard is cooler than the Home Ranch. Afternoon breezes and some morning fog resulting from the marine layer of air. Even here in Dry Creek, the Russian River has an influence. More red-raspberry character, with more acidity due to the cooler climate. Very food-friendly.

Seghesio Zinfandel Rockpile (Rockpile): 100% Zinfandel. Shallow, rocky top-soils produce smaller berried clusters. Rockpile is its own AVA and overlaps the northwest corner of the Dry Creek AVA: a unique 15,000-acre appellation with only 200 acres planted to vineyards. Dusty raspberry notes and earthen spice. Fine tannins add depth and length. The grapes can ripen at a quicker pace as there is typically only a 30-degree diurnal swing. Smaller berries, brown spice, mocha notes.

For more information visit Seghesio Family Vineyards at seghesio.com.