

Brutocao Cellars—Italian Style in Hopland

Wine Notes by Heidi Cusick Dickerson

The Brutocao family brings a sampling of the Italian lifestyle to Mendocino County. From the St. Mark's Square (in Venice) lion on their wine label to their tasting room, restaurant and bocce courts, *la dolce vita* is what I found at Brutocao Cellars in Hopland.

Playing on a bocce team for the last few years at Brutocao's summer league offered a glimpse into the sweet life. We competed, we drank great wine, and we ate crispy flavorful pizzas from the wood fired oven in the Crushed Grape Restaurant. On balmy evenings after the game, we sipped an after dinner drink at round tables under a grape arbor. The sun set against the western hills backlighting the terraces of lavender and olive trees.

Inside the tasting room, which is housed in the old Hopland High School, a hand painted fresco features St. Mark's Square. Tiled floors and marble tabletops, arched alcoves, and a tasteful selection of glassware, kitchenware and linens evoke the style for which Italy is renown. More than two dozen wines are open for tasting each day. Varietals such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot, pinot noir, sauvignon blanc, and zinfandel are on the list. So are wines from their Italian series, for which Brutocao is gaining recognition.

Barbera, primitivo, dolcetta and sangiovese are available. And a new wine Quadriga, which is a blend of the four Italian varietals, "is really doing great," says Steve Brutocao, third generation in a family of northern California grape growers. The 2005 Quadriga recently won a double gold medal at the prestigious San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition.

"My dad's father was from Treviso near Venice," says Steve. Dad Len and mom Marty live at the Home Ranch on a knoll above the winery, located just east of Hopland on Highway 175. Marty's parents grew grapes in Sonoma County and in 1943 her father Irv Bliss bought this property east of Hopland and had sheep, prunes and grapes. It was later sold and the Brutocaos repurchased it in 1974. They planted 200 acres of chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, and zinfandel. "We still have the old zinfandel block," says Steve. The other two varietals were replaced with sauvignon blanc and merlot.

At the time, Len and his sons were in highway construction in southern California. Then, in 1994, the senior Brutocaos and Steve and his family decided they wanted a change and moved to the Home Ranch. The next year they started the winery. Now two more of Steve's brothers are

partners in the business. David does all the financial and legal and compliance work. Lenny is the vineyard manager. Sister Renee lives in Windsor with her family and brother Dan is a physician in Spokane, Washington. Steve, who runs the overall operations, lives on the Home Ranch with his wife Tammy and sons Joe, 17, and Dominic, 15.

In addition to the Home Ranch the Brutocaos added two other ranches. Contento Ranch, also on Highway 175, is where their primitivo and cabernet sauvignon grow. At Feliz Ranch off Feliz Creek Road you'll find Italian varietals such as dolcetto, sangiovese, and barbera. And pinot noir vines border Brutocao's second tasting room in Anderson Valley. The Anderson Valley tasting room, opened in 1992, has a beautifully sleek interior with curved tasting bar and a selection of locally made artisan items to purchase.

At the winery, which stretches out on a mesa-like knoll, a large office building, cellar and warehouse overlook a reservoir. Five and a half acres of olive trees grace the setting. Last year Brutocao pressed 100 gallons of olive oil, which they bottled and sell in the tasting room. Brutocao's Toscana Extra Virgin Olive Oil sports the St. Mark's lion logo. The distinctive lion with wings was inspired by the three statues in St. Mark's Square in Venice. "My dad adopted it as the family crest in the 1980s," says Steve.

He guides me into the winery on a hot day in August and the coolness and aromatic blast of fermenting grapes is refreshing. Winemaker Fred Nickel is busy checking tanks and figuring out the next bottling time. His sense of humor and winemaking expertise combine to make him the perfect person to finesse and blend the 30 or so wines that come from Brutocao. They make 15,000 cases of wine under the Brutocao label and another 15,000 cases of Bliss, their second label, made for drinking right now.

In addition, Nickel makes Brutocao's Coro Mendocino wine. This is the high end zinfandel that is made by 12 different Mendocino wineries to exacting specifications designed to create a rich and age-worthy wine showcasing the best of the best.

The winery is cooled with the night air and no refrigeration. A fan comes on at midnight and louvers open to suck the warm air out and pull in cold air. It circulates all night. "The air from our cool nights maintains the temperature even on hottest day," says Steve.

Brutocao wines are sold all over the United States, in a dozen other countries, and in their tasting rooms and on their website, which has slide shows of the vineyards and harvest. They also make one of the last Ports in America to be called Port. A new international agreement now

only allows the name Port to be placed on a bottle of the lovely fortified wine, made for sipping with blue cheese or chocolate in front of a fire on a wintry evening, on Port from Portugal. Wineries such as Brutocao which already had a Port on their label, had the name grandfathered in. Brutocao will be showcasing its Tawny Port with samples of chocolate in their Tasting rooms on November 8. Next month, Brutocao will participate in the annual Hopland Fall Passport on October 25 and 26.

With more than 30 wines in their repertoire, including reserve selections, it seems that Brutocao has the wine list covered. What's next?

"Dad wants a pinot grigio," says Steve. Not surprising, it's Italian.

Tasting Notes: I agree with the Petaluma Wine Jazz and Blues Festival which just gave a gold medal to Brutocao's 2005 Quadrigo. One sip of this fragrantly bright and very rich blend with a thin slice of parmigiano-reggiano instigated one of those "oh yes!" pairings. I then served it with a dish of al dente fettuccine with olive oil, garlic, parsley and shaved parmigiano-reggiano (parmesan cheese). Sigh.

For more information on Brutocao Cellars, contact www.brutocaozellars.com. To learn more about what to do and where to stay in Mendocino County, visit www.gomendo.com. For more information about Mendocino County wineries and wine regions, visit www.mendowine.com.

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