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## Vineyard & Winery Management Magazine

### Feature Story

#### Sangiaco Family Values Intelligence in the Vineyard

By Christopher Sawyer

**Founded: 1969**

**Principals: Angelo and Diane Sangiacomo, Lorraine Sangiacomo, Sue and Buck Sangiacomo, Michael and Whitney Sangiacomo, Steve and Connie Sangiacomo, Mia and Mike Pucci**

**Acreage Farmed: 1,600 acres**

**AVAs: Carneros, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma Coast**

**Main Grape Varieties: Chardonnay (65%), pinot noir (30%)**

**Additional Varieties: Merlot (4%), pinot gris and syrah (1%)**

**Number of Winery Clients: 76**

**Number of Vineyard-Designate Clients: 33**

With the recent gobbling up of small California wineries by big corporations and the sales of vineyards during tough economic times, the tradition of passing down grapegrowing skills to the next generation is not as common as it used to be.

In Sonoma County, a glowing exception is the Sangiacomo clan. Run by a multi-generational family known for its detailed, custom viticultural practices and its dedication to growing world-class grapes, Sangiacomo Family Vineyards farms 1,600 acres of vineyards and more than 100 distinctive sites in the Carneros, Sonoma Valley and Sonoma Coast regions.

After emigrating from Genoa, Italy, to California in 1927, Vittorio and Maria Sangiacomo purchased the original 120-acre Home Ranch property, located south of the town of Sonoma. They developed a reputation for growing premium pears, apples and prunes, and in 1969, the family took a leap of faith and planted its first vineyard.

In the 1970s, the expansion of the grape program was led by the second generation of Sangiacomos: siblings Angelo, Bob, Buck and Lorraine. During the next 25 years, they continued to update their farming practices and increased the quality of their grapes as they developed each new vineyard block.

Today, those experiences have been passed down to the third generation - Michael and his wife, Whitney; Steve and his wife, Connie, and Mia and her husband, Mike Pucci - who are now responsible for running Sangiacomo Family Vineyards (SFV).

The Sangiacomos have never needed to advertise their grapes, as most of their business has come from word-of-mouth recommendations. To this day, many of their grape sales agreements are based on handshakes.

The first winery to bottle a vineyard-designated Sangiacomo wine was Sonoma's Gundlach Bundschu, in 1979; Joseph Phelps Vineyards in Napa Valley followed in 1981. Now 76 producers purchase fruit from the family, bottling 33 vineyard-designated wines.

"We realize that wineries position themselves in different ways, based on brand identity or different brands within their portfolio," said Steve Sangiacomo. (Because the family members handle multiple duties, they do not have specific job titles.) "With vineyard designates, we do our part of the process by growing high-quality grapes that can hopefully live up to the expectations consumers have when they see the name of our vineyards on the label."

Through the years, clients have included David Ramey, Jed Steele and Joel Peterson.

The diversity of soils and microclimates, as well as the proper pairing of rootstocks to clones in each block, allow some wineries to work with distinctive flavor profiles, while others prefer to source fruit from multiple blocks and create a consistent core of complex flavors from vintage to vintage.

As an extra perk, the family is flexible in custom-farming each block to meet the needs of individual clients. In each case, such techniques as head suckering, shoot thinning, shoot and bunch positioning, removing of shoulders from clusters, the number of passes per row to drop fruit, and the other aspects of vineyard management are discussed with all clients prior to the beginning of each season.

"The Sangiacomos don't cut corners," said Michael Cox, who currently makes wine with grapes purchased from the Sangiacomos' Donnell Ranch and Tall Grass vineyard, for Schug Carneros Estate and his family's boutique brand, Mayro-Murdick Wines. "The whole family has their eyes on the individual blocks at each vineyard. To me, that's a sign of assurance that they are going to constantly deliver the best fruit possible."



The Sangiacomo family: (left to right, back to front): Steve, Michael, Mike Pucci, Buck and Angelo. Photo: Kent Hanson

Earlier this year, the Sangiacomos were awarded the 2009 Viticulture Award of Excellence by the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission. In July, the Sonoma County Harvest Fair honored Steve Sangiacomo as Outstanding Young Farmer 2009, and the family was chosen as the honorary chair for the 2009 Sonoma Wine Country Weekend, held over Labor Day weekend.

"Every year we get more experience under the belt and we gain the benefits of research done in the fields," Michael Sangiacomo said. "So I think we've been able to make better decisions regarding which particular varieties we are going to plant at each site, the appropriate clonal selections, and the matching of the best rootstock we can get our hands on."

#### Clonal Aspect

To build upon its hands-on approach in the vineyards, the family has developed its own Vine Ecology program focused on weather, soil, light exposure and implementation of new viticultural practices, designed to improve fruit quality and show environmental responsibility.

In Carneros, chardonnay is the family's primary variety. At SFV's Green Acres Vineyard, one can still find original plantings from 1970 of old Wente clone chardonnay on St. George rootstock. In the late 1980s, as part of a 600-acre AXR conversion and replanting process, new plant material was added, including clones 4, 17, 548, 809, Hyde and Robert Young selections. The Home Ranch and Catarina Ranch clones are non-certified variations of field selections from the two ranches.

To work with each of the new clone and rootstock combinations, the family has invested much time in experimentation. In general, trials are done on 5- to 10-acre parcels, designed to test everything, including close spacing, advanced trellis systems, soil amendments, deficit irrigation and cover crops.

Many of the replanted blocks feature slight adjustments in row direction, closer vine spacing and/or tighter row width. At Green Acres, for example, the original vine spacing in 1970 was 8 feet by 12 feet; all vines planted since 2000 are on much denser spacing of 5 feet by 8 feet.

"For the current level of farming that we're doing, vine spacing is absolutely critical to maximize the land potential and eliminate pounds per vine to increase the quality and intensity of the fruit," Michael Sangiacomo said.

Most of the converted vineyard blocks have updated versions of vertical shoot positioning. This approach has helped open up the canopy and provide more sun exposure to individual leaves in the cooler-climate blocks. The new VSP styles can also be adjusted for mechanical hedging or tipped-off by hand, to eliminate excess lateral shoot growth.

"Site by site, we're now starting to work with more variations and V-bars to widen the canopy, depending on where we need extra shading based on the row orientation. So it's not just a carte blanche straight VSP anymore," Michael explained.

Water conservation has become another important part of the program. During the past 20 years, the Sangiacomos have significantly reduced the amount of water they use by replacing overhead sprayers with advanced drip systems and more emitters per vine.

This new irrigation regime has made a difference in the block size as well. In the early days, the Sangiacomos used 10- to 20-acre irrigation sets. Now they micro-manage 2- to 5-acre sets, allowing them to plant a more diverse mix of rootstocks and clones to suit particular soils and microclimates in each block.

"Whether you're pushing the onset of irrigation or measuring the amount of stress, you're allowing the vine to maintain (itself) before you actually give it water," Michael said. "By starting at smaller sites, we've been able to apply these techniques on more acreage, once we're comfortable with pushing the vines to higher levels of stress."

For frost protection, overhead sprinklers are being replaced by wind machines. In winter months, the family keeps close watch on how the soils are affected by rainfall. From spring to harvest, the family uses pressure bombs to chart leaf water potential and neutron probes to monitor the remaining water reserves in the ground.

"Everybody's been looking for the silver bullet, and I don't think it's there," Steve Sangiacomo said. "Instead, I think it's about using all of these tools together and trying to make what amounts to an educated guess, because I don't think we can say there is an 'exact' science quite yet."

#### Sustainable and Organic Farming

Another SFV focus is sustainable farming. Through the decades, practices have changed from straight cultivation to planting cover crops in each row or every other row. By planting vetch, rye, bell beans, legumes and other crops, the goal is to create specialty blends that help build up the natural nutrient levels in the soils.

Other sustainable techniques include the use of owl boxes and raptor perches to control rodents; planting trees to host beneficial insects; reducing the use of pesticides; using more natural composts, and controlling weeds with a Spedovator, an innovative machine which features a gentle stinger that retracts when it touches the vine.

"In the last 10 years-plus, we re-evaluated everything and, to use a poor cliché, we've left no stone unturned," Michael Sangiacomo said. "Essentially, we're doing everything we can to make the vines healthier and more productive of top-tier grapes."

At the Home Ranch, a few of the Chardonnay blocks are being converted to organic. Mike Benziger of Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen, one of the primary sourcers of organically grown grapes in Sonoma County, said he admires the Sangiacomos' deep understanding of the vineyards and their role as part of the organic winemaking process. He's purchased their fruit since 1983.

"Other growers might roll their eyes at the thought of going organic, yet the Sangiacomos see it as an opportunity," Benziger said. "They understood why we were doing it and changed their farming practices to work with our program. There is no doubt that they are one of those few growers that no one wants to leave."

#### Sonoma Coast Expansion

While the majority of the Sangiacomo property is located in Carneros, some of the family's most intriguing plantings are of pinot noir in the Sonoma Coast appellation.

According to Michael Sangiacomo, the investment in land outside Sonoma Valley began with the spread of phylloxera in the late 1980s. "At the time, we had developed partnerships with wineries who were counting on us to supply them with fruit," he said. "When phylloxera hit, we didn't know how fast it would spread. So it made good business sense to start looking for other sites to grow high-quality fruit, as we made the transition to replanting many of the original vineyards."

South of Petaluma, Sangiacomo's Lakeville Vineyard was planted in 1990. Influenced by the powerful Petaluma Gap winds and close proximity to San Pablo Bay, the vines on the property were among the first planted in the region since Prohibition. Today, the pinot noir and chardonnay fruit is purchased by seven wineries.

Across Lakeville Highway, the Fedrick Vineyard was planted in 2000. This slightly more elevated site has 11 different rootstock/clone combinations of pinot noir and chardonnay, and three smaller blocks of syrah.

After establishing these vineyards, the Sangiacomos shared the information they gathered about the soils, climates and history of the area with local residents. Among the attentive listeners were Joan and Jim Griffin, who planted Griffin's Lair Vineyard in the Lakeville region in 2000.

"Anything Angelo Sangiacomo and his family found out about soils, roots, clones, sources of water and even the grapes grown in the area before Prohibition, they were generous enough to share with us," Joan Griffin said. "Not only did this information make the planting of our vineyard that much easier, but the family helped show us the potential of the region way before anyone else was really talking about it."



SFV business partner Mike Pucci shows off the growers' HP IPAQ device, used to record data in the vineyards. Photo: Christopher Sawyer

Fifteen miles north of Lakeville, another Sangiacomo Sonoma Coast project is the Roberts Road Vineyard. Located at the base of Sonoma Mountain in the Penngrove-Cotati area, this pristine property was purchased in 1998 and planted in 1999. Influenced by morning fog, warm days and strong afternoon winds, the grapes get plenty of hang time and develop distinctive flavors.

A big fan of this vineyard is winemaker Greg La Follette, who has bottled a vineyard-designated pinot noir from Roberts Road for his Tandem label since 2001. His latest release, from 2006, is a combination of Swan and 777 clones from Roberts Road, and a smaller amount of 114 from one block at the Sangiacomo Vella Ranch in Cameros. It's a wine layered with ripe berry and plum flavors, and an amazing gaminess that La Follette refers to in French as "sauvage et animale" (savage and animal).

"The microbiology of the Roberts vineyard is very special and the wines show it," La Follette said. "The grapes have great hang time due to the cool weather in the region. To me, there is something magical and viscerally exciting about the flavor profile that is like no other wine I make."

#### **Night Harvesting**

In the late 1980s, the Sangiacomos were among the first grapegrowers to harvest at night. After learning the basic techniques from R.H. Phillips Winery in the Dunnigan Hills of Yolo County, they fabricated their own machine to cover four rows at a time. Today, the family uses more than 30 of these lighted harvesters to pick 60%-75% of the fruit at night.

Another innovation is the use of sorting tables in the vineyard at night. After the grapes are harvested, the clusters are placed in small sorting trays and inspected for stray leaves, small canes and individual clusters affected by Botrytis or sunburn.

"It's not perfect, but we feel this technique really cuts down on the percentage of flawed fruit before we hand it over to our clients," Steve Sangiacomo said.

#### **Computer Technology**

Thanks to evolving technology, information about each application in the vineyard is stored in a database designed to follow the progress of each block down to the individual vine.

On a weekly basis, reports from each vineyard are fed into the master computer from the field, via a hand-held wireless HP PDA system with links to the Internet. This device monitors weekly irrigation rates, rodent sightings, pressure bomb readings, canopy management regimes, cluster counts, bunch weights and other critical information.

At the Sangiacomos' headquarters in Sonoma, the specific coordinates of each report are tracked by coded panels located throughout the vineyards. This information is used to follow the maturity of each block compared to reports from previous vintages, and is overlaid on infrared maps.

#### **Economic Impact**

From a business standpoint, Steve Sangiacomo said it's important to remember that each vineyard block is a minimum 25- to 30-year investment. "As farmers, we can't play the 'Sideways' game and convert everything to pinot noir and not realize the ramifications that such a dramatic change could have on our business plan," he said. "Like our previous generations, we feel it's best to not chase the market, but to work with an assortment of grape varieties like chardonnay, pinot noir, merlot, syrah and pinot gris, which have proved themselves when planted at the appropriate sites."

When asked about the effect the recession has had on the demand for Sangiacomo grapes, Steve said no one is completely insulated from the economic downturn.

"When these conditions affect our clients, we also feel the pinch," he said. "For us, whether it is good times or bad, the bottom line is that you have to be fair with your clients and work together to keep the relationship healthy and moving forward."

He said it comes down to knowing what each side wants. "For us, we're most successful when we know the program that our grapes are going to go into, and what we can do with our viticultural practices to live up to our side of the bargain.

"Now, I think we're at the point that we're making good decisions for high-quality grapes, and now we're trying to refine it year after year. As we take these steps, those last few remaining details become more and more difficult to find."

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Christopher Sawyer is a sommelier, wine educator and critic who travels around the globe following wine trends and judging wine in international competitions.

Comments? Please email us at [feedback@vwm-online.com](mailto:feedback@vwm-online.com).