



Written By BEV STENEHJEM

Fortino Winery's Rich History

The Fortino family story is a classic American Dream story. Ernest Fortino was just 23 when he immigrated from Italy to the United States from Italy in 1959. Not speaking a word of English but looking for a better way of life in America, Ernest eagerly accepted work in the canneries and vineyards of Santa Clara Valley. By the early 1970s, he and his wife, Marie, had started a family and established Fortino Winery in Gilroy. They worked long and hard hours to make their winery a success, and established one of the very first wine clubs in California.

In 1995, they retired and passed the winery down to their children, Gino and Teri. Gino's strategic decision to obtain wedding and commercial kitchen permits launched their business to a whole new level—with weddings booked solid from spring through fall.

Today, Fortino Winery has a total of 50 planted acres including estate Merlot, Cabernet, Carignan, Charbono, Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Noir. Their award winning red blend, Maribella, is named in honor of Marie, the family matriarch.

gmh TODAY recently caught up with Gino, the Fortino family winemaker, for the following interview:

What are the pros and cons of owning a winery?

Some people say, "You're so lucky, you must make millions of dollars!" Which, of course, is not true. But, one of the pros is the gratification of taking a simple grape and turning it into a wine that people will like to drink. And for the cons—it is all the overhead costs and regulations that take me away from making wine.

What has surprised you about being a winemaker?

The business side of winemaking brought the biggest surprise. There is a lot more involved than the romance of making wine. You have to run a winery as a business—complying with all the state and federal rules and regulations—all because alcohol is supposedly "sinful." The bigger your business, the more it's hit by government agencies wanting to audit you for compliance. For example, the state's health department checks our drinking water because our water comes from a well. It's not a bad thing; it just requires a lot of paperwork and time.



How did you get started in wine?

With my mom and dad owning a winery, I've never worked anywhere else. I have always worked here. Since we were little, my sister, Teri, and I always did whatever needed to be done. After finishing junior college in 1987, I started working here full-time. I became the assistant winemaker and in 1995, Teri and I took over the winery. I guess you can say I was roped into it. Now I think maybe I should have done something else.

Do you have a degree in winemaking?

I learned to make wine by getting my hands purple. From a young age I received on-the-job-training from my dad and his assistant winemakers. I learned by doing.

What do you drink when you are not drinking your own wine?

I like Jack and Coke or tequila. When I can get it, my favorite is an almond-flavored tequila; a south-of-the-border bootleg.



Kraig Youmans, Teri Fortino, Jill and Geno Fortino at a Chamber event in 2014.



What goals in winemaking are you still working to achieve?

My goal is to make the best wine I can. I try to make the kind of wine I like, but also wines that the public will like.

What do you find to be the hardest part of harvest?

Actually, I really like harvest. For me, harvest is the beginning of making the final product—where it all starts. It's an exciting time where I get to be creative in the winemaking process. Also, because I have plenty of room with all the equipment (tanks, press, wine tanks, pumps and hoses) I need, harvest is a fairly easy process for me.

What kind of vibe does your winery have?

We have a comfy, relaxed and friendly feel. There is always a family member on premise to talk to. But we are in the process of reinventing ourselves, trying to appeal to a newer, younger generation. We plan on offering more food pairings and music events.

Any new releases or anything special on the horizon?

We had some extra wines lying around and started mixing. We wanted to come up with something new and since we hadn't done a rosé in 25 years, we came up with Petali di Rosa—a blend of four reds and two whites (and a favorite of this writer). We also have a newly-released Pinot Grigio and a new Carignane.

Funniest customer story (something they said or did)?

The other day a guy came in with a bag and unwrapped one of our old wine glasses. He had taken the glass after winetasting with us back in the 1980s and had felt guilty about it all this time. So we took back the glass and replaced it with a new one for him.

Worst disaster you've experienced in your business?

In 1982 a fire started behind our barrel room where we stored all our wine. The barrel room and part of our fermentation room were destroyed. We lost most of the older cabernets that were bottled and warehoused there.

What is a favorite wine and food pairing?

Lamb pops; a little over-rare and with the right seasoning along with a heavy Cabernet.

Favorite award or accolade that you have received?

We were really honored when we received the 2014 Small Business of the Year award from the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce.

What recipe do you like to add wine to?

Red pasta sauce with Italian sausage and ground hamburger.

What is the biggest misconception about you?

Most people don't realize that I do a little bit of everything at the winery—from electrical and welding to working on cars. We don't hire out for these small jobs; we're old school. The other misconception is that people think that my dad still runs the winery. He hasn't since 1995.

Is there a next generation ready to take over the Fortino legacy of winemaking?

That is the million-dollar question: who is going to take over the reins of the winery when Teri and I retire? Teri's son, Austin, received a business degree from Humboldt and my son, Nic, is getting his ag business degree from Chico. Our sons are in the beginning stages of learning the winery business and are both showing interest. But only time will tell.



Bev Stenehjem is a local wine enthusiast, author and freelance writer focused on the wineries of Santa Clara Valley. Bev wrote "The Wineries of Santa Clara Valley," a historical photo book published by Arcadia Publishing in 2015. Bev conducts occasional wine and food pairing events at the local wineries and through Gavilan College Community Education. She is passionate about shining a light on the world-class wines of the Santa Clara Valley and the people behind them.