



Written By BEV STENEHJEM

# The Guglielmo Winery's Family Legacy



Gene and George Guglielmo

As one of northern California's wine pioneers, the Guglielmo Winery holds the distinction of being the oldest continuously operated family winery in Santa Clara Valley. The winery was founded in 1925 by Emilio and Emilia Guglielmo – two Italian immigrants. After their arrival to the United States, the young couple toiled and saved their money for fifteen years before purchasing acreage and a home in Morgan Hill. It was then that they also started their winery. Their son, George W., along with his wife, Madeline, joined the family business in 1945. By the 1980s, the winery was passed on to the third generation, George W. and Madeline's three sons: George E., Gary and Gene.

Today, the house where Emilio and Emilia began is still standing and has now become offices for the winery. A fourth generation is in the early stages of being groomed with Angelia Guglielmo, Gene's newly hired daughter.

Guglielmo Winery produces a wide variety of award-winning varietals from more than 80 acres of Santa Clara Valley estate vineyards, as well as from other premium winegrowing regions within California. The winery is rich in the charm and tradition of Italy. Beyond iron gates and a cobblestone courtyard lie a tasting room and a covered lawn area popular for weddings, concerts and corporate events.

*gmh*TODAY recently caught up with George and Gene Guglielmo, the brothers who own the winery, for the following interview:

**The first question that most people wonder about, is how do you pronounce your last name?**

*Gool-yell-mo – with the accent on the second syllable.*

**Since your grandparents founded your winery in 1925, it is been regarded as one of one of the region's oldest and best wineries. What is the secret of your continued success?**

*Perseverance, dedication and passion. This is where we grew up and it's our family name that is out there. So whatever we do, we want to uphold our family's traditions and reputation for making quality wines. The reputation we've achieved over three generations reflects our commitment to wine and the community. It also helps that we are willing to improve and change with the times. We have had to morph into other arenas such as with our event center and the distribution of our wines.*

**Growing up, you were very close to your grandparents. What were some of the most important lessons that you learned from them?**

*For a time, we all lived in the three-bedroom house that now serves as our office here at the winery. Our grandparents slept in one room, my parents in another and two of us boys in the third bedroom. We ate all our meals together. Mainly by example, they taught us the value of hard work and respect for each and every individual. Never run away from your commitments and always treat people right.*



Gene, Laura, Jan and George Guglielmo

**Was wine a big part of your family meals?**

*Wine was always a part of our lunch and dinner. In fact, we don't remember a time when wine wasn't on the table. It was customary to have wine with meals. As teenagers we were offered a little watered-down wine. It was such a common, everyday occurrence and so we never snuck any.*

**How old were you when you started to help out in the winery – what were your jobs?**

*We helped out as soon as we were able – doing odd jobs like putting caps and foils on bottles and pulling hoses.*

**Did you ever have other aspirations for a different career or did you feel destined to take over the winery one day?**

*George: I always thought I would work at the winery so that is why I majored in viticulture with an option of enology at Fresno State.*

*Gene: Originally, I had wanted to do my own thing, apart from the winery. But one year, when I traveled to Italy to meet my great aunts in the same village where my grandfather was born, I thought it would be sad to see the winery that they worked so hard to establish, go away. So I became determined to stay and help keep our family business successful.*

**The old family home is now the winery's front office. What are your favorite memories here?**

*The house, or "International Headquarters" as we jokingly call it - was full of music – whether it was recording music or people playing accordions or just my grandmother singing. Our customers were also our friends. They'd come to the house for lunch and before long start singing the old Italian mountain songs. During Prohibition, there was an old trap door in the floor of my grandparent's bedroom that led to the secret cellar.*

**Among the 3 Guglielmo brothers – George, Gene and Gary – who own the winery - how did you decide who would do what?**

*We had a natural division of labor. George graduated with a viticulture degree so he became our winemaker. Gene was more interested in business and marketing which he majored in at Santa Clara University – so he took over sales and operations. With an accounting degree, Gary took over the bookkeeping.*

**How would you describe your wines?**

*Our legacy is making dry, full-bodied wines – wines that pair well with food. We produce several uncommon varietals such as Grignolino, Barbera, Dolcetto and Carignan – along with Cabernet, Zinfandel, Syrah, Merlot and Pinot Noir. Our white wines include Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Blanc and several sparkling options.*

**What are some of the biggest changes that you've seen in the wine industry?**

*The changes have been mind-boggling. When the winery first started, most wine was drunk by the ethnic Mediterranean cultures – the Italians, French and Spanish people. We made 20-gallon, home deliveries – 90% of our wine was sold direct to the consumer, restaurants and liquor stores. Whole sale prices were just \$1.00 per gallon. In the 1970s, there were less than 200 wineries in the state (now there are over 5,000). Also at this time, there were no varietals – all our wines were blended into Burgundy. But, then a trend to bottle individual varietals became popular so in the 1970s, George started that program here. In 1989, Gene was instrumental in getting an AVA for the Santa Clara Valley established.*

**What kind of vibe does your winery have?**

*We have a sense of tradition based on history and family. People feel comfortable and taken care of here.*

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Steven Pattie working on historic “cook” wagon.

site by oxen or horses and left standing. Sort of the RVs of the time. Oxen and dray horses are very slow and they would be driven by people walking alongside or on horseback so there was no need for a seat on the wagon.

This wagon is even more special because it clearly had windows and a stove. This was most common in “cook” wagons. The marks on the floor from the old iron stove legs are very clear and even though some of the windows have been boarded over, you can see where they once let light into the wagon. Shepherds’ cook wagons were also different than the chuck wagons of the cowboys because the cooks were frequently women. The women had bunks in the wagon where they could safely sleep at night. Further research by Steven showed that his particular cook wagon had come from the Fresno area. There are many more sheep ranches there now as there were at the turn of the 19th century.

Steven worked hard on the wagon to keep it from deteriorating. Peeling paint, rotted wood and rusting metal were refurbished or replaced and the coachwork was trued. He built nice steps leading up to a deck at the door on the rear of the coach so visitors could easily visit. Quaint electric lighting was added to diminish the risk of the open flames of the original kerosene or oil lamps. The interior has been decorated with the intention of calling to mind and honoring the people who lived and worked in the cook trailer. His efforts with the wagon have helped to preserve a little part of history and a flavor of the past.

## The Vine

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### Do you have a funny customer story?

*Years ago, we delivered five cases of wine, our minimum order, to an elderly woman who lived in Oakland. When she greeted us, she said, “Wait a minute, I’ll get my kid to help unload the wine.” Before long, out came her 80-year old son.*

### You are well known for being very generous to the community – always donating your wines and lending a hand/equipment to new winemakers. What is your general philosophy about your giving?

*We care about our community and it’s important for us to be a contributing member. It is what our grandparents taught us about giving back. We want to see everyone be successful.*

### What is your best accomplishment or award?

*Our wines consistently win awards. The San Jose Mercury News awarded us the Best Zinfandel in the state back in the 1980s. But it is the pleasure that we see on our customers’ faces when they drink our wine that is really our biggest reward. Being in this industry all of our lives – it is about more than just the wine – it is about the people that are so special to us.*

### How much longer will you be working here – do you have any plans to retire?

*We could have retired a long time ago if we wanted to - but we’re still healthy and enjoy what we are doing so we don’t have a set target date to retire just yet. Angelia, (Gene’s daughter), who recently joined us, is part of our fourth generation. Angelia has a Hospitality/Customer Service background and is just now getting her feet wet in the industry.*

### Your winery hosts a dizzying number of annual events – what was your favorite event this past year?

*We enjoyed so many events but some of our favorites were the St. Louise Hospital fundraiser, the South Valley Symphony and ALFIO, the very popular singer and entertainer from Italy which we hope to bring back this year.*

### If you were stranded on a desert island and could only have one wine to drink, what would it be?

*Gene: Probably a Zinfandel – it is a good, all around red wine.  
George: I would rather have a cold beer.*



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.