

Biale Family Embraces Zinfandel In Napa Valley



by: [Mira Honeycutt](#)

in: [Drinking](#)

The 2014 Auction Napa Valley-The American Wine Classic shattered last year's record and raised a staggering \$18.7 million over one weekend in June.

[The auction](#) was the brainchild of the late Robert Mondavi, known as the “Godfather” of Napa Valley. His vision was supported by the Napa Valley Vintners Association, and the auction was launched in 1981. To date, the group has invested more than \$120 million from auction proceeds in Napa County nonprofit organizations.

As in previous years, 2014 auction lots were gilded with trips to far-flung locales in private jets or luxury yachts, flashy sports cars, magnums of pricey Napa red wine and the ultimate indulgence — dinner for 50 at the venerable French Laundry restaurant.

After all, this is the Napa Valley brand: touting high-end [Cabernets](#) and projecting a sexy, glamorous image. And it takes a village to stage an auction of this magnitude — an event that draws oenophiles from around the globe.

Napa Valley's vintners are as diverse as its [terroir](#). There are the stratospheric cult labels such as Screaming Eagle, Harlan, Colgin and Araujo. Then there's the other face of Napa: winemakers who are active participants in the auction but seek a lower profile.

After the adrenaline rush of this year's auction slowed Sunday morning, I had the opportunity to meet one such winemaking family, the Biales of [Robert Biale Vineyards](#), who are among the pioneers making up Napa's historic landscape.

Clementina Biale, 82 years young, and her son Bob Biale greeted me in the matriarch's Tudor-style house in the city of Napa. For 70 years, the family has farmed Zinfandel in Cabernet country. “Aldo loved Zinfandel,” Clementina said of her late husband while walking us out to the terrace overlooking vineyards planted with Zinfandel, Petite Sirah and Sangiovese.

Today, the Biales are continuing their family tradition of Zinfandel. Their annual production of 15,000 cases includes 12,000 cases of 14 vineyard-designate Zinfandels from various properties in the Oak Knoll appellation and 3,000 cases of Petite Sirah and blends. The wines reflect elegance and balanced fruit — none of the jamminess you associate with Zinfandel.



“Napa was full of Zinfandel and Petite Sirah,” Bob Biale said. Then Cabernet Sauvignon came along in the late 1960s. After Napa’s win at the 1976 Judgment of Paris competition, Cabernet became even more popular, he said. “Napans found that Cab grows well, so they pulled out all the Zinfandel.”

Biale family has humble origins

An active octogenarian, Clementina drives around Napa doing errands and going to church. She draws the line at driving on the freeway, though.

“I never went to university,” she told me. “I was happy to raise a good family. We had a good life, nothing fancy.”

A few times a week, Clementina visits the humble barn-like Biale tasting room in Napa, where her handmade aprons and bottle bags are sold among other items.

“Aldo always said you don’t need a million-dollar room to have good wine,” she said fondly about her husband, who passed away in 2009 at age 80.

Aldo Biale was born in 1929 on Napa’s Mount Veeder to Pietro and Christina, who arrived in the early 1920s from Liguria, Italy. To help Aldo learn English, the family moved to the valley floor and purchased its first 5-acre parcel in 1937. They planted Zinfandel and fruit orchards while also raising white leghorn chickens. Pietro passed away in 1942, leaving 13-year-old Aldo and his mother to tend the ranch.

In the Biale Tasting Room, a vintage photo of Bob Biale's grandfather, Pietro, and his father, Aldo. Credit: Mira Honeycutt

In 1953, Aldo visited Italy for the first time and met Clementina in Piedmont. “He took me to a fiesta,” she recalled.

They married a year later, and Clementina arrived in Napa in 1954. She raised four children and helped out in the farming operation.

In his teen years, Aldo worked on the family vineyards, delivering fresh eggs in the community. At age 14, he figured out there was more money in wine than selling Zinfandel grapes at \$25 per ton, so he started making homemade jug wine and sold it without a license until the mid-1960s. Aldo continued selling grapes until 1990, including to such companies as Gallo and the St. Helena Co-op.

Aldo also kept his day job, working for Napa City’s Water Department. He would come home at 4 p.m. and start farming till 10. “There were lights on the tractor,” Bob recalled. “He had chores for me and my brothers. Now I’m glad we grew up this way and learned from him.”

As we taste the Black Chicken Zinfandel, a blend from different vineyards, Clementina tells the story behind the label. The name was a code for the jug wine for customers who ordered by telephone. The Biale family's phone was on a party line, meaning it was shared with possibly nosy neighbors.

Clementina had just arrived from Italy when she answered a call from someone asking for two dozen eggs and a black chicken. "I said to this fella, 'We have no black chicken, we have white,'" she said, laughing. She soon learned it was the code for Aldo's secret Zinfandel.

"But my father's dream was to have a brand that was our own wine," Bob said. That was realized when Aldo and Bob founded Robert Biale Vineyards in 1991. Later, a partnership was formed with Dave Pramuk and Dave Perry.

"We had a nice little team, but we still kept our day jobs," Bob said. He worked with the cellar team crew at Beringer.

Bob reflects sadly about the old-vine Zinfandels that were pulled out and replanted to Cabernet Sauvignon. He points in part to Robert Mondavi for this conversion.

"He was right by planting more Cab varietal, which put Napa on the map," Bob said. "God bless him, that Cab conversion has allowed us growers to actually make a living. But it came with a sacrifice by removing old Zinfandel."

Standing by their Zinfandels, the Biales are part of Napa's mosaic of vintners. Over the years, Biale wine has been poured at the barrel auction's marketplace tasting. "I am considering participating in the barrel auction next year," Bob said.

That Biale Zin is sure to stand out in a barrel room full of Napa Cabs.

Main photo: A selection of Robert Biale Vineyards wines. Credit: Mira Honeycutt

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