

# VINE STEWARD

## Phil LaRocca and LaRocca Vineyards

STORY BY GABE GABARINO

PHOTOS BY DAVE SANDEN

Situated on Doe Mill Ridge, between the canyons of Little Chico Creek and Butte Creek, LaRocca Vineyards is surrounded by tall pines, bisected by a mountain creek, and alive with wildlife. Its unique geographical location is well suited for producing organic Merlot and Cabernet grapes. The elevation provides cool nights, which promote good sugar content, but the days are warm and the danger of untimely frost is hindered when freezing air slides off of the ridge into the canyons below.

### THE VISION

When Phil LaRocca, the owner and founder of LaRocca Vineyards, first saw the land nearly 25 years ago, it looked nothing like it does now. The rows between the vines had been disked constantly throughout the growing season for weed control, and the soil was rock hard and void of crucial organic matter. “Believe it or not, rain actually bounced off of the soil back then,” he states today as he looks out over the



sloping fields of vines and the verdant, thriving cover crop. Back then, runoff coursed downslope, and the gullies formed by erosion were so bad in some spots that “you couldn’t drive a tractor over them.” Additionally, the forest had begun to encroach into the unpruned vines, the vineyard suffering from both too much and too little attention. However, Phil had a vision. He saw past the disrepair and neglect and recognized the potential of the land. Production could be restored with careful stewardship.

## THE FOUNDATION

Phil has been surrounded by organic farming his whole life. In fact, he’s been involved with it so long that he can remember when there wasn’t even a label for the method of farming that his grandfather used. “It wasn’t even called organic back then; it was just the way we had always done it,” says Phil, a second generation Sicilian.

His grandfather and uncles on his mother’s side came to California and settled in the fertile San Jose area, when the valley was dominated by agriculture. They tended acres of apricots, cherries, and vegetables in the fine alluvial loam of the Santa Clara valley, and their produce was grown the “old” way, the way that had evolved from hundreds of years of farming prior to the invention of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This is how his family has always farmed; his grandfather resisted the use of chemicals that became popular during the Green Revolution of the 1950’s and focused heavily on cultural methods for pest and disease management—using natural practices that focused on prevention, rather than reacting to a problem with synthetic chemicals.

Phil brought this worldview with him as he began to farm. He spent several years working with a conventional apple grower, learning the management techniques for successful production. He then took these practices and melded them with his own knowledge to craft an organic model for apple production. In 1975, tending an orchard in Paradise, he worked through the brand new California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) program to become the first certified organic apple producer in California. Then, a few years later, the Forest Ranch property, where the main vineyard and winery sit today, caught Phil’s eye.

## THE LABOR

It was obvious to Phil that bringing the 110 acre vineyard back into production was going to be a big job. In fact, he says, at times the task seemed downright overwhelming, but he dug in and focused on the biggest challenge: repairing the soil. In order to develop a restoration plan, Phil consulted with Wendell Gilgert, of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Fred Thomas, an agricultural consultant. “The first thing Fred said was, ‘You ought to throw that disk

over the cliff,’” remembers Phil with a smile. “This place looked like the Maginot Line. It was torn up.” The incessant disking had created serious compaction issues and made the mountain loam vulnerable to erosion. Once the disking was halted, Phil began to fill in the eroded areas with any kind of organic matter he could get his hands on. He removed the encroaching brush and stacked the detritus into the gullies. “For a year, I hauled truckload after truckload of old hay up here, just to get the erosion under control and increase organic matter,” Phil says. Slowly, as the brush, hay, and compost broke down, the gullies disappeared, filled in with new soil.

Next, Phil turned his attention to rebuilding the nutrient and water cycles of the soil. He worked with NRCS to develop the “LaRocca Mix,” a cover crop consisting of rose clover, sub-clover, vetch, “Zorro” fescue, and “Blando” brome. This permanent vegetative cover serves several functions. The fibrous roots of the grasses hold the soil in place and aerate the soil when they break down. The clovers and vetch fix nitrogen in the soil and reduce the need for fertilizer. As a result, the soil now holds increased amounts of water, hosts higher populations of beneficial microbes, and filters nutrients and potential pathogens.

The cover crop is allowed to grow until late spring when maximum biomass is achieved (the photo to the left shows mid-spring growth); it is then chopped and the cuttings serve as a green manure. “We’ve built organic matter up so much over the years that I don’t shred my prunings. I never have. We always leave them on the ground, and if you come back here around mid-May you will not find a pruning,” Phil says with pride, for this is a sure sign of a vibrant and healthy soil. “NRCS taught me a lot. They introduced me to cover crops, and that’s worth a million dollars,” he says. In fact, the relationship between LaRocca Vineyards and the NRCS has been a continuous one since that initial project. According to Phil, “The services that NRCS has to offer are a valuable resource to any grower.”

Once the vineyard soil was on the road to recovery, Phil turned his attention to the vines: “My dad always said that in Italy, a vineyard isn’t considered mature until it is thirty years old. So I kept as many old vines as I could.” To replace the



dead vines, Phil started a nursery, grew cuttings from the old survivors, and began transplanting. Today the vineyard stands as a family, the younger vines arranged around the parents, rooted deep in the rich, living soil, and Phil and his family reap the benefits of years of hard work and planning.

## THE HARVEST

Over the years the operation of the vineyard and the winery has evolved into a true family business. Phil's wife Judy, daughter Phaedra, and sons Tony and Nathan all play important roles in the success of the enterprise, and there is certainly plenty of work to keep everyone running full time. Last year LaRocca produced 25,000 cases of organic wine, which were supplied to international markets in China, Taiwan, and Canada; national markets such as Whole Foods and Wild Oats; and local markets such as S&S Produce, Chico Natural Foods, and most other local stores that carry wine. LaRocca wines are also sold at the Chico farmers' markets on Thursdays and Saturdays.

In addition to the main Forest Ranch vineyard, the LaRoccas also tend ninety acres of Zinfandel, Chardonnay, and Chenin-Blanc grapes near the Sutter Buttes. This diversity allows them to offer a variety of award winning wines created from grapes grown the "old" way, 100% organic; and

## THE USDA'S ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVE PROGRAM

The United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to farmers and growers. In cooperation with NRCS, Phil developed a conservation plan for his land that addresses resource concerns and complements his farming operation. Some of the conservation practices that he has implemented include cover crop, field border, upland wildlife habitat management, pest management, and nutrient management. Phil received financial assistance to install these practices through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which is the primary cost-share program of NRCS. To learn about NRCS and the various services that are offered by the agency, please visit [www.ca.nrcd.usda.gov](http://www.ca.nrcd.usda.gov) or contact a local USDA service center, searchable by county through the website.

according to Phil this is the only way he would have it. "For my family and me, growing organic is not just a business. It is a way of life," Phil says.

Not just his farming practices back up his words. He has

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been a fierce advocate for organic farmers, serving as both president and board member of the CCOF, and travelling to the nation's capital to speak out on issues that are vital to the organic industry. Recently, he has also begun to share his knowledge in the classroom, teaching viticulture classes and helping to manage the experimental vineyard at Butte College. Over the past quarter century Phil has learned much about the ecology of organic grapes and the art of wine-making; it is important to him that this knowledge be passed on to future viticulturists.

For Phil and his family, the work is not over. It's never easy running a business, especially one that is so dependent on fickle weather. But in the early autumn, when the harvest is brought in, and the bins are overfull with the fruit of the vine still warm from the sun, there is satisfaction, satisfaction found in hard work, in family, in tradition, and in a life lived from the land. ♪

*Gabe Garbarino is a soil conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. He works in cooperation with many Butte County growers, large and small, to preserve and enhance natural resources on their land. He strives to carry out the mission of NRCS: "Helping People Help the Land." Gabe, his wife Marissa, and son Lucas are usually present in the Saturday morning crowd at the Chico Farmers' Market.*



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