

SWANSON

VINEYARDS

MARCO CAPPELLI, DESSERT WINEMAKER

Marco Cappelli was destined to specialize in dessert wines. During his first year at U.C. Davis, he enrolled as a physical anthropology student, yet found he was even more drawn to the enology program. Fascinated by the winemaking process, he was especially intrigued by the transformation that took place during fermentation, and soon began conducting small experiments in his dorm room. His first "wine" was a sweet one, made from diluted honey.

Marco was so sure of his calling that he left school for a quarter to take an internship during crush at the Louis Martini Winery in St. Helena. The experience solidified what his first batch of fermented honey had hinted at: he wanted to be a winemaker.

He returned to U.C. Davis, acquired a B.S. in Enology in 1984, and then traveled to Europe for more practical training in Italy and France. While Davis had given Marco a solid theoretical foundation in winemaking, his time in Europe helped refine his palate and gave him a deeper understanding of what wine truly is and how to enjoy it in every day life. In Italy, he says, he learned that wine is food, as important to the daily meal as bread or pasta. In France, he grew to deeply respect how soil, climate and human factors influence the character and veritable personality of wine.

Marco returned to Napa Valley from Europe in January of 1986. Almost immediately, he was hired as a cellar worker for Saintsbury Winery in Carneros, where he soon met and become friends with legendary winemaker Andre Tchelistcheff. It was Andre who, one year later, introduced him to Clarke Swanson.

Clarke was a risk-taker, and saw in Marco an extraordinary, if nascent talent. The two were kindred spirits, with Clarke's pioneering approach to grape growing, and Marco's curiosity and passion to explore innovative winemaking techniques and to produce world-class wines. In March of 1987, Clarke hired Marco to make the very first wines for his new winery, Swanson Vineyards, under the direction of lead consultant Tchelistcheff.

In the spring of 1990, Clarke sent Marco on his first trip to Australia. Arriving at harvest time, the trip was a revelation for the young winemaker. In the continent's isolation, the Australian industry had developed relatively separately from the influences of European winemaking traditions. Marco studied their progressive techniques, returning for subsequent tours, and eventually incorporated some of their most cutting edge approaches into Swanson Vineyards' vineyard management and winemaking methods.

In 1992, Marco established yet another ground breaking niche for the winery: dessert wines. He became a specialist, perhaps the only "dessert winemaker" in the country, and, through Swanson Vineyards, is responsible for crafting some of the most highly regarded sweet wines in the world.

Among those dessert wines is Swanson Vineyards' highly coveted Angelica, a project that began in 1995, when Clarke directed Marco to a small grouping of very old Mission vines from a tiny Amador County vineyard planted in 1856. "We researched Gold Rush-era documents trying to identify a production technique that we could reproduce," Marco recalls. "We wanted to make something that would pay homage to the wine styles from the period, and found such a technique described in the 1890s by a Frenchman, Emile Vache. This 'recipe' was for Angelica -- a wine type popular at the time, but not seen much today."

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The fortified wine is "A true California original," says Marco. "It is a living relic that reflects the history and culture of our state. Most of the old Mission vines have long since been ripped out, and the few original plantings that remain should be preserved as national treasures. We are doing our part."

"Over the years, Marco has shown another of Clarke's signature traits - an entrepreneurial style. In 2002, he purchased 42 acres in El Dorado County, in California's Sierra Foothills. He currently sells his grapes to local wineries, and makes a red Rhone-style blend plus a small amount of fortified wine.

His evolution into sweet wines reflects what first drew him to Swanson Vineyards more than two decades ago. "The innovation is exhilarating and very rewarding. My years working with Clarke Swanson prepared me for this." Swanson was one of the first to plant Sangiovese and Pinot Grigio in Napa, and the original Alexis Red Wine -- a blend of Cabernet and Syrah -- was ahead of its time in California.

"I hope to continue honoring that tradition with my dessert wines."

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