

# Marin Independent Journal

## Tiburon vintner offers industry perspective

By [Jeff Burkhart](#) | [jeff@thebarflyonline.com](mailto:jeff@thebarflyonline.com) | Marin Independent Journal | September 4, 2018 at 12:00 pm

Bernard Orsi, proprietor of Orsi Family Vineyards, doesn't mince his words when describing the wine industry.

"There's more bull— floating around in the wine industry than there is wine," says Orsi, who has lived in Tiburon since 1987.

He is no newcomer to the industry of alcohol. He worked for many years with Paul Kalmanovitz (also of Tiburon), the real estate magnate who also owned breweries, including Falstaff and later Pabst Brewing Co. In fact, Orsi himself has been called the "Father of Pabst Blue Ribbon." And sometimes fathers have many children.

"I decided a few years back to grow Italian varietals and make Italian style wines because Healdsburg is really a microcosm of Italy: weather, soil types, the whole thing. Many of the Italian varietals do well here," he says. Orsi's family originally hails from Lucca and has lived in California for nearly 100 years.

"I grew up in San Pedro (Los Angeles) then went to Saint Mary's College, and that was it. I met a girl from Dominican in San Rafael, we got married, that was 50 some years ago. Four kids and thirteen grandkids later here we are."

In 1990 the Orsis bought an old cattle ranch in Healdsburg.

"I started growing grapes and selling them to wineries," he says. "I just sold them. As I found extra pieces of ground that made sense I started planting Italian."

Today Orsi owns over 200 acres under vine including vineyards along the Russian River, some in Geyserville, as well as holdings in Mendocino County. But the 20 acres in Healdsburg's Dry Creek area are the home of his beloved private label.

Ironically, Orsi first began growing cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay. "There's a lot of competition with those three varietals," Orsi says. "You are running into a real buzz saw sales wise, but if you say the word schioppettino, nobody has ever heard of it, so you at least have the opportunity to have a chat."



*Photo by Jeff Burkhart*

*Orsi Family Vineyards currently bottles 11 Italian varietals including two stainless steel fermented whites.*

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In 2012 Orsi brought in winemaker Dick Schultz, who had cut his teeth with Merry Edwards and a few other wineries in Sonoma County: Quivira, Gary Farrell and Pelligrini among them. In 2003 Schultz landed at Everett Ridge Winery, where he took over winemaking and began making wine with Orsi's sangiovese grapes.

"We started this project in 2012," Schultz says. "But we had an eight-year relationship before that."

Orsi Family Vineyards currently bottles 11 Italian varietals including two stainless steel fermented whites: fiano and biancolella, both exhibiting the crisp dryness of pinot grigio but with a hint of wet earthy slate that distinguishes both from pinot grigio as well as either chardonnay or sauvignon blanc. The nine reds — aglianico, barbera, montepulciano, nebbiolo, negro amaro, primitivo, sagrantino, sangiovese and schioppettino — are as similar as they are different.

"The sangiovese and schioppettino can be a little lighter in style," Schultz says. "There is no real target flavor profile, it's more of an expression of what the vineyard has. We don't have a huge frame of reference, or almost none at all, for what's going on in either America or in the Cal-Ital group. I just wanted to treat everything single varietal, and pick it on time. So, lower alcohols — everything here is under 14 percent — higher acidity, which is natural in a lot of these grapes, and then neutral wood."

What Schultz ends up with are more food friendly wines, ones with a powerful yet soft quality that are much more Bruce Lee than Arnold Schwarzenegger. All are reasonably priced: \$26 for the whites and between \$28 and \$36 for the reds, with discounts up to 25 percent available on volume buys (free shipping in California on bottles of six or more.) Orsi Family Vineyards also produces a pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon, both made with grapes "cherry picked" from their many vineyards.

"The easiest thing in the wine business is to grow the grapes, the next most difficult job is to make the wine, and the toughest job of them all is to sell it," Orsi says.

"It is a very, very difficult, competitive environment to sell wine," he explains. "The little guys don't have the resources to reach out across states or across the country and so they all concentrate on the Bay Area. So, the most intense competition, for the littler wine guys, is right around the area, and that makes it tougher."

Orsi Family wines are available at several Marin County restaurants and will be featured at a special tasting counter in the Vines Wine Shop in the Red Hill Shopping Center in San Anselmo beginning this weekend at a "Grand Opening Event" starting at 2 p.m.

"Wine is a romantic business," Orsi says. "It's a social product that people can relate to. And, whatever you don't sell, you get to drink."

More information on Orsi wines is available at [orsifamilyvineyards.com](http://orsifamilyvineyards.com).

*Jeff Burkhart is the author of "Twenty Years Behind Bars: The Spirited Adventures of a Real Bartender" and an award-winning bartender at a local restaurant. Follow him at [jeffburkhart.net](http://jeffburkhart.net) and contact him at [jeff@thebarflyonline.com](mailto:jeff@thebarflyonline.com).*