

Visit to Dry Creek Valley: A Tale of Generations

By Richard Jennings

Puccioni Vineyards



Dry Creek Valley is a long, narrow valley—16 miles by a maximum of two miles—that runs north and west from just south of Healdsburg up to Warm Springs Dam and Lake Sonoma. North of the dam is the steep, mountainous Rockpile AVA, which overlaps a portion of the Dry Creek Valley AVA. Italian immigrants planted vineyards in this region beginning in the 1870s, and descendants of several of those early families—including the Rafanellis, Pedroncellis, Buchignanis and Puccioni—are still a strong presence as growers and wine producers today. Dry Creek Valley was recognized as an appellation in 1983. Zinfandel is arguably at its most complex and luscious here, and there is a concentration of old vine Zin vineyards in the Valley, but Zin now competes for prime vineyard spots with Cabernet Sauvignon. Sauvignon Blanc is the dominant white grape, grown mainly on the benchland close to the creek.

I was part of a day-long expedition to Dry Creek and Rockpile this month sponsored by the Winegrowers of Dry Creek Valley Association. Over 60 wineries and 150 growers operate as multi-generational, family-owned enterprises in Dry Creek, with small to medium production. We tasted wines from 15 producers on our day there, and made stops at four wineries or vineyards; at three of those stops we were joined by representatives from nearby wineries as well. This trip gave me a great feel for the beauty of the area, the hilly nature of many of the vineyards, a sense of what grape varieties do best here, and the generations of winemaking families responsible for sustaining vineyards and winemaking in the valley. I also learned about

the conservation practices—aimed at protecting the creek, which is a vital habitat for coho salmon and steelhead trout—and organic and biodynamic farming practiced by several producers in this appellation. And I found some new favorite producers from the area.

This first part of my report will focus on a couple of the older families whose vineyards and production facilities we visited—Puccioni Vineyards and A. Raffanelli. I am also including tasting notes on wines from other neighboring producers toward the southern end of the valley, near where Puccioni Vineyards is located, who joined us at Puccioni, our first stop, to sample us on their wines. Those producers were Pezzi King, Mill Creek Vineyards and Everett Ridge.

Puccioni



Very old Carignane vine where Glenn's grandfather used to sit and eat his lunch

Glenn Proctor, pictured below, is the energetic wine business veteran who recently launched Puccioni Vineyards as a new producer in the area. In the picture, Glenn is talking to us from the rear of a wagon attached to a tractor, that carried our group up to the top of the hillside where we tasted the Puccioni wines.

Glenn received his bachelors in viticulture from C.S.U. Fresno and his masters in viticulture from U.C. Davis. He started his career working with Glen Ellen Winery and Benziger Family Winery in the late '80s, and later worked at BV and Sterling, where he was the vice president of winegrowing. Glenn and his team started replanting some of the vineyards at the family's ranch six years ago, and started making wine from the old vines in 2003. Starting with the 2007 vintage, the Puccioni wines are based on grapes grown on Glenn's family's ranch, where his great grandfather, Angelo Puccioni, who came to the area from the small village of Coselli, Italy,

first planted Zinfandel in 1904. The ranch sits in a small valley with up slopes on each side. The elevations go from 400 to 1000 feet. The vineyards are planted on the west facing slopes. The hillside vineyards are planted to old clone Zinfandel, on St George and 1103 Rootstock, largely head trained. The ranch's 15 acres of vines are largely Zin, and a field blend in the old vine vineyard planted in 1904. One acre is planted to Alicante Bouchet and another to Petite Sirah.

The original Puccioni Winery, operated by Angelo Puccioni, started in 1919, just before Prohibition, and continued until 1935. The Puccioni family used a mule and a plow until the last mule died in 1968, making them the last farmers in Dry Creek to use a mule commercially. The mule on the label is an homage to these hardworking mules.

I was quite impressed with the 2007 Old Vine Zin, which has complexity and good balance. The 2009 was also good, and should be ageworthy, and I liked the 2007 Petite Sirah as well. This is definitely a Dry Creek producer to watch.



- **2007 Puccioni Zinfandel Old Vine** – USA, California, Sonoma County, Dry Creek Valley
Dark maroon color; dried berry, tart plum, smoke nose; elegant, tasty, dried berry, tart cherry, tart raspberry, wild berry palate with intensity, good acidity and balance; drinking well now and should age well for 7-10 years; medium-plus finish (with 17% Petite Sirah; 19 mos. in French and Hungarian oak; from vines planted starting in 1904) **(92 pts.)**
- **2009 Puccioni Zinfandel Old Vine** – USA, California, Sonoma County, Dry Creek Valley

Dark maroon color; tart berry, tart black fruit, tar nose; tasty, youthful, tart berry, dried berry, spicy plum palate with focus; medium-plus finish 91+ points (from vines planted starting in 1904) **(91 pts.)**

- **2007 Puccioni Petite Sirah Puccioni** – USA, California, Sonoma County, Dry Creek Valley
Dark maroon color; a little reduction, tart black fruit, herbs nose; tight, tasty, balanced, tart black fruit, tart berry palate with wonderful acidity; needs 3-plus years; medium-plus finish 91+ points **(91 pts.)**