

San Joaquin Magazine

Uvaggio's Jim Moore walks the Lodi talk

by Randy Caparoso, May 2011

One of Lodi's most original white wines today is made from the Vermentino grape by Jim Moore, owner and winemaker of Italian-inspired wines under the Uvaggio label.

"Vermentino," says Moore, "is the thinking man's Pinot Grigio." Like Pinot Grigio, it tends to be light, dry, and breezy; lemony tart without being puckery. Where Vermentino veers off-as in the 2009 Uvaggio Lodi Vermentino (\$14)-is in its multifaceted fragrances, quite the opposite of the usually neutral Pinot Grigio: lavender, thyme, and lime blossom fragrances, with undertones of cantaloupe and nuances of wild honey and cream. On the palate, it's silkier than your typical Pinot Grigio, dry and lithe, the crisp qualities popping through the fleshy fruit, stony and, yes, lavendery sensations. A taste of the Mediterranean-grown in Lodi!

So what brought Mr. Moore to this point where, lance tilted towards windmills, he feels the need to champion an obscure white wine grape that originated in Sardinia and Corsica? (Vermentino is also known as Rolle in Southern France, and is thought to be related to the Pigato grape of Italy's Liguria region.)

Moore worked for 19 years as a winemaker for Robert Mondavi during the Napa Valley institution's glory days, and his most significant contribution while there was the now defunct Cal-Ital label called La Famiglia di Robert Mondavi. According to Moore, "I conceived, planned, and executed La Famiglia. I also re-introduced high-end Zin at Mondavi, did a makeover of their Moscato d'Oro, and played a major role in the development of Lucente." (The latter, Mondavi's Supertuscan red, was produced as a joint venture with the Frescobaldi family.) Moore decided to leave when La Famiglia headed in a different direction, and he still wanted to explore cutting-edge wines.

Soon after, Moore did what many winemakers who work for years at other people's wineries do: he started his own company, called L'Uvaggio di Giacomo-which is a fancy way of saying "Jim's



wines." But making wine and selling it are two different things, as Moore also quickly discovered. When unsold vintages began to pile up in the warehouse, Moore went back to working for someone else-Bonny Doon Vineyard, in 2004.

Soon after, an opportunity to design and implement a start-up winery in Napa Valley as a full-time consultant came around, and Moore suddenly found himself in a financial position of being able to pick up the threads of L'Uvaggio di Giacomo once again. Renewing a longtime friendship with Rod Schultz of Lodi's Peltier Station, who had planted Vermentino for Moore back in the nineties when he was guiding La Famiglia, Moore re-introduced Uvaggio Vermentino to the market. This time around, the Uvaggio brand seemed to take, the Vermentino garnering the enthusiastic support of key retailers like Sacramento's Corti Brothers and San Francisco's Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant. Many of the Bay Area's adventurous restaurant sommeliers have also embraced Vermentino as an alternative to ubiquitous Chardonnays and run-of-the-mill Pinot Grigios.

When it comes to the importance of sourcing from Lodi, Moore is bullish. "Not only is it more than possible to grow very good Vermentino and other Italian varieties like Barbera, Primitivo, and Teroldego in Lodi, Lodi is the land of cost-effective viticulture. No one in Napa Valley would take the risk with me with adventurous, esoteric grapes. Plus, I didn't want to buy North Coast grapes for \$3,000 or \$4,000 a ton and make \$50 wine. All Uvaggio wines are under \$20. I can get high-quality grapes in Lodi for less than a third of the price, and sell them in the mid to low 'teens."

Adds Moore, "I'm hanging my hat on Vermentino because it's kind of a sweet, little bright spot that consumers who like Pinot Grigio can identify with. Vermentino may be where Fumé Blanc was in 1968... it's ready for a breakout."

On the back of Uvaggio bottles, wine lovers are encouraged to "move beyond chocolate and vanilla." Thanks to winemakers like Jim Moore, wine lovers now have a new "black" to try on for size, and Vermentino is its name.



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