



**From Potatoes to Pinot**  
***Bondi Home Ranch ~ Water Trough Vineyard***

When I was a small child my Nono loved to entertain me with stories about my great-grandfather, Paolo Bondi. Nono once said to me about his father-in-law, "He was a rhinoceros!" When Nono came courting Paolo's daughter, Alma, he and his teen bella would sit together on the emerald-green brocade sofa in the long living room. During these dates Mr. Bondi would chaperon the youngsters by squarely positioning himself at the kitchen table. The story goes that Paolo would rise every couple of minutes from his seat, strike a match, and then throw it into the wood burning stove. As he passed the door to the living room he would throw a quick glance towards the couch. Nono told me that Old Man Bondi used lighting the fire as a pretense because from where he sat in the kitchen, he could not see the kids in the other room. That young couple on the dark green couch eventually became my grandparents.

Paolo Bondi was the only grandfather that my father, Lee Sr., and my aunt Joyce ever knew. Despite the unfavorable title that their own father had bequeathed upon Paolo, they have nothing but fond memories of him. Paolo had a big booming laugh but in physique "rhinoceros" didn't actually fit him, as he was a small man in stature. As he grew elderly he stopped driving his car and would travel on foot to whatever destination called. He had a deep affection for gambling and would sometimes disappear for 2 weeks at a time without giving any notice of his whereabouts. Then, just as suddenly, he would arrive home unannounced from his wanderings, sauntering up the drive where he would appear at Sunday dinner in his blue bib overalls.

In the late 1800's Paolo Antoni Bondi left his stone village set high in the marbled Tuscan mountains and made his way to the small town of Sebastopol in search of a place to farm. Paolo soon procured a job working in a Gravenstein apple orchard on *Water Trough Road*. This windy road runs along the northern end of the property and is so named for a horse trough that once sat in the low vale where, 100 years ago, horses pulling buggies would stop to water. Paolo planted a field of potatoes just below this narrow dirt road and in the course of one year made a large enough profit to buy the farmhouse and the surrounding acres of apple trees from his boss.

The *Bondi Home Ranch* rests in the *Green Valley* appellation, which is a sub-appellation of the Russian River Valley. It is the coolest site where Martinelli Winery is growing Pinot Noir today. Lee Martinelli, Sr., Paolo's grandson, eventually took over the farming of his grandfather's old apple orchard. A cool breeze from the sea rises in late afternoon, skimming along the distant bank of fog, relieving the vines from intense afternoon heat. Blackberries lie thick in great thorny bushes throughout *Green Valley*. Seeing how prolific the berries were in this area and how the Gravensteins apples also preferred the cooler climate, Lee reasoned this would be ideal territory for Pinot Noir. In 1996 Gravensteins in Sonoma County were selling for only \$30 per ton and the market grew unbearably soft for apple farmers. It was at this time that Lee decided to make the transition from apples to

grapes. Surrounding his grandparent's old farmhouse, Lee planted three select Dijon clones onto a de-vigorating rootstock. The grapevines are densely planted at 2,000 vines per acre with the fruit clusters hanging 28 inches above ground on a vertical trellis system. Eastern exposure compliments the vines growth and even ripening with all day sun.

I am the fourth generation to live in the old white farmhouse where Paolo Bondi had once flicked match after match into the wood burning stove as he kept a firm eye on the green couch. My family is very fortunate to have been able to continue farming this piece of land through both World Wars, the Great Depression, and all the other tests of human strife in our country over the past ten decades. Although this new Pinot Noir vineyard makes more sense economically, I do miss the swaying branches of those old gnarled apple trees. My only selfish regret since the transformation from apples to grapes is not being able to sunbath 'clothing optional' outside on the patio with the benefit of disguise from that tall green wall of trees. But as a farmer's daughter I can hardly argue with only \$30 a ton.

*Cheers, Julianna Martinelli Spring 2004*