



Spring 2014 Newsletter

A Conversation with Lee Martinelli, Sr.

By Lee Martinelli, Sr. & Julianna Martinelli



1939 Forestville, California

My father was born *Lee Paul Martinelli*, making his debut to the world in the spring of 1939. Forestville was populated with scores of Italian immigrant families such as the Martinellis, and at the time the town bragged more grapevines than people as inhabitants. My father grew up in an Italian speaking household, learning English as a second language when he entered kindergarten. Lee grew up on a small working farm tucked into a narrow valley of rolling vineyard land, bordered by thick dark forests and a clear running creek. One might suppose that having been born on a farm that my father would have without question want to become a farmer himself. Well, that is not exactly how the story goes. Being a product of his era, my father was expected to work on the farm at a young age. Below is my father's account about his early experiences in the Martinelli road vineyards:

After school and on weekends I had to work, I was not able to do sports. I was expected home promptly to prune, sucker or hoe our Jackass Zinfandel Vineyard and cut wood for our fireplace and woodstove in the kitchen that my mom used to prepare dinner. This wood fed our fireplace, which was our only source of heat in our 3-bedroom house. In the summer my days were spent in our Zinfandel vineyards tilling the very hard ground by hand in 90+ degree weather, while my cousins and friends swam in the Russian River. I noticed my older sister, Joyce, was nowhere to be seen. For some reason my sister had to learn to cook, so she stayed indoors. I wanted her help in the vineyard and often thought, "How long does it take to learn to cook?" This wasn't just for a day or a month or a year, I actually never saw my sister in the vineyards. Again I thought, "How long does it take to learn to cook? Is it really that hard?"

One extremely hot day, the ground was even harder than the day before when I

was hoeing Jackass Vineyard, I decided I had enough. It was almost 3:30 pm, my cousin Albert Vellutini, was swimming in the Russian River with our friends and I was determined to join the fun. My father was on the other side of the vineyard discing the prune orchard; there was just enough out of sight to slip away to the river before he could finish his work and check on me.

I jumped in my 47 Chevy Torpedo-back, sun gold & blue color with a Cadillac grill and headed to the swimming hole. Mirabelle was the local swimming spot where I met my cousin & friends and washed off the day's vineyard dust. I stayed a bit too long and my father came looking for me. Luckily I was already in my 47 Chevy pulling out of the parking lot as he drove in searching for me. Funny how he knew just where to find me on that hot summer day. Awkwardly I changed out of my swimsuit into that day's work clothes, as I drove the 2 1/2 miles home very quickly. At home I parked and got out of my car fully clothed. My father looked at me and said "you look awfully clean." I wanted to say "you don't pay me, so I can take off anytime I want," but I thought better of it and that was the best decision.

Later that summer my mother was gone and my father & I were working all day, while my sister stayed home to cook us dinner. I thought finally, after all these years, Joyce has learned to cook. Believe me, at the end of a day's hard work I was ready to eat. So my father and I come home to a set table. We sat down anticipating the meal Joyce had prepared. This was the first meal in 6 years that she did herself, yet she'd been comfortably learning indoors all these years. We were not only hungry but excited to see her scholarly efforts in use. Joyce opened the wood-burning stove to fetch the roasting pan that contained roasted rosemary chicken. As Joyce lifted the lid on the roasting pan, a look of shock came over her face. The pan was empty. She cooked the pan for 3 1/2 hours with no chicken in it. I then realized why it took her so long to learn to cook, it was an imaginary chicken.

Working in the vineyards growing up did give me the farming experience I needed to later get paid. At 14 1/2 years old I got a driver's license. I was now able to enter the paying labor force. I immediately went to work happily for cash.

The years working for my father were hard. Today I farm those same vineyards I could not wait to escape from as a young man. These are the same vineyards I had my four children work while they were growing up, each summer and weekends. It was those early years that seeded my love for farming and eventually called me back to the vineyards after several years working indoors. I believe this is also true for my children, all four returned to work in the family business. This makes working the vineyards together even more enjoyable on those hot summer days when you dream of swimming in the cool waters of the Russian River. These are the memories I reminisce about while enjoying a glass of our Jackass Zinfandel.

Salute!

Lee Martinelli Sr. & Julianna Martinelli ~ *Spring 2014*