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By James Rodewald

Wine
Excerpts from **ROSSO DI CALIFORNIA**

In an article that spoke to the past, present and future of Italian wines being featured in Italian restaurants across America, James Rodewald spoke to Chrystal and had this to say:

“The Cal-Ital label has now been largely dropped, which may help the select group of California’s winemakers doing serious work with Italian varietals get taken more seriously. Another important development is the maturing of new vineyards – with the right varietals in the right places – including a 40-acre site in Santa Ynez Valley that the Honea family began planting in 2003; the grapes are being grown exclusively for Steve and Chrystal Clifton’s Palmina winery. Much of the plant material for Honea Vineyards came from the world’s largest grapevine nursery, Vivai Cooperativi Rauscedo, in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy, and was chosen by the Cliftons. They tasted from a menu of micro-vinified grapes, allowing them to get a sense of the fruit’s potential and picked the clones they thought would do best here. “Our soil types and the push of hot and cool are similar to what we see in northern Italy,” says Chrystal. “We’re trying to respectfully reflect what’s over there, not copy it.”

That strategy is paying off. After 14 harvests, the tireless Ital-evangelism of Steve and Chrystal Clifton has brought Palmina closer to that goal. Palmina’s 2006 Santa Barbara County Barbera is one of the best \$25 wines I’ve tasted. The single-vineyard Honea and Zotovich Barbera (\$40) are more intense and need time to open up, and their Nebbiolos are amazingly complex, changing with every sip and with every minute of exposure to oxygen.

Despite increased consumer acceptance and critical acclaim, the Cliftons still have to battle to get on the wine lists they most admire. Not long ago, Chrystal was showing her wines to the owner of an Italian restaurant in Arizona. “He said he liked them,” Chrystal recalls, “but that he only buys Italian wines. This wasn’t the first time I’d heard this, so I decided to speak my mind. I told him, “I only eat Italian food in Italy. Your food is made with local ingredients, so it can’t be Italian. He laughed, and of course he argued a bit more, but he did end up ordering our Tocai and our Barbera to serve by the glass.

Even in Italy attitudes have shifted. At an international Nebbiolo symposium, Giuseppe Rinaldi, one of the top Barolo producers, told the Cliftons, “I have a problem with your wine.” Chrystal remembers thinking, “Of course you have a problem with our wine, you always have a problem with our wine.” Then Rinaldi finished his thought: “The problem is, it’s good.”

He finished the article with another of Chrystal’s mantras “As I tasted...Chrystal Clifton’s words rang in my ears: “Italian wines do not go with wine. They go with food.” She’s right, these are not wines for tasting. They’re wines for drinking with a meal. Luckily, I had some Fra’Mani salami and a piece of really nice Pecorino as study aids. The salami was made in Berkeley, and the cheese came from Dancing Ewe Farm, which is near Saratoga Springs, New York. It’s hard to imagine an experience more Italian than that.”