

Wine Spectator

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New Wines New Faces

Buoncrisiani Family Winery

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC BOVIO

The first unusual thing about Buoncrisiani Family Winery is its location: a two-car garage in a residential neighborhood in Napa's Browns Valley area. While some Napa Valley vintners spend millions building elaborate estates, for each harvest at Buoncrisiani, the cars are moved outside to make way for one of the smallest bonded wineries in California. The next thing that catches your attention is the altar of county-fair ribbons on the garage wall -- affirmation that the Buoncrisiani family has a history of making award-winning wines. Capturing their father's spirit, the four Buoncrisiani brothers have transcended winemaking as a hobby and are making serious reds.

As they were growing up, Matthew, 32, Jason, 29, Aaron, 26, and Nathan, 24, watched their father, Robert, 58, a school administrator, make wine in the family garage. The boys

picked grapes in pint-size buckets, stomped berries with their feet, and bought baseball cards and candy with the allowance they earned by helping their father. Robert routinely entered his wine in local fairs, earning a "best in Show" gold medal for his 1974 Petite Sirah.

Wine to Watch

Buoncrisiani Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2001 **92, \$58**

Remarkably rich, plush and dense, with layers of spicy currant, blackberry, fresh earth, herbs, mineral and light toasty oak.

Napa, Calif.
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Even though wine was his passion, the Buoncrisiani patriarch didn't want his sons to grow up to be winemakers. But in 1995, after studying for medical careers, Matt and Jason resurrected their father's hobby in the garage - starting with an Amador County Zinfandel and an experimental hard cider, made with apples from their backyard. The two were so proud of their 1997 Zinfandel that they entered it into some local fairs, and they started winning ribbons. The Buoncrisiani touch, apparently, had not skipped a generation.

Barely legal to drink, the younger brothers joined on as partners, and the garage officially become a bonded winery in 1999. "Most people go through life stressed, only later changing their lifestyle. We skipped all that," Jason quips. "We started broke and went straight for the lifestyle."



The four Buoncrisiani brothers (from left), Jason, Nathan, Aaron and Matthew, have bonded over their father's love of wine.

The Buoncrisianis' current releases, the Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 2001 (92 points, \$58, 240 cases) and Syrah Napa Valley Artistico 2001 (91, \$40, 100 cases), are both powerful wines, well-structured, with intense flavors and firm tannins.

The brothers are quick to point out that while there are many family-owned wineries, Buoncrisiani is a family-only winery; no outsiders touch their product - the brothers handle every step from vineyard management to bottling. Together they decide on all aspects of viticulture, enology, production and design, with each brother's vote of equal value. Dad is the official tiebreaker.

The brothers buy most of their grapes and source some from a 3-acre vineyard in Yountville that they were hired to design and plant to Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Dolcetto. The wines are made at the family home, but stored off-site so the "winery" can become a working garage again in the off-season.

All the brothers now also work at other Napa wineries. Matt works for Rudd Estate, Jason is a winemaker at the Hess Collection, and Aaron and Nate work for Caldwell Vineyards.

These days, it's almost an inconvenience to keep the garage bonded as a winery. But the brothers insist it's worthwhile so they can keep the "Produced and Bottled by Buoncrisiani Family Winery" on their back label. Their father often hangs out in the garage, but now as an observer. "We're teaching him," Jason says. Aaron adds, "We've come full circle."