

# A Family Tradition

Sonoma County's Gus Gamba, a sixth-generation grower and winemaker, continues the legacy of Old Vine Zin.

*By Jennie Orvino*

“I can't remember the first time I tasted wine. It may have been on my pacifier.” So declares Agostino “Gus” Gamba with a chuckle and a grin, the sixth generation grower and winemaker of a historic vineyard estate in the Russian River Valley. His father, Agostino Luigi Gamba, was born in Northern Italy on the border of Piemonte and Liguria, not far from the famous Barolo and Barbaresco winegrowing regions.

“We still own property on the ranch where my father grew up,” says Gus. “There are about 10

hectares that my cousins look after for us; we've been back to visit many times. It is important to have that connection for my kids, who will be the seventh generation connected to the wine industry.”

Since the first release of Gamba Old Vine Zinfandel in 2000, the wines have garnered accolades, and high praise from the likes of critic Robert Parker of *The Wine Advocate* who called them “pretty serious Zinfandels...among the best...” In 2015, Parker wrote, “Gamba's name is going to have to be included with the stars of Sonoma.”

*“One of the best damn Zins you could ever be gifted.”*

—From a wine lover upon hearing the words: Gamba Old Vine Zinfandel



Elizabetha Elena and Agostina Gamba Sr. (center), visiting with cousins in Northern Italy in 1959.

[Photos courtesy of Gamba Vineyards and Winery]

## Family heritage

The present-day Gamba history begins with Agostino Sr., a hardworking, ambitious man with a dream, who left what he felt was limited opportunity and made his way to America, eventually landing in the North Bay. In Sonoma County, he found a landscape that resembled his Northern Italian homeland, and encountered *paisanos* who had beautiful pieces of property where they were growing grapes. One day he met with vineyard owner Cesare Barbieri. It turned out to be a fateful meeting because Barbieri was ready to retire and happened to be from the same part of Italy as Agostino's family.

"What a story," says Gus Gamba. "My father came to a new country, learned English, worked to build a couple of businesses and then met someone from the old country. The two guys really hit it off, and in 1947, Dad purchased the Gamba Estate property on a handshake."

Barbieri was responsible in part for planting the vines in 1900, and worked alongside Agostino Sr. for many years. That is why Gus can affirm with confidence the history of the family vineyard. The Gamba Estate Vineyard has been grown without herbicides or pesticides and dry-farmed for 120 years. "It is wonderful for me to continue to steward this land in the original spirit and intention," he says.

Of his childhood, Gus remembers picnics out in the vineyards and long lunches that included seafood dishes and recipes from his mother, Elizabetta Elena, who brought them from Sicily. He learned about his culture and heard family stories in four languages: standard Italian, the Sicilian and northern dialects, and English. But many of his clearest recollections were of his father's tutelage. As the only son



Gus Gamba, proprietor and winemaker, Gamba Vineyards and Winery

of the family, he was expected to acquire a passion for the grapes at an early age.

"We had a redwood tank—in fact we still have it here in the barn—and he'd empty the wooden picking boxes of grapes into the tank. I would wash up before he lifted me inside," Gus recalls. "I had a ball stomping the grapes, thrilled with tasting fresh grape juice and then being perplexed at how it changed and why it changed into wine. My father wanted to engage me in a way he thought I would enjoy, and he was absolutely right."

Gus recalls one vivid memory from when he was about four years old. "It was a foggy morning in the valley and it felt like a dreamlike, magical place. We stopped at a vine and Dad said, 'I'm going to show you how we prune.'" Little Gus watched but had no idea exactly what was happening. He only remembers his father calling the buds "buttons" so the boy could relate parts of the vine to something that was familiar.

"He gave me the pruners and reached his big hands around my tiny hands, trying to help me make a cut. He squeezed so hard that I started to cry, but I'm grateful for the hurt because that's what made the memory stick."

Agostino Sr. passed away in 1983, leaving Agostino Jr., then 17 years old, to manage the vineyards. After graduating from high school, he continued to take responsibility for the estate even while earning a degree in business economics from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Gus then took every course in enology and viticulture that the University of California, Davis, extension had to offer. He went to work in the wine industry, gaining practical experience from cellar to sales and marketing. Eventually he was appointed director of operations for a winery in Sonoma where he oversaw approximately 200 employees. "After work I'd come home and work the vineyard. I'd prune; I'd disc. Of course I had help, we are just under 30 acres—still, it was quite a task."

Although his father never insisted he choose farming as a career path, Gus embraced the opportunity in front of him. "I wanted to continue the legacy of winegrape growing," he says, "but take it to the next level." For Gus, taking it to the next level meant going from only *growing* grapes to building a winery. Together with his high school sweetheart, Paulette, whom he married in 1991, that is exactly what he set out to do.

## From grower to winemaker

Transitioning from grape farming to founding a winery bearing the Gamba name happened through a perfect combination of circumstances. In the mid 1990s, famed

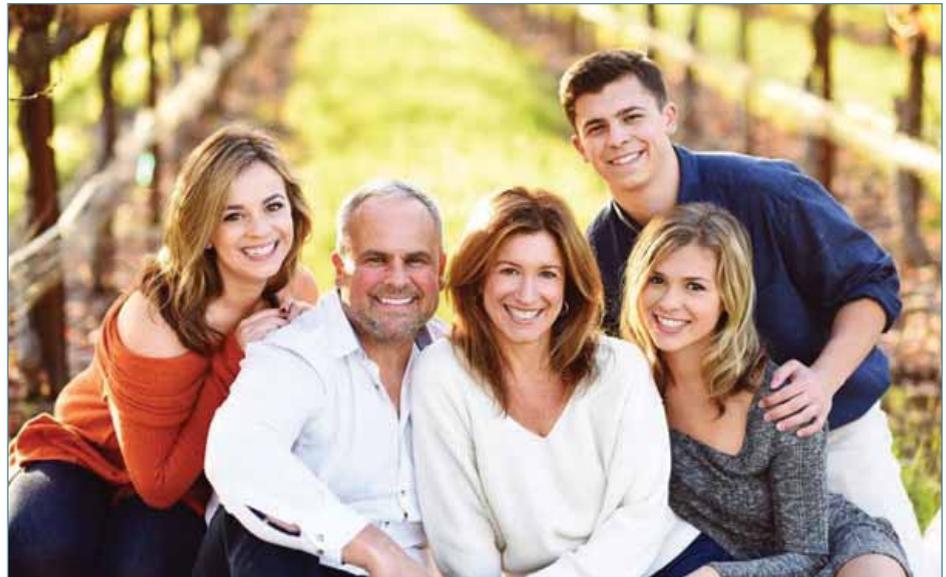


Agostino Gamba Sr.

master winemaker Bob Cabral was at Alderbrook Winery and purchasing grapes from Gamba Vineyards. "When Bob got the wine into the tank, he called me and said 'Gus, you have to come over and taste this wine!' He recognized the quality of what we had here, and asked if Alderbrook could start a vineyard designate program and use the Gamba name. Of course, I said 'Great!'" That single vineyard wine was the 1995 Alderbrook Winery Old Vine Zinfandel Gamba Vineyard and Bob Cabral was the winemaker. It garnered a lot of attention because of a center spread in *Wine Spectator* and a score of 92 points, a head-turning score for a Zin at that time.

"When I was younger, I believed our wine was the best I'd ever tasted," Gus recalls, "but I thought, that's because my dad made it. As I started to taste other commercial wine, I found that I still preferred ours. When a professional winemaker put it out there, and our wine was critically acclaimed, it confirmed my feelings were right all along. Shortly thereafter, I left my job in Sonoma, and we were off to the races."

Though it was never Gus's intention to be the Gamba winemaker, he felt it was so important to know the vineyard well to coax the flavors out of the vine and into the bottle that the job had to be his. "I didn't want to be standing over someone else's shoulder all day long."



From left, Cecily, Gus, Paulette, Natalia and Augie Gamba

### The next generation

Gus and Paulette have raised their family on the same land where the young Agostino learned about tending old vines as a labor of love. Just as an old vine's complex ecosystem develops over time by learning from its surroundings, perhaps so has the seventh generation of Gambas. Daughter Cecily, age 26, who is involved in the marketing, wine education and lifestyle side of the industry, has 20,000 followers at her Instagram blog, "You Had Me At Bordeaux." Their 23-year-old son, Augie (Agostino Gamba III) works

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in Los Angeles as a wine buyer. Daughter Natalia, 21, is finishing up her senior year at Loyola Marymount University.

"Their knowledge of the wine world has come through osmosis, growing up in the vineyards, playing among the vines and working with me," Gus says. "My wife and I have encouraged them to follow their bliss. What's really rewarding for us is, now that they are young adults, they have a love and passion for the wine business. They are working their way up to positions where they feel they can contribute best. To have our children on the team with us is a dream come true."

Over the years, Agostino Jr. progressed the work of Agostino Sr. from growing grapes to creating hand-crafted, luxury wines. What would it mean for the Gamba offspring to take it to the next level? Gus takes a moment to answer. "Perhaps they will spin off a high-end offshoot brand, as we did with the Etrusca Wines," he says. Create something that has a story, significance, depth. Something that has inspiration for it. They are pretty brilliant, all three of them, and I can't wait to see what they might do."

### Talking Old Vine Zin

One documented route of Zinfandel to California indicates the grape came from an Austrian collection, and it's possible Austria obtained the vines during its rule over Croatia. DNA fingerprinting confirms that an ancient variety from Croatia's Dalmation coast has the same DNA structure as California Zinfandel.

Wherever the vines originated, pioneering immigrants at the turn of the century planted the 120-year-old vines that comprise the Gamba Estate. Research from UC Davis supports the contention that vineyard location is of paramount importance, and certainly, Russian River Valley Zinfandels are special. In a philosophic moment, Gus invokes the proverb, *In vino veritas*, which means "In wine, truth." He interprets the proverb this way: "Making wine is a pure occupation, telling the whole story—where it came from, who produced it and how it was produced."

This is likely why he is an active board member of the 29-year-old educational nonprofit, Zinfandel Advocates and Producers, also known as ZAP. The organization's mission is to celebrate the

heritage, quality and versatility of Zinfandel, to create in-depth studies of its origins and celebrate its unique place in culture and history. "Through ZAP, I've met growers and producers from all over," Gus says. "We are buddies, not competitors; we couldn't make the same wine if we tried. I get to experience expressions and interpretations of Zinfandel from people who have been making it throughout California, from the claret style to a big bold style. We let Zin be Zin. For me, it's a benchmark wine and I love all expressions of Zinfandel."

The vines in the Gamba Vineyards are planted in a highly-desirable soil called Huichica loam, ancient volcanic ash deposits from Mount St. Helena. The vines are grafted on to St. George rootstock (which is not susceptible to phylloxera), and the Gamba clone of Zinfandel produces smaller berries, smaller clusters, essential to making fine wine. And besides the superior location of the vineyards, there are the advantages of being "Old Vine."

While there is no absolute definition of Old Vine vinyards, those that are more than 50 years old generally fit the label.

(cont'd. on pg 26)



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## ETRUSCA WINES

# An Homage to Family Heritage

In 2012, Gus Gamba introduced the Etrusca brand to pay homage to his family heritage. Or, as Gus puts it, “to really find out why I’m doing what I’m doing.” While researching his roots, Gamba became fascinated with the ancient Etruscans, who were likely the first people to plant winegrapes on the Italian peninsula and introduce winemaking around the Mediterranean.

“There is physical proof of this,” Gamba says. Etruscan boats containing wine amphoras were found off the coast of France, as well as inland before the time of French winemaking. “And maybe there’s a chance I have a few drops of Etruscan blood flowing through my veins because my father is from a part of Italy where the kingdom of Etruria extended.”

The labels of the Etrusca brand don’t reveal the winery, the brand, or the vintage from the front. The facing label is a stunning piece of art, matched in character and color to the libation within. One might be struck first by the portrait of Velia Velcha who lived in 450 B.C. in what is now the region of Tuscany. This Etruscan noblewoman lends her name to the winemaker’s proprietary red blend of ancient vine Zinfandel, Petit Sirah, Carignane and Alicante Bouschet grapes. The wine is dark, yet brilliant in the glass, perhaps as seductive and mysterious as the image of Velia herself.

Because Gamba grew up in a family where the enjoyment of wine was intimately connected to the enjoyment of food, he always offers at least one pairing option. For the *Velia*, he suggests trying it with barbecue, either the dry rub or tangy-sauced version.

The 2019 *Paoletta* Sauvignon Blanc (named after Gamba’s wife, Paulette) is sourced from the Russian River Valley’s Gamino Vineyard. This wine’s shimmering gold-and-black label—the reproduction of a king’s royal tablet containing both Etruscan and Phoenician languages—complements the delicate pale straw hue of this varietal. “Ideal growing conditions and near perfect summer weather produced intensely flavored fruit, balanced with a delightful and proportionate amount of lively acidity,” Gamba writes in his tasting notes. “The nose abounds with bright notes of honeydew, kiwi and white peach and a touch of minerality...



The Gamba family’s Etrusca brand of wine.

[Photos courtesy of Gamba Vineyards and Winery]

an expression I’m always looking for.”

The label for the 2019 *Natalia* Rosé (named after Gamba’s youngest daughter) depicts a line of dancing Etruscan women in a scene lifted from life in what was known to be a gregarious, egalitarian society. Fruit from three different old vine vineyards in the Russian River Valley (Winberrie Knolls, Gamba and the Fistolera Ranch) was grown especially for this limited production Rosé. It’s a perfect warm weather wine because of its compelling bouquet, refreshing flavors of summer fruits, and a lively acidity to balance it out. While *Natalia* Rosé is a joy to sip on its own, Gamba suggests pairing this wine with grilled seafood, hard cheeses, and salads from pasta and citrus to green leaf. The Etrusca brand also includes *Cecilia* Russian River Valley Chardonnay, produced in a style that is crisp and refreshing, and *Paolo* Pinot Noir, elegant and refined, both 2017 vintages.

### Where to taste

At the Duo-Vini e Bocce tasting room in Geyserville—Gamba’s joint venture with his long-time friend Peter Tonti—visitors can sample both Tonti Family Wines and the Etrusca offerings. The two partners come from generations of winegrape growers and producers; and Gus Gamba is consulting winemaker for Tonti Family Wines.

While Etrusca wines can be tasted by appointment at the Gamba Estate Winery on Woolsey Road, which is also the location to reserve tasting appointments for their ultra premium Old Vine Zinfandels, Duo-Vini e Bocce is the place to go for a wide-range, wine-tasting experience. Nestled into the northeast corner of the Geyserville Inn property, the Duo tasting room offers sweeping views of the Alexander Valley to accompany tasting flights of four or eight from these two exclusive artisan wineries. Enjoy a game of bocce ball while you’re there. Reservations are not required. For more information, visit [geyservilleinn.com](http://geyservilleinn.com).





The tasting room at Gamba Vineyards and winery.

The Gamba vineyards are centenarian-plus. The ecosystem of these vines is “self-regulating.” They learn to find the nutrients they need in the soil; the root system spreads out and sends a tap root deep down to get a consistent supply of water. The vine develops more wood to store carbohydrates—that gnarly appearance obvious in an old-vine vineyard. Younger vines may be affected by flood or drought, but old vines are not as affected by the vagaries of weather, and adjust their internal chemistry for better balance. Flavors in younger vines can be a bit hollow or one dimensional, Gus notes, but the depth to the fruit in an old vine comes from the naturally smaller crop load and sufficient water and nutrients, lending layers of complex flavors, including fruity and spicy characteristics. All these factors pertaining to Old Vines ensure a consistency of quality.

This is not to say that old vines don’t require constant care, observation, and yes, an intimate relationship that grows over the years like a solid friendship. Not every old vine vineyard is the same.

The Gamba Estate managers control pests by growing lavender and Italian prune trees that attract predatory insects that help solve problems in the canopy. The roses planted around the vineyards are lovely, but they also serve a canary-in-the-coal-mine function. “Roses are vulnerable to powdery mildew and are an early indicator,” says Gus. “We use sulphur dust, which is nature’s natural cleanser, at the earliest signs of powdery mildew on the roses.”

If the soil needs supplementation, Gus will do soil analysis or petiole analysis, to determine whether soil amendment is needed and what type. He walks the vineyards, as he did as a little boy, holding the hand of his father, looking at the leaves, looking at the growth. These days, decisions are made with a combination of science, acute attention, experience and instinct.

It is now the milestone 20th year of the Gamba brand, with limited production of 500 to 1,000 case lots and a total of about 3,000 total cases annually. The winery is currently offering three outstanding 2018 vintages: the MCM Zinfandel, Russian River Valley (which celebrates the year the grape vines were planted by naming the wine with Roman numerals for 1900); and the Old Vine Starr Road Ranch Zinfandel,

Russian River Valley; and the Messana Vineyard Zinfandel. Gus works with other old vine vineyards that don’t produce enough to merit single vineyard production, so he blends those into a cuvée named Family Ranches.

The Etrusca Wines spin-off has garnered a loyal following, and has been well received since its launch in 2012. (See “Etrusca Wines” on page 25.) However, because of the coronavirus pandemic, Gamba’s distribution—through a network of restaurants and wine retailers—has been essentially shut down, either because those sites are trying to deplete inventories or have gone out of business.

“We did dozens of winemaker dinners at Prima in Walnut Creek and now they have closed after 45 years. Thankfully, they have kept their wine shop alive,” Gus says. “These closures are unfortunate

because our partners offer so much more than wine sales. They know people’s tastes, they make recommendations and people come back time and again because of the connection to outstanding wineries and because of the relationships they build.”

What is sustaining Gamba now is direct-to-consumer sales—the wine club, tastings at Duo-Vini e Bocce in Geyserville, and tastings by appointment at the Gamba Estate on Woolsey Road in Windsor. Without the unwavering loyalty of their patrons, Gus says, this would be a difficult time.

“No matter what the economy is doing, the grapes keep growing. This is job security for the vineyard crews but for a producer, it takes about three years from harvest until you see a return on investment. And during that three years, you’ll also have the 2021 vintage, the 2022...”

After 20 harvests, Gamba Vineyards and Winery still remains a small, family-owned operation that doesn’t aspire to grow into a huge business. Owner-winemaker Gus Gamba and his team hope to touch people who are looking to have a special experience and then bring it home. “I make wine for people who want to dig a little deeper, discover something real that comes from passion and history. That’s what we’re all about. We don’t want to be a supermarket wine.” ■

## ZAP for Zin

With a post office box address in Rough and Ready, Calif., and the initials of their nonprofit organization spelling ZAP, this gang of wine fans seems a force to be reckoned with. Zinfandel Advocates and Producers, of which Gus Gamba is a board member, is dedicated to this distinct varietal.

“[We want to] advance knowledge and appreciation for American Zinfandel and its unique place in our culture and history,” says Gamba. Zin lovers, promoters, growers and winemakers believe that this wine rivals the world’s best. “The grape,” he adds, “is unique in the nature and quality of its fruit, drinkable and enjoyable as a young wine but also possessing the ability to age gracefully.”

Currently, ZAP is partnering with UC Davis on the Heritage Vineyard Project. The project encompasses 26 years’ worth of the Zinfandel Experience expo in San Francisco, and is committed to educational efforts, scholarships and grant-funded projects that will preserve acres of old vine Zinfandel, increase propagation and raise awareness of California’s prized specialty crop. For more information, visit [zinfandel.com](http://zinfandel.com).

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