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Sangiacomo Family's Culture of Care at the Root of Farm Bureau's Luther Burbank Conservation Award



Sonoma Valley farming family balances economic viability with environmental stewardship For nearly a century, the Sangiacomo family has farmed in the Sonoma Valley, not only passing down farming skills from generation-to-generation but their Italian ancestors' Old World reverence for the land and the miraculous bounty that comes from it. The Old World belief that if you take care of the land, it takes care of you is deeply embedded in the DNA of the third generation Sangiacomos now managing the family farming operation established by

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The Old World belief that if you take care of the land, it takes care of you is deeply embedded in the DNA of the third generation Sangiacomos now managing the family farming operation established by their grandparents Vittorio and Maria Sangiacomo, immigrants from Genoa, Italy.

The family holdings, which started with 56 acres of pear, apple and prune trees in 1927, today unfolds over 1,600 acres of sustainably farmed premium wine grapes spreading from Carneros to the Sonoma Coast. The Sangiacomos' pinot noir and chardonnay grapes are purchased by 60 top tier wineries in Sonoma and Napa counties. And two years ago, in a nod to the third generation and their heritage, the family began producing small lots of ultra-premium wine from their best-of-the-best grapes for the Sangiacomo label.

While the crops they grow have changed with the evolving times in farming, the Sangiacomo family's respect for the land remains at the core of their farming endeavors. It's a remarkable legacy of dedication to the land, family values and the community they proudly call home.

Like their immigrant ancestors, the Sangiacomos are deeply rooted in their land and dedicated to family unity as the generations work side-by-side. And despite the perceived glitz of the wine industry, the Sangiacomos remain as humble and unpretentious as the family members who were fruit farmers 90 years ago.

"The land is in our DNA," said Steve Sangiacomo, 45, one of the members of the third generation. "As a multi-generational farming family, we grew up working in the fields with our father and uncles. We learned from them and they learned from the previous generation, passing down better ways to do things."

"We learned early on that you get up every day to work hard, do the best you can and treat everyone fairly. Our family always stressed quality whether growing pears or premium wine

grapes and honesty and integrity in the relationships with the people you deal with,” said Michael Sangiacomo, 51.

Michael and Steve Sangiacomo, along with their sister Mia Pucci, 48, and Mia’s husband, Mike Pucci, are the third-generation team overseeing day-to-day operations of the family business. Michael, Steve and Mia are the children of viticulture industry icon Angelo Sangiacomo, who turns 90 in August, and Diane Sangiacomo.

“As learned from our previous generations, we have learned the value of sticking together, getting along and treating each other equally,” said Mia Pucci. “We hope to instill this in the next generation.”

The three siblings, proud of their close-knit family, also benefited from the farming wisdom and guidance of their aunts and uncles, Buck and Sue Sangiacomo, the late Bob Sangiacomo and their aunt Lorraine Sangiacomo. Aunt Lorraine carried on her mother Maria’s tradition of having the family gather daily for lunch at the family’s ancestral home to talk farming between forkfuls of chicken cacciatore and pasta Genovese.

The noontime talk centered on the family’s mission, which is to sustainably farm with Mother Nature to grow world-class winegrapes and craft wines of intensity and balance from the very best vineyard sites. That mission is the guiding force in vineyard development and land acquisition as well as the focus on environmentally conscientious farming practices.

It’s this culture of care and land stewardship that has earned the Sangiacomo family the 2020 Luther Burbank Conservation Award from the Sonoma County Farm Bureau. The award annually recognizes an individual, business or family making extraordinary efforts to balance economic viability with environmental stewardship as part of the county’s multi-billion dollar farming industry.

Jeff Carlton, president of Sonoma County Farm Bureau, said the Sangiacomos, pillars of the viticulture industry, epitomize the spirit of the Luther Burbank Conservation Award.

“First and foremost the Sangiacomos are farmers and, as dedicated farmers, they are true conservationists who take seriously their responsibility as stewards of their land, water and

natural resources,” said Carlton. “The Sangiacomos are well known and respected by fellow grape growers, winemakers and the local community.”

The family has earned that respect, Carlton said, through honest and fair business practices, their involvement in wine industry organizations and their generous support in building community. He said the Sangiacomos never seek recognition or accolades but it comes to them because they always strive to do the right thing, whether it’s working on housing issues for vineyard workers or growing the best grapes from their well-tended vineyards.

Farm Bureau’s Burbank Conservation Award is one of many honors bestowed on the Sangiacomo family over the years. In 2009, the family was honored with the Sonoma County Winegrowers’ Viticulture Award of Excellence. The Sangiacomos were characteristically gracious when they received the award.

“We are extremely honored to receive this award especially since it is from our peers,” patriarch Angelo Sangiacomo said in accepting the award. “Sonoma County has been good to our family and we feel very fortunate to have farmed through three generations. Grape growing is a great balance of maintaining cutting edge farming practices and being exemplary stewards of the land. Our family continues to focus on both and treat them equally.”

Michael and Steve both were honored by the Sonoma County Harvest Fair with the fair’s Outstanding Young Farmer Awards, Michael in 2007 and Steve in 2009.

The Sangiacomo brothers could be described as vineyard hybrids — university educated but deeply entrenched in farming and family tradition. Michael graduated from Santa Clara University where he studied business and economics to enhance the farming he learned from his father and uncles. Michael and his wife Whitney, whom he met at Santa Clara University, have three children, Joe, 21, Julia, 18 and Robby, 16.

Steve graduated with a business and economics degree from Saint Mary’s College. He and his wife Connie, have two children, Drew, 13, and Sam, 11.

Mia and Mike Pucci have two children, Michaela, 13, and Dominic, 11.

As the fourth generation of the family matures and finds their place in the world, there is hope, of course, that some of them will be interested in carrying on the family grape growing and wine business. Steve, Michael, and Mia said they were not pressured to come back to the ranch, encouraged to follow their passion wherever it might lead. It's the same for the fourth generation as they graduate from high school and go off to college.

The siblings said family farming requires passion, dedication, perseverance and commitment. The fourth generation will have to decide for themselves if they are up for the challenge of a family farming business that is not only a career but a way-of-life.

"Hopefully there will be a couple of farmers, a winemaker, a marketing person and accountant in the fourth generation," said Steve.

As grape growers for more than a half century there are many reasons for the Sangiacomo family's success and longevity. First is their diversity of soils and microclimates across multiple vineyard sites across Sonoma County. This allows some wineries to work with distinctive flavor profiles, while others prefer to source fruit from multiple blocks and create a consistent core of complex flavors from vintage to vintage.

Additionally, the Sangiacomos are accommodating and flexible in custom-farming each block to meet the needs of individual winery clients.

The family has developed its own Vine Ecology program focused on weather, soil, light exposure and implementation of new viticultural practices, designed to improve fruit quality and environmental responsibility. The family also invests much of its time in experimentation to create rootstock combinations and tests everything, including close spacing, advanced trellis systems, soil amendments, deficit irrigation and cover crops to produce their exceptional fruit.

Water conservation has become an important part of their farming program. During the past 20 years, the Sangiacomos have reduced by 30 percent the amount of water they use by

incorporating technology in the vineyard to precisely determine when and how much to irrigate.

Another focus is sustainable farming that reduces the impact on soil. Through the decades, practices have changed from heavy duty cultivation to a focus on reduced soil compaction and planting cover crops in each row or every other row to build up the natural nutrient levels in the soils. Other sustainable techniques include the use of owl boxes and raptor perches to control gophers and other rodents; planting trees and shrubs to host beneficial insects; reducing the use of toxic pesticides; using more natural composts and controlling weeds with innovative machinery.

“Every year we get more experience under our belt and we gain additional knowledge from the research we do in the vineyards,” said Michael. That bank of information allows them to make better decisions regarding the specific varieties they will plant at each site while doing everything they can as farmers to make their vines healthier and more productive for ultimate quality.

The Sangiacomos said they would not be where they are today without their hard-working employees who are the backbone of their farming business. Depending on the season, the Sangiacomos employ 80 to 140 workers with each worker playing a crucial role in delivering quality grapes at harvest. The Sangiacomos, who provide single family homes to 10 vineyard supervisors, said 30 percent of their workforce has been with them for more than 20 years.

Part of the challenge of farming is weathering the market cycles that are as inevitable as frost during spring budbreak. Each decade Michael and Steve say they have dealt with down cycles as markets boom and then decline in reaction to grape supply and wine demand, always the determining factor in prices.

“During the down cycles, we dig our feet into the ground until we get to the other side,” said Michael.

Steve said trends in the wine business come and go so it’s extremely important to stay focused.

“Like our previous generations, we feel it is best not to chase the market, but to work with the grape varieties that have proven themselves when planted at the appropriate sites,” said Steve.