

JOHN BALISTRERI VINTNER



FINE VINTAGE

A WINEMAKER REDEFINES THE FAMILY BUSINESS

WRITTEN BY NANCY CLARK PHOTOGRAPHY BY MCCORY JAMES

The lineup of bottles on the counter at the winery tasting room bears a strong resemblance to the cases at Tiffany's, where the gemstones—amethysts to rubies—are securely locked down. The overseer of this cache is John Balistreri, whose family operated a truck-farming business as far back as the early 1900s, raising every kind of produce imaginable, from lettuce to celery to spinach. But times changed, and eventually the family shifted the business to winemaking, which Balistreri learned from watching his uncle make muscat, a family tradition.

Their 10th vintage now on the shelves of select liquor stores, the Balistreri Winery has captured more than 164 prestigious awards. "The Syrah is my favorite," confesses Balistreri. "It's a little like picking a single favorite child from among the siblings." But the Syrah has brought home the double gold and gold awards more than once, so it's easy to see why he's particularly proud of it.

To a detail-oriented vintner like Balistreri, it's the nuances that make the difference between a good year and a remarkable one. The amount of sugar in the grapes, the oak barrels that are never disturbed during the aging process, and the signature wax seal that's hand-dipped one bottle at a time make all the difference between a mass-produced and a hand-crafted wine.

When he explains the science behind his recipes, Balistreri owns the room. It's a sure bet that lettuce never got him this excited. "The un-chardonnay," he explains, "is fermented on the skins of the grapes like a red, pressed off and barrel fermented. We source grapes from the Western Slope that have a particularly high sugar content," he adds in plainspeak. Where other vintners might toss around words like "terroir" to one-up a wine newbie, Balistreri keeps it simple. Even youngsters get into the celebratory process of winemaking when they are invited to stomp on the grapes as part of the annual Festival Italiano at Belmar. In honor of the children, he notes, the wine produced is named "Little Feet." Working with his wife Birdie and daughter Julie, Balistreri never tires of welcoming strangers into the timber wine tasting room. Before they depart, they've become lasting friends.

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