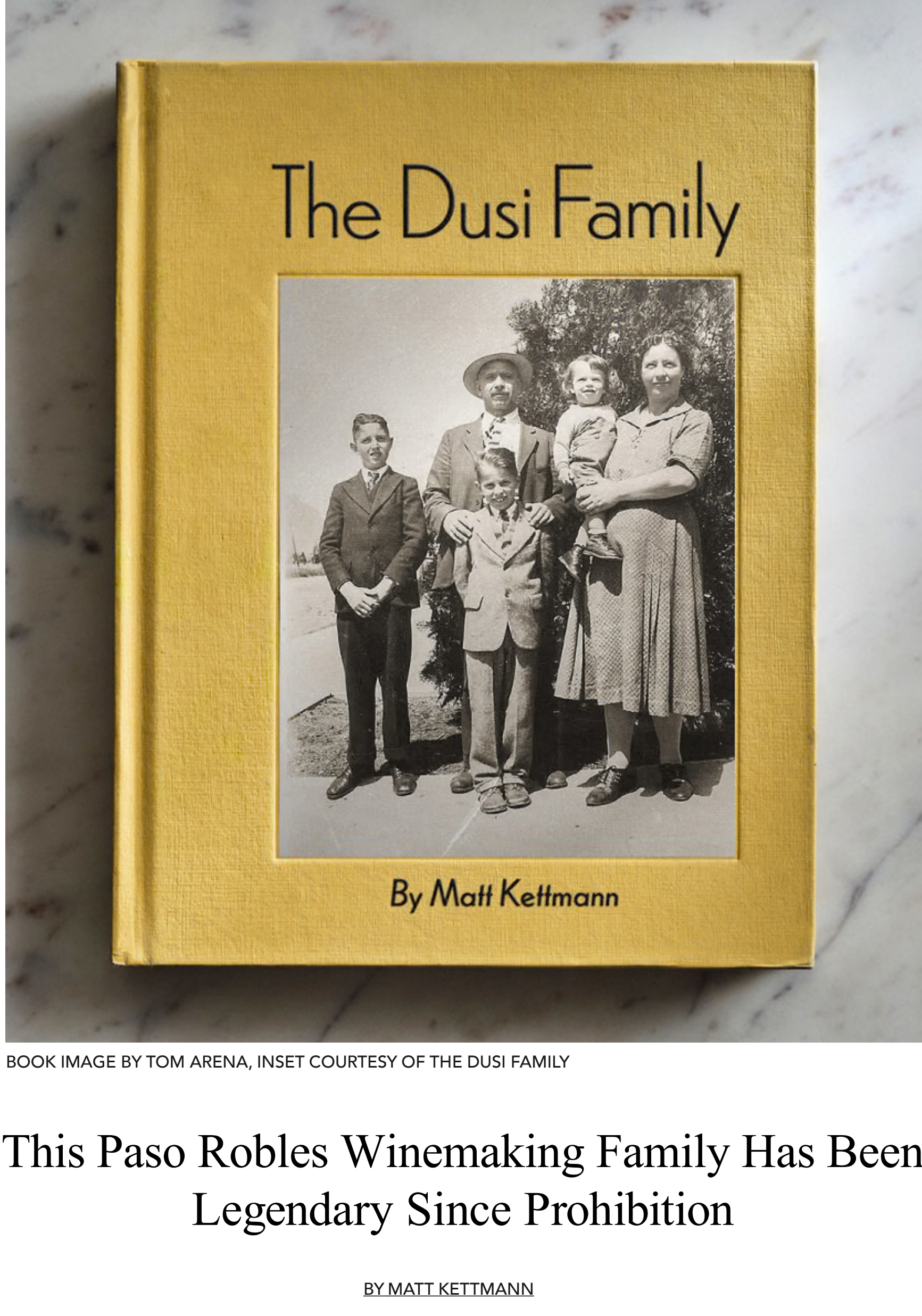




BOOK IMAGE BY TOM ARENA, INSET COURTESY OF THE DUSI FAMILY

This Paso Robles Winemaking Family Has Been Legendary Since Prohibition

BY MATT KETTMANN

“Two hens and a red-necked rooster.”

That’s what you would say over the phone to get three gallons of grappa delivered in Paso Robles during Prohibition, courtesy of the Dusi family, who hid their hooch in barrels beneath the chicken coop.

When fourth-generation vintner Janell Dusi—who started making her own wine at age 12—put those words on her J Dusi grappa label nearly a century later, her otherwise gentle and kindhearted great-uncle Benito Dusi flipped out. “This is why I don’t tell you those stories,” Benito told her.

“He was very upset at me for a good year,” Janell said. “They were deathly afraid of telling us their stories, like they were going to get caught.” She assured him that nothing bad would happen, explaining, “We just want to get those stories out and laugh about them.”



“It will never be sold as long as I’m alive, and I think the kids feel the same way.”

— MIKE DUSI



FROM LEFT: DANTE DUSI, MICHAEL DUSI, BILLY GRANT, JANELL DUSI, MIKE DUSI, JONI DUSI, ALI DUSI, PARKER DUSI, MATT DUSI. PHOTO BY ELLI LAUREN

There’s no shortage of legendary tales like that in the Dusi family, who are celebrating the 100th anniversary of their original Paso Robles vineyard this year. They’re also long on legendary people, particularly Benito, who was the spirit of the family’s vines for three quarters of a century, and his parents, the Italian-born Sylvester and Caterina Dusi.

The Dusi saga begins at the base of the Alps in Ono Degno, Italy, the mountainside village that Sylvester left in 1907 for better opportunities in the United States. After returning to Europe for World War I and working as a lumberjack in Northern California, Sylvester settled in Paso Robles in 1920. By the following year, the consummate entrepreneur owned a hotel, market, and restaurant on the main square.

After he wrote to his sister back home requesting a woman to be a maid and cook for the business, along came Caterina Gazzaroli from the nearby village of Casto, who boarded the ship to America with a fiancé in tow.

“He died on the voyage over,” said Janell, noting that the family only learned that tidbit about a decade ago when visiting Caterina’s distant relatives in Italy. “They were mad that she left them and never came back.”

Caterina must have gotten over him quickly; she and Sylvester married on October 28, 1922, less than three weeks after her arrival. Their first son, Guido, was born that next fall, and Dante came three years later.

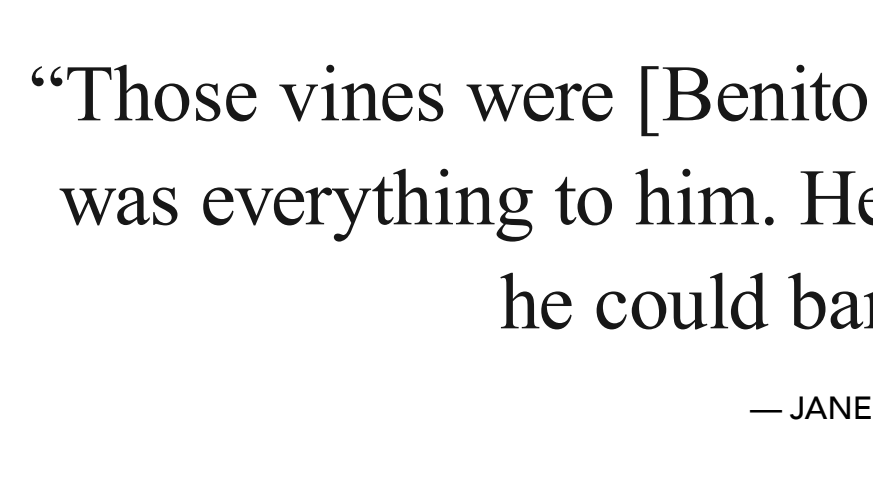


The Dusis bought land alongside what became U.S. Route 101 in 1926, and planted Zinfandel like the other Italian families in the area. “Why they planted during Prohibition, I have no idea,” said their grandson Mike Dusi. But he’s heard numerous tales from that era about them distilling alcohol under the radar.

Some of the illicit booze was made with a hidden still in the mountains north of Paso Robles, where they buried the barrels in trenches. One day, the Prohibition officers showed up and asked about the holes, saying they’d return the next day to dig them up.

“My grandfather went up with a disk and worked up that whole field,” said Mike. “When the cops came back, they couldn’t figure out where to start digging, so they just left.”

Sylvester did get caught by the cops at least twice, which made him a felon. He was forced to sign over the legal wine and vineyard business to his sons when they were 21 years old. “He had his fingers in all kinds of mischief,” Janell said.



DANTE DUSI AT THE FAMILY VINEYARD IN 1945. COURTESY OF DUSI FAMILY

Living in the shadow of law enforcement wasn’t easy for the young boys, Guido and Dante. “They were always told, ‘If the cops come in the middle of the night, pretend you’re sick and act like you’re going to throw up on them,’” said Janell of what her grandfather Dante, who died in 2014, told her. “Why? Because they kept the cash under their beds.”

Benito was born in 1933, the year Prohibition ended. “He was always the baby,” said his nephew Mike, noting that, aside from serving in the Korean War, Benito never really left the property, living there with his dad and mom until they died, and never married. “That’s why the vineyard was just an extension of himself.”

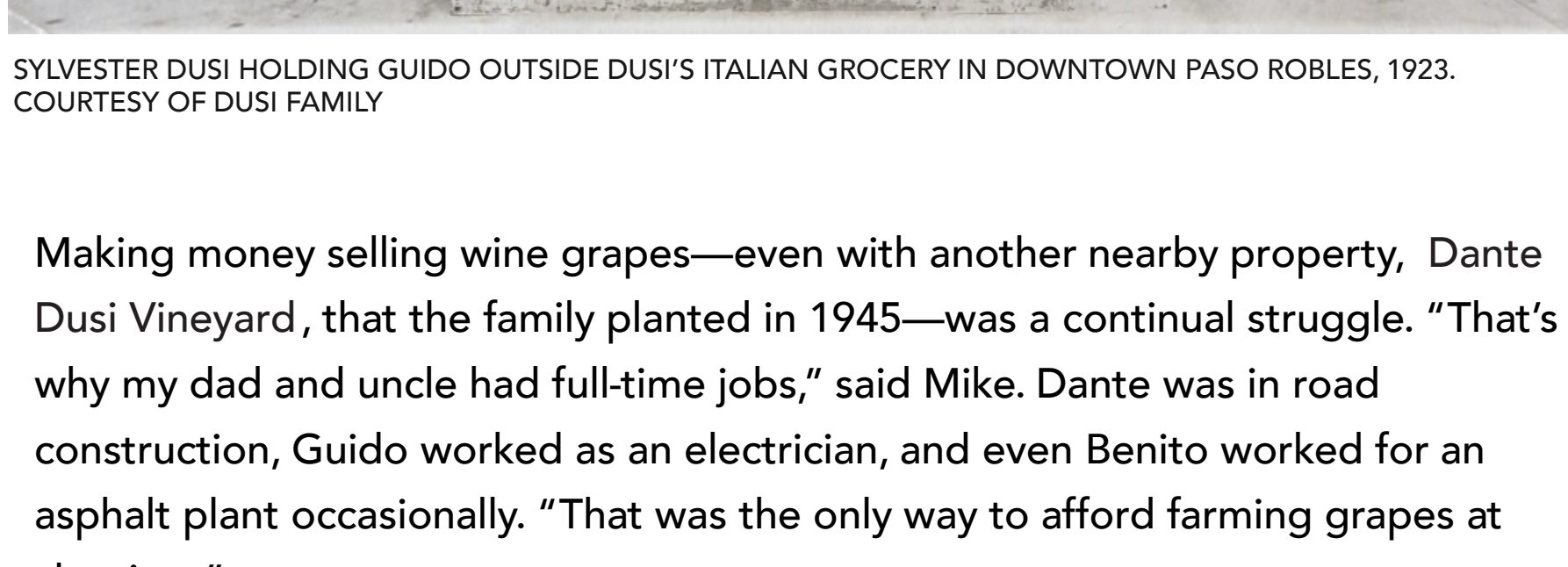
One day, when Benito was in elementary school, his teacher called Caterina. “I don’t know what’s wrong with Benito, but after lunch, he falls asleep at his desk,” the teacher explained. “Maybe I shouldn’t give him wine in his thermos anymore,” Caterina replied.



“Those vines were [Benito’s] babies, his family. That was everything to him. He was on that tractor when he could barely walk.”

— JANELL DUSI

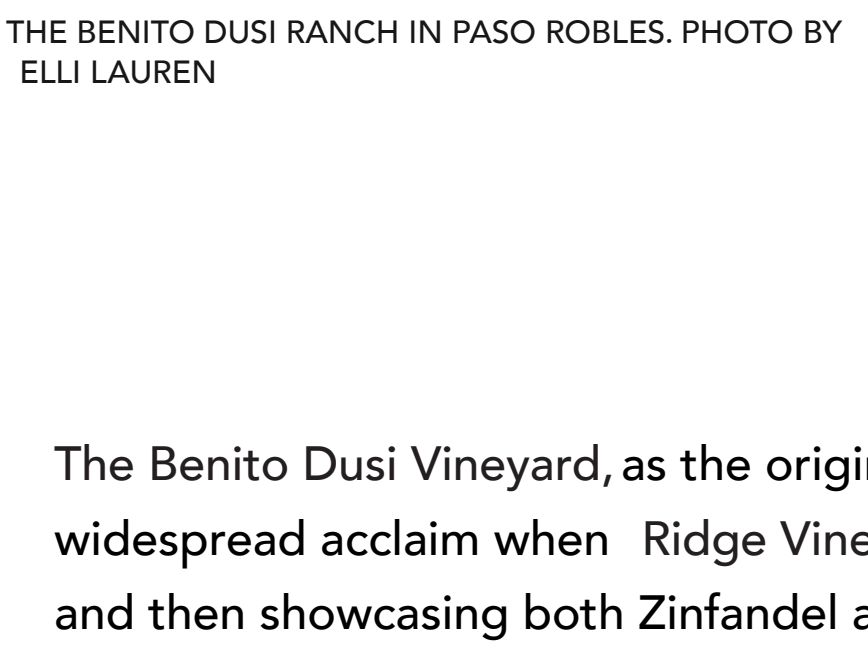
Mike was 11 years old when Sylvester died in 1964. Caterina, meanwhile, lived until 1985, so memories of her are much fresher—cooking polenta and stew, lentils and sausage, cow-brain stuffed handmade ravioli, fried squash blossoms, and enchiladas on the wood-fired stove. “She’d have us go out and shoot birds—any kind of bird—and then she’d pluck them and put them in the stew,” said Mike. Once, she met the grandkids’ pet chicken. “She picked it up, wrung its neck, and that was her lunch,” Mike said. “The kids were appalled.”



SYLVESTER DUSI HOLDING GUIDO OUTSIDE DUSI’S ITALIAN GROCERY IN DOWNTOWN PASO ROBLES, 1923. COURTESY OF DUSI FAMILY

Making money selling wine grapes—even with another nearby property, Dante Dusi Vineyard, that the family planted in 1945—was a continual struggle. “That’s why my dad and uncle had full-time jobs,” said Mike. Dante was in road construction, Guido worked as an electrician, and even Benito worked for an asphalt plant occasionally. “That was the only way to afford farming grapes at the time.”

One strategy was selling to home winemakers all around California. “The worst part is that they wanted you to drink the wine from the years before,” said Mike, who helped with those deliveries. “I was a young kid, and it still didn’t taste good.”



THE BENITO DUSI RANCH IN PASO ROBLES. PHOTO BY ELLI LAUREN

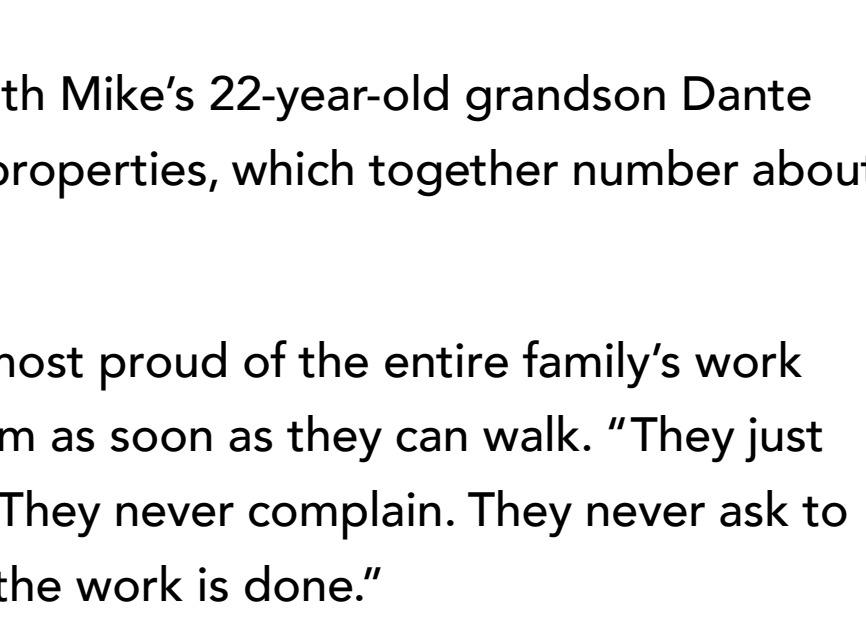


BENITO DUSI, WHO DIED IN 2019, AT HIS BELOVED RANCH. COURTESY OF DUSI FAMILY

The Benito Dusi Vineyard, as the original 1925 planting became known, earned widespread acclaim when Ridge Vineyards started buying grapes there in 1967, and then showcasing both Zinfandel and Benito Dusi on the label in 1976. “This was the jug-wine era; no one was writing ‘Zinfandel’ on the bottle, no one was mentioning the vineyard,” Janell said. “Benito was really proud of the Ridge bottle. He always showed it to people.”

In the 1950s and ‘60s, when the family made its own wine for a spell, the property served wine to passersby; there was particular interest from soldiers stationed at Camp Roberts and priests from the San Miguel Mission. “They had the only tasting room along 101 at the time,” said Janell. “It was a gathering place, too.”

Benito worked the vineyard right up until his death in 2019. “We had to pry him off the tractor,” said Janell, who started her J. Dusi label almost 20 years ago. “Those vines were his babies, his family. That was everything to him. He was on that tractor when he could barely walk.”



FROM LEFT: PARKER DUSI, MICHAEL DUSI, RICK DUSI, DANTE DUSI. PHOTO BY ELLI LAUREN

Benito left the vineyard to Mike, who’d helped him farm it for many years. “He knew I wouldn’t sell,” said Mike. “It will never be sold as long as I’m alive, and I think the kids feel the same way.”

Today, the fifth generation is involved, with Mike’s 22-year-old grandson Dante Dusi now farming five of the family’s 10 properties, which together number about 600 acres.

Joni Dusi, who married Mike in 1972, is most proud of the entire family’s work ethic, which starts being ingrained in them as soon as they can walk. “They just do what they’re asked to do,” she said. “They never complain. They never ask to leave early. They don’t ask to leave until the work is done.”

Most family members live very near each other, surrounded by their vineyards, and still gather for supper every Sunday. But as a multigenerational farming family, the strongest tradition concerns the weather. “We celebrate the first rain of the season,” Janell said. “We still always have polenta and stew.”

Joni added, “I didn’t realize how different our household was until the kids came home from school one day and said, ‘Mom, some kids don’t care if it rains.’”

This article originally appeared in the December 2025 Family Issue of Wine Enthusiast magazine.