



TASTING ROOM FOCUS

Hitching Post Wine's First Tasting Room

By Stacy Briscoe

In August, Frank Ostini and Gray Hartley, known for their famed Hitching Post 2 restaurant along East Highway 246 in Buellton, Calif., opened Hitching Post Wines — the partners' first tasting room featuring the Hitching Post portfolio of wines, complemented by food from the iconic restaurant, located just next door.

Ostini and Hartley started the Hitching Post brand back in 1984, with the first commercial production reaching just 1,200 cases. "By 1999 we were 2,000 cases and we made 4,000 cases in 2000," he said.

But then the film *Sideways* was released in 2004. "Oh yeah," Ostini says, "with *Sideways* we quickly jumped from 5,000 to 15,000 cases with the 2005 vintage. The increased demand, coupled with the numerous new vineyards of high quality coming into production in Santa Barbara County, allowed us to grow quickly and maintain high quality."

Today, Hitching Post produces 17,000 cases a year out of Terraviva Wine Company in Buellton.

Despite that growth in production, the partners never opened a tasting room.

"My original goal was to serve my wine in my family's restaurant," said Ostini. "But I never allowed the wine to take over as the star player of the Hitching Post 2."

Ostini said he's never had the opportunity to give the wine part of the business "it's just due." But with a recent expansion of the Hitching Post property, from one acre to 12 acres, he said they can now let the winemaking story take front and

center at the tasting room while continuing to focus on food service at the restaurant.

Those additional 12 acres included a pre-existing mid-century cottage, which has been transformed into the Hitching Post Wines tasting room. Ostini said the property's previous owners, the Loring and Cargasacchi wine companies, had done some minor restorations to the old building and that the "bones of a tasting room" were already in place when they moved in.

"We came in to renovate the original farmhouse," he said, which included restoring the original floors and introducing wood from an adjacent barn, building wine cabinets from the reclaimed wood. "We have discovered that as things get old they are discarded, then they get good again, just like us 65-plus year-old winemakers — we hope," Ostini said.

The new, 2,000-square-foot tasting room includes a main tasting bar and two separate rooms to accommodate private tastings and special events. The exterior includes casual seating for guests who want to stay and partake of the Hitching Post 2's takeaway menu.

About the business

Currently, Hitching Post does less than 20% of its business through direct-to-consumer (DtC) sales, and Ostini said he certainly sees room for growth in this area. "We hope to double our DtC and build our wine club as we can now focus on these goals in the tasting room," Ostini said. "I would never let that happen in the Hitching Post 2, as I didn't want to interfere with our primary goal of providing food and

hospitality to our dining customers."

Ostini said that Hitching Post's current best-selling wine in his restaurant is the Highliner Pinot Noir (\$44), which is the wine featured in the movie *Sideways*. But in his new tasting room, he's noticed a shift toward the dry rosé, "Pinks," and the Merlot-Syrah blend, "Gen Red," both priced at \$19.

Hitching Post Wines staffs seven tasting room sales associates, with just two or three working at a time. He said the most important qualities for his staff are passion for the wines they're selling and communication skills to convey that passion to consumers.

When asked how he advises asking for a sale at the end of a tasting experience, Ostini admitted he's still learning that skill himself. "I've always depended upon the wine to speak for itself, but I suppose there are more direct ways to make a sale happen," he said.

Tools of the trade

Currently, Hitching Post Wines is using True Commerce for its point-of-sale (POS) system, which aligns with Nexternal, the platform used for the winery's webstore. Ostini said it was their most economical choice. "This is fairly new for retail tasting room POS, so we can't as yet recommend this set up. We're hopeful that the glitches can be worked out soon."

The tasting room uses Riedel IPNC Pinot Noir glasses to serve wine, a glass Ostini described as a "big, funny shape," but said makes his wines truly taste and smell better than any other glass he's used. 🍷