



Wine's Most Inspiring People 2018: Growing Grapes, Family, and Community in Sonoma County

By Kim Badenfort

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John and Terri Balletto planted their first vineyard in the mid-nineties on a 35 acre lot in Sebastopol (now part of the potential Sebastopol Hills AVA) where they were also building their home. Back then, they were vegetable farmers, but the hill did not have enough water to grow produce, so with the advice of family friend Warren Dutton (Dutton Ranch), they planted 20 acres of Pinot, 10 of Chardonnay, and 5 of Pinot Gris.



John and Terri Balletto

Today they farm almost 800 acres of vineyards in Sonoma County and sell grapes to over 30 wineries, keeping just the top 10% of grapes for their own estate bottled [Balletto Vineyards](#) wines. It was a long, arduous journey to get to where they are today, a journey that shaped them as people, a family, and a business.

"Along the way we've had a lot of help from the community, a lot of help from inspirational people," says John Balletto. "One of the reasons we're so enthused to give back to our community is because when my mother and I were alone, we had a lot of people help us like the Sanchietti family, the Dutton family, and Mr. Hansel (of Hansel Auto Group)."



In 1977 John Balletto had just graduate high school when his father died of cancer, so he went to work with his mother on their five acre vegetable farm. "We had to farm to survive, that was our only way to make it," Balletto recalls.

They slowly added a few acres, and in 1982 Balletto's high school counselor helped them get a farmer's home loan to buy 40 acres in the Santa Rosa plain. But the money wasn't the only hurdle. "The property was part of a 110 acre parcel, and the county didn't want to split it, and we could only afford 40 acres," Balletto recalls. "But, Mr. Hansel, who sat on the county ad hoc committee that decided whether properties should be split for ag, said they should give this young kid a chance. So we've had a lot of people help us."



Nick Frey, Brand Ambassador for Balletto Vineyards, explains how adding acres continues to be a core business philosophy for Balletto. "I say, John never saw a piece of land he didn't like. His mother was a product of the Great Depression, she came out of the dust bowl in Oklahoma and moved here, and when they were growing the vegetable business, she said 'if you ever have any extra money buy land.' And he took it to heart, he just added another hundred acres last year."

That approach mixed with foresight and courage put Balletto ahead of the vineyard buying trend of large wine companies that is now driving up land prices. **Anthony Beckman**, Winemaker and Vice President of Balletto Vineyards, relates. "It was 2008 and the economy was starting to crash a little bit. I met with John, and I said, 'the economy is crashing, and I think wine sales are going to be the first ones to take a hit, we should cut back on inventory, we should be really careful here.' His words to me were 'don't look at it that way, this is a time of opportunity.'"

"So when a lot of people were getting out, he was getting in, and now looking back 10 years, what a brilliant move that was. You couldn't even look at buying those vineyards today."



Beckman joined Balletto Vineyards more than ten years ago in 2007, a stint that's not unusual at Balletto Vineyards and far from the longest. "Some of the workers have been with them approaching 30 years," says Beckman. "Even on the cellar side, I have two guys that started working for John 20 years ago, they moved from the produce side, and now they're my main cellar workers. My Assistant winemaker has been with us 7 years.

"This is very much a family business, and there's a work mentality that everybody works really hard, and everybody has this work ethic of moving forward."

John's mother Hazel worked half a day packing zucchini every day until she was 75, and John and Terri's two daughters **Jacqueline** and **Caterina** grew up as part of the business from the time they were very young, learning the work ethic, and after finishing college, they've both returned to Balletto Vineyards.

"Dad wanted us to learn every aspect of the business," Jacqueline explains. "So when I started here I worked in the lab, then I worked for a distributor, and with our sales manager, and I worked out in the field, before I came over in the tasting room, so I'd get a well-rounded experience and know everyone and every aspect."



Caterina Balletto (left) and Jacqueline Balletto (right)

Caterina says, "So many of my friends from college said, 'oh why do you need to go to college, you're just going to go back and work for your parents, it's super easy.' But let me tell you that they expect more out of you than anyone, and although it's hard, it's also extremely rewarding."

The kids don't have to look far for a role model, He's like the energizer bunny," Caterina says of her father. "He loves it, he loves his job. Part of it is that it's all he's ever known, but he'll come in on the weekend, and it's not because he's forced to, it's because he loves being out in the vineyards checking and making sure things are good."

Jacqueline adds, "He always has to finish something, and for me that's been one the greatest lessons. When you start something, make sure you finish it; if you can't figure it out, you have to find a way to figure it out. He has a lot of perseverance, and he never stops."

"Oftentimes I'm just trying to hold on to John's shirt tails, just trying to keep up," Beckman laughs. When Beckman started at Balletto Vineyards they had six wines, now they have twenty two and are planning for the next project. "There was a time when I would caution John, but I've since learned that when he makes a decision you immediately start thinking about what fifty things can I do to make this decision work. Then, everybody gets in this mode of we're moving in this direction, what do we have to do to make it successful? It's a mentality, and it comes from John down."

While John is the front man that keeps pushing for expansion, Terri plays an important part in keeping it all together. "I think Terri is the key to a lot of things," says Beckman, "she's much quieter than John, and I think that's a good thing; they balance each other well. That said, she knows exactly what she wants, she has her opinion, and she's really good at making decisions."

"Terri's the glue that keeps it all together behind the scenes," says Balletto. "We run a really thin staff, and we don't have a lot of layers, so she's the backup on a lot of stuff. We have three other partnerships that we are involved with, and she does all the bookkeeping for that plus our personal stuff too, she does a lot. And it's important to have someone behind the scenes making sure it's all held together."



Sonoma County vegetable growers Teresa and John Balletto with dog Shiro.

For all the work Terri does for the business, Balletto credits her greatest success to be her commitment to their daughters, helping them and pushing them to achieve. Terri grew up in the 4-H program, and it meant a lot to her Balletto explains. She was always “making the girls go to their meetings, getting up and speaking in front of people, and following through on their animal projects. That program and her involvement helped turn them into really good people, which lead to high school, and college, and back here again.”

As in everything else, the Balletto’s never fail to give back to the community that supports them, and last year Terri was honored as the Sonoma County 4-H alumni of the year for her work on with the Youth Ag & Leadership Foundation.

“Terri Balletto is the quiet force working behind the scenes at her family winery, stitching together the various threads that make Balletto Vineyards such a rich and integral part of Sonoma County’s fabric. In addition to being the centerpiece of her close-knit family, Terri generously channels time and resources to many community groups and charitable organizations including the Youth Ag & Leadership Foundation where she serves as a director and board secretary,” said **Tim Tesconi** of Healdsburg who serves with Terri Balletto on the foundation. The Youth Ag & Leadership Foundation raises and distributes funds to enhance and support the 4-H program in Sonoma County. The foundation’s mission is to develop the next generation of community leaders, people like Terri Balletto, who was a 4-H Club member in her youth.



Jacqueline and Caterina helping out with the produce business

“4-H is really important to me, it’s great, I love the program,” says Terri Balletto. “It teaches all ages together, that’s why I think it’s so important; the young kids get to come in and learn from the older kids, and eventually they grow up and become mentors for younger kids. It’s a fantastic youth leadership program. So that is definitely my passion.”

And Caterina adds, "remembering to take care of not only your community but your employees. My dad says he doesn't just go to bed thinking of our family, but the fifty other families that rely on us. So, it's really a business that builds on a whole group of people, not just us."

Now Balletto Vineyards donates to 600 organizations every year, but Balletto notes that there were a few years when they couldn't afford to give back. "We had a couple of tough years, 98, 99, and 2000 were tough for us. That's when we basically converted all of our vegetable operations to vineyards. That was a big deal. We took a company at 250 employees and rinsed it down, sold the marketing part, and then borrowed more money to plant 300 acres of grapes in 2000, 2001, and 2002, so that was a big step for us to do that."

Frey, who was Executive Director for the Sonoma County Winegrowers when Balletto served on the board including three years as its chairman, sums it up. "John and Terri are very involved in the community, and just like with farming, when John gets involved, he is all in. They are not ones to pad their resume or get that organization to advance their business, it's to support their community and make a contribution, and I think a lot of that comes from when John's father passed away. People in the community really were there for him, and he doesn't forget it, he's very loyal to friends and long term employees. He really wants to give back to the community, because he feels they helped him to get where he is today."

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