

# A Sense of BALANCE

SAN ANTONIO WINERY'S WINEMAKER ANTHONY RIBOLI  
LOOKS TO BOTH THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

by Kyle Billings

In an otherwise quiet and unremarkable Thursday afternoon, the Maddalena restaurant is bustling with energy. A throng of people creates a chorus of clamor in harmony with the clinking and clanking of glasses and plates, paired with poorly-concealed excitement. The setting is evocative: Sepia pictures adorn the walls, suggesting the passage of time and the commensurate comfort of experience; a Spanish guitar serenades the assembly with lilting melodies from songs by Richard Marx and Eric Clapton. San Antonio Winery's winemaker, Anthony Riboli, explains the attraction of a place with generations of patrons: "Once you're inside, you could be in Tuscany, Provence . . . wherever."

"Inside," of course, is San Antonio Winery, an oasis among the steel and concrete in the Lincoln Heights district near Downtown Los Angeles. The successful staying power of the winery and the stewardship of its numerous brands is due in no small part to Anthony Riboli. Scion to the San Antonio Winery dynasty, this Riboli—the fourth generation since its founding in 1917—has the distinction of being the first family winemaker in its illustrious history with a formal viticultural education and training, namely a Master's degree in viticulture from world-renowned U.C. Davis and harvest experience at Napa Valley's Groth Vineyards & Winery.

A childhood immersed in wine notwithstanding, an education fostered insight, and since his appointment as winemaker in 1999, Riboli knew change was essential. With the family's blessing, he ushered in sweeping revisions, chief among these being the priority of constant visits to their many vineyards because, as Riboli suggests, "You can't do it remotely." Said vineyards are scattered throughout California, including the Rutherford district in Napa Valley, Monterey and, notably, Paso Robles, where a new winery and hospitality center is currently under construction and due to open next spring. Riboli even travels regularly to Italy to discuss concepts and oversee production behind the family's leviathan Stella Rosa brand.

Riboli acknowledges both the successes of the family business and the challenging necessity of appealing to patrons, themselves of varying vintages. To meet such a broad and diverse demand, select winemaking techniques are employed, including discerning applications of French



# Ontario

Winemaker Anthony Riboli of San Antonio Winery, located in the Lincoln Heights district near Downtown Los Angeles.



**All three of San Antonio Winery's locations—Los Angeles, Ontario and Paso Robles—host daily tastings.**

and American oak, experimentation with unique yeast strains, *bâtonnage* for the different Chardonnays and changing cooperages.

"Luck's part of life, let's be honest, but never stop thinking about what's the next concept. I think that's always been the most important lesson," says Riboli. "Work hard, enjoy what you're doing and evolve with it. Don't be so stagnant."

At the winery, entrance to the work space lies past an ornate banquet room, replete with barrels, harvest wreaths and four towering redwood tanks (a relic of a bygone era, Riboli explaining that new redwood doesn't necessarily impart an appealing flavor). The form of the handsome backdrop then yields to function as the operation's labyrinthine organs reveal the requisite serpentine bottling conveyor, while around the corner stand large stainless-steel fermentation tanks. Another bend unveils towers of barrels, and yet another turn reveals Riboli's longtime fellow winemaker, French-born Arnaud Debons, wielding a metal wine thief.

Among the dedicated fixtures here are the many Riboli family members themselves. Anthony's grandfather Stefano enjoys lunch daily at the Maddalena (named for his wife) and has recently taken to a ritual inquiry concerning progress of the new Paso Robles winery. Family photos decorate the walls, while Ribolis dominate the corner booth, communing over salads and the business of the day.

## MEET THE WINEMAKER

In the tasting room, a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary engages Anthony about the merits of different bottle closures—natural, synthetic and screwtop. Upon the revelation that Anthony is the family winemaker, they proceed to solicit wine suggestions and confess their fondness for the winery.

Such a familial and welcoming atmosphere tempers any sense of pretense. Riboli eschews the idea that wine should be the purview of an exclusive few: “Wine has become too pretentious, too snobby, and not everyone’s going to buy a \$1,000 wine.” Riboli suggests that the winery’s various labels—including Opaque, San Simeon, Windstream and Riboli Family, among others—offer something for customers with a nascent wine interest, whose introduction may be the sweet sparklers of Stella Rosa, as well as for connoisseurs who prefer complex reds from the single-estate vineyards in Napa and Paso Robles. Whatever the preference, Riboli simply hopes their libation of choice is wine. “We’ve never been biased; a customer’s a customer, so give that customer what they want and make them feel good about it.”

At one point, Riboli pauses briefly in a small gallery teeming with portraits documenting the family’s history, where a tour is proceeding. The docent makes notice of the head winemaker in the group’s presence and a young lady, compulsive in her excitement, points to the wall and unabashedly declares, “You’re famous!” The progeny of sustained success is respect—indiscriminate of age. Riboli blushes slightly and concedes a demure yet appreciative nod, the winemaker’s innate sense of balance on display beyond just his wines. ■■



**Founded in 1917, San Antonio Winery is the oldest producing winery in Los Angeles.**



**San Antonio's estate Stefano Vineyard in Paso Robles.**