

NOTES FROM THE WINE CELLAR

A Tasting of Bob Pepi's New Label

by Mort Hochstein



It seemed incongruous to be dining in

a ornate
traditional
Italian wine
cellar and singing the

praises of American wine. The wine cellar was at **Bottega Del Vino** (*left*), a NYC beachhead for a 117-year-old Verona restaurant. The wines we enjoyed were from American producer Bob Pepi, though they are not on BDV's encyclopedia-sized wine book.

Not yet anyway, but they will find a place there in the future, according to proprietor Severino Barzan and Pepi. Bottega del Vino's Verona progenitor carries about 10,000 labels on its list and the NYC outpost has about 1,000, but the NYC list increases steadily as shipments arrive from the group's warehouse in Italy and from American sources. The restaurant's wine list is international in scope, showing many of the great names of France and California along with those of its native Italy. (*For a review of Bottega del Vino [click](#).*)

When Pepi's wines join that array, they won't, however, wear his name, because he's from one of the many California families who've sold their name to a larger constellation. He went off to join the ranks of consultants and flying winemakers in the early nineties and returned to proprietorship as the new century began. In 2000, wearying of being the hired gun, Pepi discovered an opportunity to work with grapes from an exceptional Napa vineyard and once more became an entrepreneur.

Pepi said his first Cabernet, the 2000, was in bottle for six months and he had not been able to come up with a fitting name. One evening he heard his daughter use the word "eponymous." It was a problem-solving moment, "I found the perfect name for my concept," he comments. Pepi's first vintages were Cabernet blends, using small

amounts of Merlot and Cabernet Franc, but in 2003, the stars were right for a 100% single-vineyard Cabernet. Future editions of Eponymous are most likely to follow that path of 100% Cab.

The Eponymous wines, which list at about \$58, have been winners from the start, earning raves from critics and high rankings on the numbers charts, outscoring some of California's most honored Cabs and cult wines. Pepi's newest entry is the '03 MacAllister Red Wine, his first to come from outside Napa Valley. Like its siblings, the MacAllister is rich and elegant, with a long finish. About 60% Cab, 30% Cab Franc, and 10% Merlot; it will sell for \$45. Grapes for the MacAllister come from a steep site just over the peak of Mount Veeder, on the Sonoma side of the Mayacamus Range that runs between the Napa and Sonoma. "The vineyard is as close to Napa as you can get," Pepi notes.

As a winemaker, Pepi has worked nearly three dozen harvests, a feat possible at his age only for commuting consultants who travel between the continents, in his case between North and South America. His most notable work abroad came with Valentine Bianchi, an outstanding Argentine producer, for whom he still consults. At Whitehall Lane, one of several California wineries where he was employed, his wines earned ratings in the nineties on several occasions.

In the 1990s Pepi and his winemaking partner Jeff Booth were working for the Washington-based wine group, Stimson Lane, where they teamed up to produce one of California's legendary reds, the 1991 Conn Creek Anthology. They joined forces again in Napa to create the Eponymous wines and another line under the **Two Angels** banner for his distributor, Quintessential. One of those Quintessential



bottlings, a 2004 Two Angels Sauvignon Blanc, was our first wine of the evening at Bottega del Vino. Crisp and elegant, it mated nicely with a zesty carpaccio of smoked salmon and tuna, nestled on a fennel and orange salad. Chef Masimuliano Convertini followed up with a powerful risotto spiked with Amarone; Pepi doesn't make an Amarone, but his 2002 Eponymous, which was 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, had more than enough muscle for the rustic risotto.

Our next pairing was a moist filet of pan seared sea bream with capers and black olives in a light cherry tomato sauce, teamed with the '03 MacAllister in its first public tasting. The new blend, with Cab Franc tempering the Cabernet Sauvignon, adding cassis

and chocolate tones, played nicely off the tang of the olives and capers. Convertini's meat entrée was a succulent, tender loin of lamb in rosemary red wine sauce which was served with a Two Angels Syrah.

Pepi confesses to a secret passion for Petite Sirah, which he feels does not deserve to be regarded as the illegitimate cousin of Syrah. Its unheralded charm showed at dessert time in the most unusual pairing of the evening, We enjoyed a perfect marriage of lush *semifreddo* hazelnut ice cream topped by chocolate sauce and rather than, say, an Italian sweet wine, a dark, muscular, yet supple, Two Angels Petite Sirah, rich in chocolate, coffee and licorice flavors. It was a match I would never have considered, but Convertini and Pepi put it together beautifully. It was a great wind-up to an evening of Italian food and American wines in a wine cellar setting not to be missed.