

Harleys, roses, weddings and wine

The unusual odyssey of Dean Bordigioni

STORY DAVID BOLLING PHOTOS ROBBI PENGELLY

Mar 28, 2011 - 12:41 PM

Robbi Pengelly

We are standing in the waning sun of a winter afternoon, the spine of Sonoma Mountain is shifting its shadow in our direction, there's a pristine white Harley Davidson with a sidecar parked in the middle of a seasonal stream that dances through the heart of the estate, and Dean Bordigioni is patiently horsing the front fork of his motorcycle into the correct angle to intercept the remaining sunlight at the insistence of a nagging photographer who is oblivious to everything but the shot.

And he is still smiling.

Abigail has already taken baby Anni Lucia inside to escape the chill, there is a sensational glass of Bordigioni's own Bordeaux blend nestled in the gravel well beyond reach and the photographer tells him, yet again, to turn the handlebars another three-tenths of one degree.

He complies without complaint, the lingering smile struggling to stay in place, and you realize for the fifth or sixth time that day, this is no ordinary biker.

For a guy who spent more than half his life on the back of a Harley, who rode the length of South America, who is used to speed and action and moving things along, this patience is something to behold.



Dean, Abigail and Anni Lucia with the old barn and a heritage oak where weddings unfold.



Dean with Big Pink and the requisite glass of Sonoma Field Blend

Equally incongruous is the admixture of elements on display. Bordigioni is a big manly guy, the Harley suits him as a ride, but it doesn't suit the refined stereotype of a Sonoma Valley winemaker for whom, if a motorcycle is a must, you'd expect to see something elegant, modern and Italian, like perhaps a Ducati.

And then there are the roses, 5,000 bushes of heirloom roses, actually, the kind you layer all over a wedding. What's a Harley-riding winemaker doing with seven acres of roses? And another 2,000 hydrangea bushes?

And speaking of weddings, Bordigioni is up to his armpits in nuptial celebrations, staged in the winery ruins just beyond the arc of his Harley, and in the historic barn a few yards up the hill.

This is a guy who, four years earlier, was a self-described, Southern California beach bum. Except that his story isn't that simple and if you look closely enough to connect the dots you discover that the current elements of his life-- the Harleys, the roses, the weddings, the wine-- coalesce into a fairly coherent picture.

The Harleys, the roses, the weddings, the wine coalesce into a fairly coherent picture.

A little back story.

Dean Bordigioni (If you don't know Italian, the name may tangle your tongue-it's pronounced Bor-di-jioni.) is the grandson of Italian immigrants (of course) who made their own grappa in the bathtub of their Bronx apartment.

His parents moved to Las Vegas, where Dean grew up, and when he finished college he lived for a while in San Francisco and made occasional exploratory trips into Wine Country. That's when the fantasy took shape and lodged in his head that, someday, he would own a winery.

Nice fantasy, everyone has it, but with Dean it stuck. Still, the path to the winery was crooked. He spent some time in Italy, did the South America-on-a-Harley thing, and eventually married his motorcycle mania to his entrepreneurial instincts and founded Golden Gate Harley-Davidson in Marin County.

That was a good run, a lot of fun, and it helped fuel his passion for vintage Harleys-he eventually owned about 20. But it didn't touch all the sweet spots in his soul, so he sold the dealership in 2003 and moved on. He was hanging out in La Jolla with a house on the beach and a small real estate business when, he says, a little aluminum Airstream trailer caught his eye and triggered the Wine Country wanderlust. He bought it, towed it north to Sonoma, and ran into a well-connected real estate agent named Holly Bennett, who introduced him to the fading beauty of an old neglected winery across the road from Oakmont. That was Annadel Estates.

There were 10 acres of grapes, 10 acres of flowers, the painfully pretty stone ruins of an 1886 winery, a down-at-the heels farmhouse, a carriage house, a nearly perfect wooden barn and acres of possibilities.



Dean Bordigioni - Annadel Estate

All of a sudden that dormant dream was staring Bordigioni in the face.

First question: “What did you know about making wine?”

Dean releases a rueful smile.

“I knew how to drink it. Other than that? Absolutely nothing.”

Lucky for him, a veteran vineyard manager named Chicho Magana, who had worked there for 23 years, came with the property. Lucky for him, his peripatetic Realtor knew winemakers up and down the Valley and put him in touch with the team at Highway 12 Winery who guided his first vintage for a share of the finished product. Bennett also connected Dean with Michael Muscardini, a builder-turned-winemaker with similar Italian roots who had already turned his grape-stained fantasies into commercial and critical success.

Dean describes the vineyard he acquired as being essentially “feral,” with sizable bushes growing in the rows. “We were all taking a shot in the dark...the vineyard was a mess, but I went in with Chicho, and we dropped all the fruit that didn’t meet a certain standard.” Dean says they ended up dropping two-thirds of the grapes on the ground, and what was left became the 2007 Annadel Estate Sonoma Field Blend. One taste and you know that, however they did it, they clearly did it right. Everyone should be so lucky.

Meanwhile, all those roses already had a reputation and a market at the San Francisco Flower Mart, so Bordigioni had a virtual turnkey cut-flower operation. And the winery ruins, complete with the rustic barn and a quaint carriage house, morphed into an instant wedding venue that quickly won the attention of Martha Stewart Weddings and now has an exclusive catering partnership with Paula LeDuc, one of the country’s leading event planners.

On paper, this string of enviable enterprises might suggest the hand of a flinty-eyed, single-track tycoon. It’s a surprise, therefore, to discover that Dean is fundamentally a warm and fuzzy guy. Just ask Abigail Zimmerman, a wine writer and cellar rat whose life took a Bordigioni turn.

They met at the Tuesday night farmers market, introduced to each other by Michael Muscardini, and there were instant sparks, Roman candles, small earthquakes. They’ve been together more or less nonstop ever since, and last summer Anni Lucia was born.

What else could a guy want?

Well, since you ask, a working winery. The ruins are beautiful ruins but Dean dreams of his own functional facility. For now he’s making his wine at Deerfield Ranch, working with and learning from Robert Rex and Cecilia Valdiva, but plans are in the works for a new winery and, if the past is truly prologue, that will happen in due course.

Meanwhile there are weddings, roses and about half a dozen residual Harleys to occupy his time. Not to mention Anni Lucia, Abigail and the ever-unfolding Wine Country dream.