

# The World of Wine

## A Cabernet Sauvignon Focus

An Interview with Michael Martini,  
Master Winemaker, Louis M. Martini Winery

**EDITORS' NOTE** Michael Martini grew up in his father and grandfather's vineyards, learning firsthand what it takes to make world-class wines. A graduate of the world-renowned winemaking program at U.C. Davis, Martini worked alongside his father before taking over the reins as winemaker in 1977. He recently built a micro-winery with a focus on cabernet sauvignon, using many of the artisan winemaking techniques he learned in Bordeaux and Burgundy before settling in at home.



Michael Martini

**COMPANY BRIEF** Louis M. Martini Winery ([www.louismartini.com](http://www.louismartini.com)) is a Napa Valley legend in winemaking and innovation. Founded in 1933 and dubbed "A Napa Valley Gem," this winery's legacy is dedicated to producing distinctive cabernet sauvignon from the best vineyards in Napa Valley and Sonoma County. Guests are invited to discover the award-winning wines presented in the winery's beautiful tasting room on Highway 29 in St. Helena, and experience the warm and gracious hospitality of the family winery.

### What is the overall focus and philosophy of the Louis M. Martini Winery brand?

The philosophy is to bring you the best cabernet we can possibly make. We are always striving to be the best and we always look for ways to improve. We are always experimenting. But the overall focus of the winery is cabernet sauvignon, and that's what we do.

### How broad is your product offering, and can you highlight some of the new releases you're bringing to the market?

We have a Sonoma County cabernet, which is our everyday wine, priced around \$18, and that is widely available in restaurants and grocery stores. Our Napa Valley cabernet is a bargain at \$25 and is found more in the fine wine shops and on premise. The reserve style from Alexander Valley is priced at \$35. That is concentrated in the finer wine shops and on premise as well. We make a limited production Monte Rosso Vineyard cabernet sauvignon from a world-class vineyard my family purchased in 1938, priced at \$85. Our newest endeavor is called Lot 1, which is a blend of grapes from four or five different mountaintop vineyards in the Napa Valley. It's made in a small winery that we built in 2003 at

Louis M. Martini called Cellar 254. What we're trying to do is capture the best fruit from the most prestigious cabernet sauvignon vineyards in the Napa Valley.

### Do you foresee distribution remaining relatively consistent, and are you happy with your distribution channels?

Yes. There's plenty to go wherever it wants. It's all growth in the channels we're in. I'm not sure what that saturation point is for the fine wine market but there is definitely room to grow.

### How are you able to achieve the balance between consistent quality and very reasonable price points?

The main driver in your price point is what you pay for grapes; then you have the counter costs. It's very expensive to make wine. If you focus on the top end, you're buying tons of acres of grapes that are extremely expensive to farm with lower yields. There's a big difference in the winemaking process and in the price of grapes today. These are the two significant elements and you handle them the way each needs to be handled to produce a quality wine.

### Has there been any thought of broadening out beyond cabernet sauvignon?

We do have small reserve offerings that, as a winery, we make available in the tasting room and through our wine club. One of them is an old-vine zinfandel called Gnarly Vine from 120-year-old vines. I would think that would be the next runner. The other natural fit with Louis M. Martini Winery is merlot, as we made the first varietal labeled merlot in the United States back in 1958.

### How has new technology had an impact on your winemaking process?

Some winemaking techniques have been around for a long time. Technology has given us better tools with new precision and made it easier to achieve what we want to achieve. We were one of the first wineries to use cold fermentation and were the first to develop a wind machine to prevent frost in the vineyards. These developments help us make a better wine. As you grow and taste the wines, you grow as a winemaker, because your vision of what is excellence keeps changing. You're always chasing that vision as you are adapting to it, and technology can help you get there.

### Has being engaged in the community been critical to both the culture of the brand

### and, for your family specifically, a part of the way you have wanted to operate?

Yes, it always has been. My grandfather helped establish the Napa Valley Vintners Association and we are both past presidents of the group. I am also past president of the American Society of Enology and Viticulture and the Trellis Alliance at U.C. Davis, and I have sat on the board of directors of the Wine Institute. You really have to participate in these ventures because there are ways that we can positively influence the industry on a national level and help grow our industry. In the sense of the Napa Valley community, winemakers get together and talk all the time. As friends, we get together and discuss winemaking issues over dinner. Pretty soon, you'll see the entire industry taking the same steps because they work.

### At what stage in the winemaking process can you determine if the wine is going to live up to its expectation?

In the vineyard. We can tell by the relationship between the richness of the juice of the fruit, the acidity, the pH level – which is the acidity of it – whether you're going to have a wine that's going to be long-lived or not. Plus, you have the flavors, whether they're red fruit flavors or black fruit flavors, or a micro-wine; you can see all of that in the grape. A terrific wine is made in the vineyard and has to be done on the vine. It's extremely important that we are all cognizant of the factors that make great wine.

### For 2009, are there key areas you're focused on to make sure the brand continues the strength and the growth it has had?

We're going to be working very heavily on the Napa Valley aspect of all our wines. We have a better wine and a better price than anybody else, and we have the most room to grow in our Napa Valley cabernet line. I think it has a hard time making it past the wholesalers sometimes, because they take it home for themselves.

### Do you have a great glass of wine every night?

I have a great bottle of wine every night. I make it a point to try wines from other producers in the industry. The only time I order my own wine when I go out to dinner is if I'm entertaining a client. At home, I enjoy drinking the older vintages made by my grandfather and father, as a tribute to the Louis M. Martini Winery legacy. ●

*The cabernet sauvignon wines of Louis M. Martini Winery*

