

More About Wine Pisonis are a family operation

by Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr / www.moreaboutwine.com / posted on June 16, 2025

There are few family histories in Santa Lucia Highlands as legendary as the Pisonis. Sure, we know of the Mondavi family that pioneered winemaking in Napa Valley, but in the Santa Lucia Highlands the Pisoni family gives definition and legacy to pinot noir. Well-respected producers, such as Kosta Brown and Patz & Hall, use grapes from the Pisoni ranch.

The patriarch is Gary Pisoni who planted grapes in this rugged and often unyielding area in 1982 -- before Santa Lucia Highlands was declared a designated viticultural area. He had to drill several wells before finding good water for irrigation. But he persevered and turned out homemade wines when his two sons -- Jeff and Mark -- were playing in the hills. As the boys matured and were old enough to share wines from their father's vast collection, the seed for a new winemaking generation was firmly planted.

Jeff studied enology at Fresno State University; Mark studied agriculture economics at the University of California at Davis. They returned to the family farm and together with their father made the first Pisoni Estate Pinot Noir in 1998. Today Jeff is the winemaker of Lucia by Pisoni wines; Mark is the vineyard manager of the vast Pisoni vineyards.

Then in 2011 Jeff married Bibiana Gonzalez Rave, a native of Columbia. Her wine path wasn't already blazed by family. Her only exposure to wine was an occasional sip from her father's glass, yet at 14 she caught the bug to make wine. Bibiana studied wine in France, earning two degrees in enology, and worked in nearly every French wine region before moving to the United States. After working several harvests in California, she founded Cattleya in 2012 and consulted for several renown producers. In 2015 she was named "Winemaker of the Year" by the San Francisco Chronicle.

Today the extended Pisoni team has gained wide recognition for its exquisite pinot noirs. We joined up with Jeff, Mark and Bibiana in a recent virtual tasting.

Bibiana makes wine under two labels: Alma de Cattleya, every-day wines priced accordingly, and Cattleya, more premium wines. Cattleya is an orchid, the flower of her native





ALMA *de* CATTLEYA



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Good sips!



Columbia. The 2023 Sonoma County Alma de Cattleya Pinot Noir (\$26) is aged in neutral barrels so there is little oak influence on what is an otherwise balanced and pure wine. The grapes come from coastal regions with a heavy dose of Russian River Valley fruit. It shows blackberry notes with hints of spice and herbs.

Bibiana and Jeff

In contrast, the 2023 Cattleya Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$65) has more depth and character with the grapes coming from two vineyards at an elevation between 1,000 and 1,300 feet. This wine sees more oak and thus is more complex and deeper. Plum and cherry play a bigger role in the flavor profile. Only 300 to 500 cases of this wine are made each year.

The Pisonis are meticulous in both the vineyard and the winery. Yields are low to extract the best juice from the grapes, and the team lets the grapes do the talking with little interference from the winemaker.

Jeff's 2023 Lucia by Pisoni Estate Cuvee Pinot Noir (\$55) comes mostly from the Pisoni Vineyard with the balance coming from Gary's Vineyard and Soberanes. It has effusive red fruit aromas with varietal black cherry and plum flavors.

The 2023 Lucia by Pisoni Gary's Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$80) is a very special wine. Planted in 1996, the vineyard overlooking the Salinas Valley is a partnership of childhood pals Gary Pisoni and Gary Franscioni. Located on a gentle slope, the grapes provide depth and richness with black cherry and strawberry compote flavors.

Cattleya and Lucia also makes a small quantity of syrah, a grape that attracted Bibiana's interest when she was making wine in Cote Rotie. The 2023 Cattleya "The Initiation" Syrah (\$70) has a lot of texture with generous and earthy blackberry and black cherry flavors, soft tannins, great acidity and impressive floral, blueberry aromas. This one, sourced from Pisoni's four acres of syrah, should be cellared.

The 2023 Lucia by Pisoni Susan's Hill Syrah (\$80) is dense and tannic with good palate weight and dark berry, herbal notes.

These wines are made in small quantities but demonstrate the team's love for the grape variety and what the rugged region has to offer.