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## Chiarito Vineyard: a reverence for the old ways

Ukiah Daily Journal Staff

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Wine Notes by Heidi Cusick Dickerson

I won't say that John Chiarito should have been born in another time or place, even though he could have been. When I met Chiarito (pronounced kee-a-ree-to) at his winery in Talmage, I was immediately struck by his love of the best of the old Italian ways.

"My family came to this country from southern Italy. When I was a kid, we would spend every Sunday with my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, eating great food and drinking homemade wine," says Chiarito on his Web site introduction. "So, when I bought my land and decided to build my own home and create my own winery, I really felt it was a tribute to my grandparents and their way of life."

Fatto a mano (everything by hand) is Chiarito's motto. His orange and green label features a watermark of a hand. The original was drawn by his brother, and the lithograph hangs over his fireplace. "Everything here is touched by hand," he explains, the vineyard, the wine, the olives, the house and the bread.

On his windowsill is a photo of Larry Pacini, a grape grower and icon in Mendocino wine lore, who lived up the road. "I love it," he says, speaking with his hands as much as his voice, explaining how he learned to bake bread by watching Pacini, when he finally agreed to tutor him. Chiarito remembers being at a job site where he was building a house in Redwood Valley one day when Pacini called him and

said he was about to make some bread. If he wanted to see how to do it, he had to come now. Chiarito stopped everything and zoomed back to Talmage for what he considered the most important lesson he was about to learn. It took more than three months of weekly baking and bringing his sample loaves to Pacini, who tasted and critiqued his products. Then one day, Chiarito's olive green eyes light up as he says, "Larry told me you got it."

Pacini passed away in the mid 1990s, but his bread lives on. Chiarito helps out at his friend Ari Rosen's restaurant Scopa in Healdsburg and shared the bread recipe, which is listed on the menu as "Larry Pacini's Housemade Ciabatta." When Chiarito sliced a loaf still warm from the oven with its thick crust and airy crumb, I have to say it was one of the best breads I've ever tasted. With the bread, Chiarito served olives he cured from the trees he planted along the east side of his property.

He kept a border of walnut trees from the old orchard that was on this five-acre property he purchased in 1988. Chiarito worked 34 years in construction and still does a little building as he grows his wine business. In 1989, he started digging the foundation for the charming craftsman house that occupies what could be a contemporary Italian setting somewhere outside Naples, where it so happens his grandparents on his mother's side were born. His father's family was from an inland province, Basilicata. Chiarito's 95-year-old dad, Americo, has corked every bottle and worked every harvest since the beginning.

Chiarito currently makes a total of about 600 cases of zinfandel, petite sirah and a couple of Italian varietals: Negroamaro and Nero d'Avola. The grapes come from the acreage in Talmage and another five acres he manages off Lovers Lane in Ukiah.

Dressed in a sage shirt and blue jeans, the lean

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