

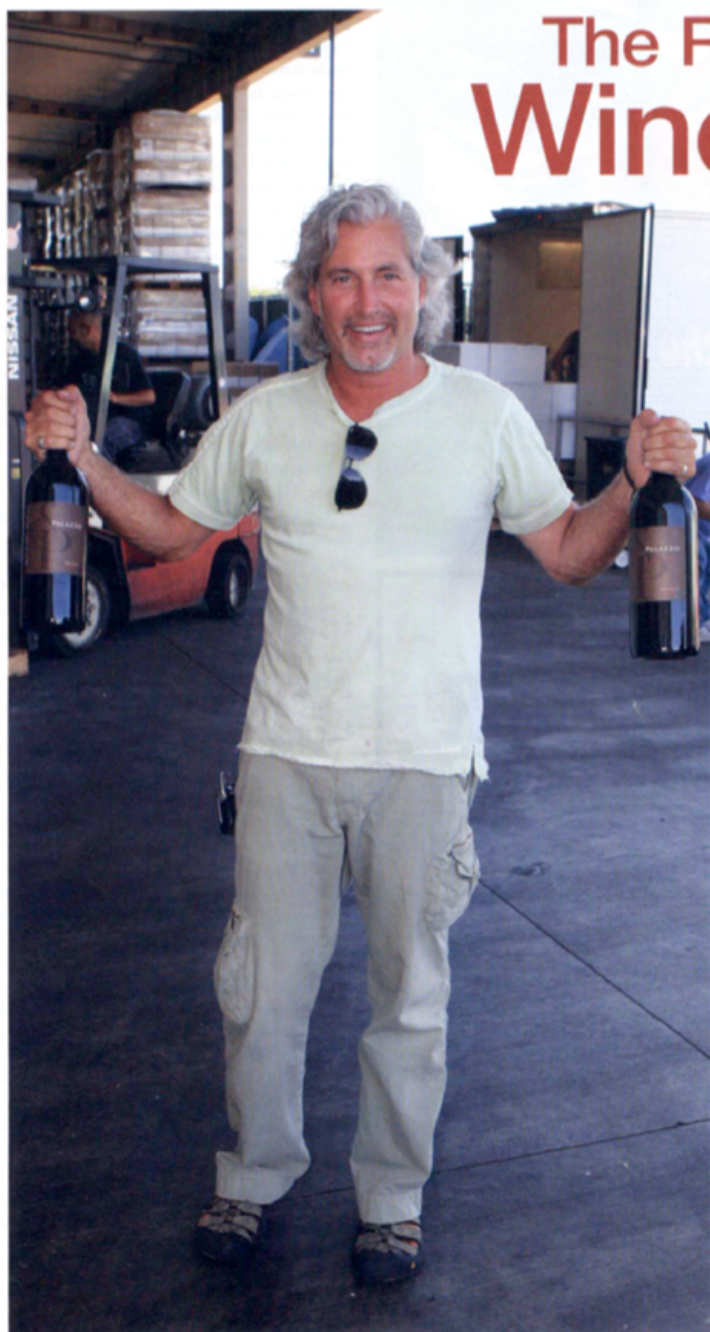
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Portraits

Studio City's Scott Palazzo moved from producing Missy Elliott and Green Day to producing some extraordinary red wines.

The Rock-and-Roll Winemaker

by Shelley Levitt



It's the kind of brilliantly sunny early spring day in Los Angeles that casts a forget-your-woes spell over everyone, especially those lucky enough to be sipping wine in the middle of a weekday afternoon at an outdoor café. And among these what-me-worry patrons who seem without a care in the midst of the deepest economic turmoil since the Great Depression, none exudes more of an air of contentment than the silver-haired, 50-ish Scott Palazzo. And for good reason. Dressed in faded jeans, cowboy boots and a colorful short-sleeved shirt, the Studio City resident is not only drinking wine, he's pouring it, a gorgeous Cabernet Franc that just happens to bear his name on the label. The bottle is the fourth vintage in what has been a spectacularly well-received transition for Palazzo from music and television producer to wine proprietor.

Palazzo founded his wine label in 2003, with the goal of producing "a beautiful elegant red table wine" in the style of the Bordeaux he had come to love when he stumbled into the winemaking village of St. Emilion as a 19 year old and stayed for two years apprenticing in the wine business. With grapes grown in the Carneros district of Napa Valley, and the help of Peter Franus, a renowned Napa Valley

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winemaker, Palazzo released its first wine, Palazzo 2003 Napa Valley Red Wine, a blend of Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, in 2005. The wine received a notable score of 91 from the extraordinarily influential wine critic Robert Parker of *"The Wine Advocate,"* who commended its "beautiful texture as well as purity," adding "This is an impressive beginning for proprietor Scott Palazzo." (Future vintages would score even higher marks.)

Parker wasn't the only one who was impressed. Thomas Keller, chef-owner of the revered French Laundry, not only added Palazzo's first release to his wine list, he called Palazzo to ask if he would craft an exclusive Cabernet Franc for his three restaurants (New York's Per Se, Bouchon in Las Vegas, as well as The French Laundry.) Today, Palazzo wines are on the lists of some of the most celebrated restaurants in the country, including Firefly in Studio City and Mistral in Sherman Oaks. Palazzo releases about 1,500 cases of wine a year, and they sell for \$65 to \$75 a bottle at high-end wine shops, including The Flask in Studio City. That might not sound like a bargain to those used to toting home the latest vintage from Charles Shaw at Trader Joe's, but Palazzo says, "I didn't think we needed another \$150 to \$200 cult wine. I wanted my wine to be elegant but accessible, and in this economy, I'm getting as many accolades for the price of my wines as for their taste."

Palazzo may have taken a zigzag path to winemaking, but red wine has been a part of his life since childhood. At holiday celebrations in his Italian-American Orange County household, everyone would drink his grandfather's homemade red wine, which his immigrant grandfather made in the cellar of his home back in Philadelphia; the kids were allowed a shot glass. Palazzo would go on to earn a football scholarship to Whittier College, but he left at the end of the first semester. "School was never my strong suit," he says. He knocked around for the next few years; there were seasons spent skiing and doing odd jobs in Mammoth and Park City, Utah, then surfing in Oahu. And at 19, he took a life-changing trip to Europe. "I left for the obligatory two or three months, with my guitar slung on my back," he says. Instead, Palazzo ended up staying two years, with much of that time spent in St. Emilion. "I like to really immerse myself in things," he says, "So when I wandered into this idyllic beautiful French village with cobblestone streets and climbing vines everywhere, I decided to stay a while."

His apprenticeship in the wine business was literally from the ground up. Palazzo began picking grapes and went on to learn blending, bottling and everything in between. The rhythms of winemaking left lots of time for travel, and he wandered through Italy, Germany and Spain, sometimes playing his guitar on the street, performing songs by favored singer-songwriters like Dylan, Springsteen and Van Morrison, to earn some spare change.

Back home in Southern California, Palazzo moved to Studio City and threw himself into the music business. He worked as an unpaid production assistant on music video sets and eventually moved on to producing videos himself. His specialty was the long-form performance video. "When I'm directing a live show," he says, "you've got seven, 10 or 12 cameras working at the same time, and you've got to be able to anticipate what the lead singer is going to do seconds before he does it. You can't go to school to learn that; life prepared me for the job." Palazzo produced and directed music videos for an eclectic mix of artists from Green Day to Missy Elliott and Willie Nelson to Oingo Boingo. His company Camera Ready Productions also moved into television, working on projects for

Barbara Walters, VH1's "Behind the Music," "America's Most Wanted" and ESPN, among others.

Four years ago, a burnt-out Palazzo sold his company. By then he has discovered the pleasures of Northern California's wine country. "I fell in love with the European sensibility of the area and the slower pace of life there," he says. He began splitting his time between Studio City and the Sonoma and Napa valleys. "I would drive through the winding roads of the Alexander Valley a few times a week," he says. "I'd see it in the early morning fog when there was baby's breath in bloom everywhere, and as much as I loved my life in LA, this was a lot different from being on the 405 at 3 in the afternoon." That chance in topography led him back to his early years in France. "It's all about the wine in Sonoma and Napa," he says, "and the businessman and artist in me couldn't stop thinking about the kind of wine I wanted to make – a beautiful but affordable red table wine in the style of a Right Bank Bordeaux."

For some accustomed to fast-moving projects ("In the world of music videos, the whole process from the beginning of production to the final product takes just six weeks," he explains), the life of a beginning vintner proved almost excruciatingly slow. Palazzo walked more than 60 vineyards before deciding on the plots that would yield the right fruit for his subtle yet full-bodied wine. He chose the Carneros region of Napa Valley because its maritime climate and shallow clay soil was similar to the rolling hills of St. Emilion. He then met with many of Napa's most renowned winemakers before deciding on Peter Franus as his consultant. "I wanted someone to be my chaperone and mentor," he says, "and someone who would keep me out of trouble."

It would be 18 months before Palazzo bottled his first vintage and more than another year before he uncorked the first bottle. "For a long time, I felt like I was in the oak-barrel business rather than the wine business," he says. Palazzo, who is single, shared one of those first bottles with his mother and father, in a neighborhood Italian restaurant near their Orange County home. "That first year I spent in France when I was 19, I sent my mom a total of five postcards," he says, "So I'm sure she spent time wondering whether I was alive or dead. It was a tremendous joy to enjoy that first bottle of wine with my parents all these years later."

As the afternoon begins to fade, Palazzo packs away his wine. There will be trips to Boston and New York in the next few days to introduce sommeliers, chefs and wine sellers to his 2006 vintages, a part of wine proprietorship that he finds as enjoyable as the time he spends in the vineyards and wine cellars. "I'm not shy," he says. "I love showing my wines and watching people enjoy them." Leaning forward as though he is about to share a great confidence, he admits there is only one gripe he has with his new life. "I have a pretty good collection of wine at home," he says, "and I love to sample them with friends. But whenever friends invite me to dinner, they feel insulted if I don't bring along one of my own bottles, even if I've brought them an incredible Chateaufort-du-Pape. I'm like, 'Hey guys, I've had Palazzo five nights this week!'"

Scott Palazzo laughs. There is still not a cloud in the skies on this glorious spring day.