



Castello di Amoroza

A Tuscan Castle in Napa Valley

(Jim Sullivan)

BY MILES RYAN FISHER

Dario Sattui glanced at the sign—*Private Property*—and walked right by it, leaving his motorcycle behind. He walked toward a Tuscan castle he'd seen in the distance, one that he wanted a better glimpse of.

Just then the owner, Kaja, came out of her house. “You are trespassing!” she said. “Were I in a bad mood, I would throw you off the property. But,” she looked at him and smiled, “I’m in a good mood.” So instead, she invited him in for a glass of wine.

Over that glass of wine, Dario learned that Kaja and her husband, Lars, were from Denmark, but that they’d lived in the United States while he worked as a naval architect until they retired to Italy, where they lived on a small vineyard and olive orchard. He also learned that the three small medieval buildings on their property were new, and that it was Lars who’d built them.

Dario returned to the small vineyard to visit Lars—and explain his ambitious dream, one that seemed as outlandish as any. After an hour and a half, he asked Lars, “Would you come to the United States and help me build a castle?”

“I’ll come,” Lars replied immediately.

“But don’t you want to consult your wife first?” Dario asked.

“I said I will come!” Lars shouted.

Dario had his builder. Now, however, he needed someone who could do the brickwork, a master craftsman capable of replicating architecture that hadn’t been constructed in centuries. So he traveled to Austria, where he met Fritz Gruber, a man who worked with old world materials and used ancient techniques to build wine cellars. He explained his dream to Franz.

“A wine cellar I can understand,” Fritz said, “but a whole castle?”

Fritz then led Dario down to the maze of medieval vaulted cellars that sat beneath his own home. After four days and much discussion, Fritz agreed to help. He looked at Dario and said, “But you are absolutely crazy.”

Perhaps Fritz was right. Perhaps Dario Sattui was crazy to think that he could build an authentic 13th century Tuscan Castle in Napa Valley. But pursuing ambitious dreams was in his blood. After all, his own great-grandparents, Vittorio and Caterina, did just that ... on their honeymoon. In 1882, they set sail from Carsi—a small village near Genoa, which is the capital of the Liguria region. They crossed the Atlantic Ocean and sailed around the tip of South America (the Panama Canal was still three decades away from being built). While on the



Capable of holding two hundred people, The Great Hall and the frescoes adorning its interior took two and a half years to build. (Jim Sullivan)

voyage, Vittorio's brother, Augustino, fell ill and had to disembark in Lima, Peru. Vittorio and Caterina, however, persisted, traveling up the western coast of the Americas until they reached San Francisco.

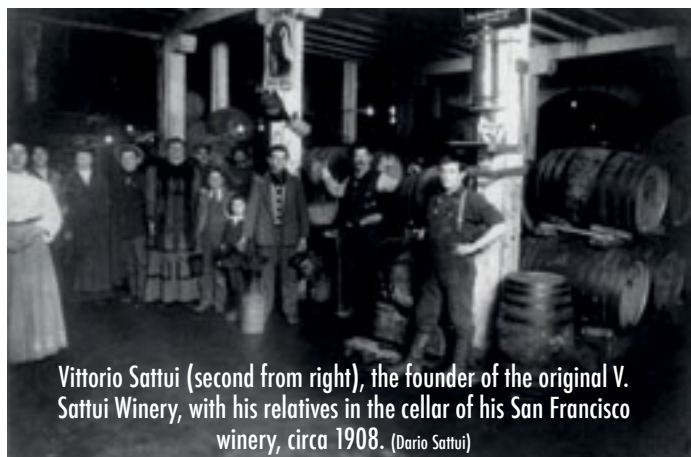
Though he was a baker by trade, Vittorio became one of California's first winemakers when he opened V. Sattui Winery in San Francisco just three years after arriving in the United States. Its success grew until, after

three decades of operation, Prohibition turned it dry and left the land barren.

The land would stay that way until half a century later when Vittorio's great-grandson, Dario, was touring Europe, sleeping in an old Volkswagen van, visiting the wineries of various regions, and developing a fascination for architecture—particularly that of medieval castles. The trip ignited a passion, and when Dario returned to the United States in 1972, he did so

with a dream: to resurrect his great-grandfather's winery.

Without money to acquire land in Napa Valley, he leased a building, bought grapes, and rented winery equipment. V. Sattui Winery then became one of the first wineries to bypass distributors and sell wine directly to those who consume it. In its first year, it turned a small profit. From there, the winery prospered, and Dario assumed this would take him into retirement.



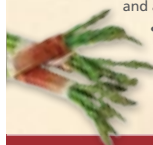
Vittorio Sattui (second from right), the founder of the original V. Sattui Winery, with his relatives in the cellar of his San Francisco winery, circa 1908. (Dario Sattui)

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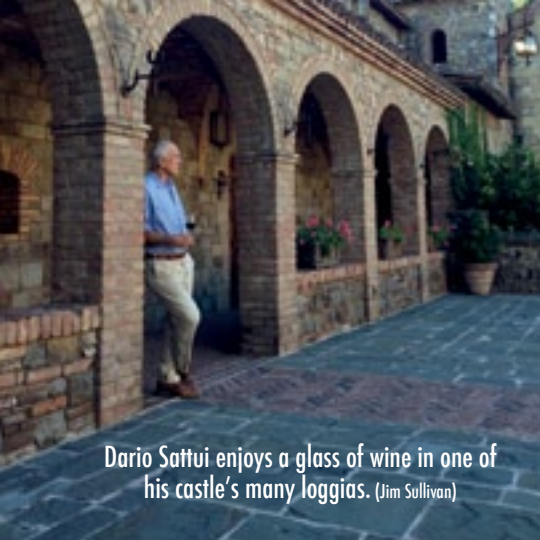
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Dario Sattui enjoys a glass of wine in one of his castle's many loggias. (Jim Sullivan)

What it took him into, however, was an even grander dream, one he would obsess over, one that would consume his life, when, in 1993, he purchased a 171-acre property in Napa Valley. With the vineyard came a permit to construct a large building—a permit that had taken the previous owner thirteen years to obtain.

Once he acquired the property, Dario replanted Sangiovese, Cabernet, and Merlot grapes in the vineyard, planning to sell these grapes to his V. Sattui Winery. A year later, his plans expanded when he held the design for an 8,500 square-foot building. Initially he projected that it would take three years to build. It ended up taking nearly fifteen.

Dario and his construction team (which evolved over time) began by digging an underground cave and the wine cellars. Once they started digging, they didn't stop. They began spending so much time underground that they'd see sunlight only at lunchtime. Ten years after they'd begun the excavation, the underground portion of the castle was complete—four separate levels covering two acres and holding eighty rooms, most of which would be devoted to wine-making. Then they started building the actual castle.

"IF YOU FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS, YOU'RE GOING TO DO A BETTER JOB AND BE MORE SUCCESSFUL. IF YOU DO THINGS JUST FOR MONEY, YOU WON'T PUT YOUR HEART AND SOUL INTO IT."

~ DARIO SATTUI

They dug a moat and erected thirty-five-foot high parapeted walls that met at five different sixty-foot towers. Then they moved inside, laying out courtyards and building loggias. They constructed a Tuscan farmhouse and several outbuildings. Then the Great Hall (with an authentic fireplace that

predates Columbus), the stables, apartments for nobles, wine fermenting rooms, a church and chapel, and secret passageways. They even built a prison and torture chamber that includes an Iron Maiden from the late Renaissance.

Every inch of it was authentic, the construction team using the very methods and materials that would have been used nearly 1,000 years ago. They chiseled more than 8,000 tons of stone. When they could, they used materials that had survived since the 14th century. Nearly two hundred shipping containers filled with these medieval materials traveled from Europe to Castello di Amorosa.

All the while, the replanted grapes continued growing. Dario allowed the vines to age so that his winery could produce the highest quality wine. But by 2005, after more than a decade of construction and without a single bottle of wine to show for it, Dario had depleted his resources. He was out of money.

To raise more funds, he produced the Castle's first bottles of wine and sold them below market value. He borrowed from the bank. He even



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The 12,000-square-foot Grand Barrel Room that has more than forty Roman cross vaults. (Jim Sullivan)



(Peter Menzel)

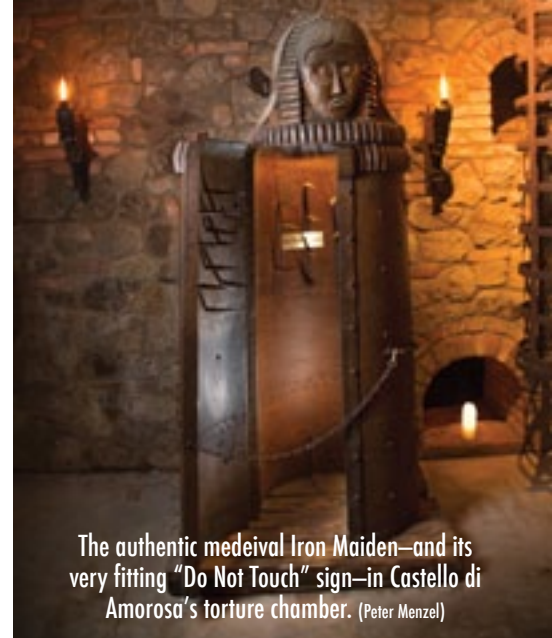
borrowed from his own V. Sattui Winery. His obsession drove him past the point of bankruptcy and toward a place where he could lose everything he'd ever worked to build. He began having nightmares, almost giving up on the project entirely. Maybe, he thought, he'd made a total fool of himself.

But Dario managed to support two more years of construction, and in April 2007, he finally opened the castle doors. What was originally supposed to be an 8,500 square-foot building had ballooned into a forty-million-dollar 150,000 square-foot castle that contained 107 total rooms

on eight levels, four above ground and four below. As he stood at the doors of the castle on opening day, he wondered if anybody would show up.

The response was overwhelming. Visitors came for a taste not just of high-quality wine but also of medieval Italy. They wanted to see the 13th century Tuscan Castle entrenched in Napa Valley. It became a sight for all ages—adults stood in awe of what had been accomplished, children stared at what they'd seen only in storybooks.

Today, ten years after opening, *Castello di Amorosa* produces more than 80,000 gallons of wine annually and



The authentic medieval Iron Maiden—and its very fitting “Do Not Touch” sign—in Castello di Amorosa’s torture chamber. (Peter Menzel)

hosts 450,000 paid visitors, making it one of the most frequented wineries in the world. And unlike most Napa Valley wineries that require reservations due to county regulations, *Castello di Amorosa* has the last public tour and tasting permit, meaning you can show up without a reservation.

While there may be a moat at *Castello di Amorosa*, there certainly is no “Private Property” sign—just an open invitation from Dario to come enjoy a glass of wine ... and his 13th century Tuscan castle.

Miles Ryan Fisher is the Editor-in-Chief of Italian America magazine. Contact him at mfisher@osia.org



Castello di Amorosa’s award-winning wines have received ratings as high as 94 points from renowned wine critic, Robert Parker. (Alison Cochrane)



For a full historical perspective of Dario’s journey along with incredible photos of Castello di Amorosa, check out his new book!

Find Castello di Amorosa’s award-winning wine at www.castellodiamorosa.com