

# THE SURPRISING CONNECTION BETWEEN ITALY'S MAZZEI FAMILY, VIRGINIA WINE, AND U.S. POLITICS



We all know that great wine and great ideas go together. For wine lovers, the name Mazzei is all about the excellent wines this noble Italian family makes in Chianti at their Fonterutoli estate, and now too in Sicily and on Tuscany's Maremma coast. They have been at it since 1435, and their flagship wine Siepi, a super Tuscan, *is always a particular favorite*. But President Obama had something else in mind when he mentioned the family in his toast to Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi at a *State Dinner at the White House last week*. He noted the intellectual influence of an 18th century scion in the family, Filippo Mazzei, on Thomas Jefferson and specifically his articulation of natural rights and equality that found its way into the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

But the story is even richer, in wine and in politics. Mazzei—a physician, viticulturist, and merchant—met Benjamin Franklin in London in the 1760s and corresponded with Jefferson. Mazzei was convinced to move to Virginia. In 1773 he arrived with hundreds of vine cuttings and a coterie that included Tuscan vineyard workers, winemakers and, of course, a tailor.

Jefferson gave Mazzei 193 acres south of Monticello, where the Tuscan settled and began planting vines. Together with Jefferson, George Washington and others, Mazzei formed the Virginia Wine Company. Early frosts and blights frustrated their efforts, but the prophetic Tuscan told Washington in a letter he was convinced great wines would someday come from Virginia. “In my opinion...the best wine in the world will be made here...I do not believe that nature is so favorable to growing vines in any country as this.”

Mazzei and Jefferson's winemaking efforts were a prelude to today's thriving quality wine industry in Virginia, where nearly 300 estates across the state's varied geography produce outstanding wines. *The best are classy, elegant, and balanced, more evocative of old world than new world styles.*

Mazzei went on to serve the cause of American independence in many ways, as a soldier and agent of Virginia in Europe. After the revolution he went back to a life of adventure all over Europe, but remained in correspondence with Jefferson until he died in 1816. As an epilogue to the story, land from Mazzei's Colle estate now forms part of Albemarle County's celebrated *Jefferson Vineyards* which makes some great bordeaux-style blends.

—William McIlhenny, Associate Publisher