

Postcards from the Italian Swiss Colony Winery

Winery Helped Popularize Wine in America

By Alice van Ommeren

It was 1964, and Craig Blackstone and his parents stopped at the Italian Swiss Colony Winery in Asti, located between Cloverdale and Healdsburg, on the way to the family cabin along the Russian River. At that time, the Italian Swiss Colony was one of the largest wineries in the country and was the world's largest producer of table wine. Craig doesn't remember much of the free 45-minute winery tour or the free wine in the tasting room, but he does remember the rack of postcards. There were half a dozen different types of colorful postcards showcasing the winery, just there, free for the taking. He was in his early teens and had just started collecting postcards and remembers taking one of each.

Craig took his postcards home, but he noticed others were not doing the same. People in the tasting room were writing on the back of the postcards and dropping them in a wine barrel located at the end of each table, which served as a mailbox. The winery covered the postage and an Asti postmark was guaranteed. According to Jack Florence, author of the *Legacy of a Village*, in 1962 the Italian Swiss Colony published 6 million postcards, and was mailing out as many as 3,000 postcards a day. At that time, the tasting room was staffed by at least a dozen people and the wine tours were continuous through the day. It was estimated that ten percent of the cars traveling along the Old Redwood Highway, now known as Highway 101, would turn into the winery. The Italian Swiss Colony winery was one of the biggest tourist attractions in California, following Disneyland.

The winery was established in 1881 by Italian immigrant, Andrea Sbarbaro, who had become a successful San Francisco banker and wanted to establish an agricultural colony. It is during these first few years that the winery began using postcards, and would do so throughout its history. Gail Unzelman is a respected wine historian and has been avidly collecting postcards



After a tour of the winery, visitors were led to the tasting room where Tipo White and Tipo Red were the most popular wines served. The raffia wrapped bottles would often end up as souvenirs to be used as vases or candle holders back home.

Courtesy author's private collection.

and ephemera of California wine for more than forty years. In her collection we see Italian Swiss Colony Winery postcards as early as 1895 being used to confirm grape orders and shipments. These were government printed postcards since it wasn't until 1898 that the Private Mailing Card Act allowed for the private printing of postcards.

In 1907, postal regulations changed and postcards began being printed with "divided backs," which made it possible for both addresses and messages to be written on the same side. As a result, pictures could now take up the entire front of the card. With these changes, the popularity of postcards soared, ushering in an era referred to by postcard collectors as the "Golden Age of Postcards." The majority of postcards during this time were printed in Germany, which had the best lithographic presses. It is during this period that many wineries began to use postcards for promotional purposes, including the Italian Swiss Colony Winery.

Postcard imports from Germany declined during World



The back of this postcard reads "Whoopie! Here we are in the sample room." Employees often wore traditional Italian and Swiss wear. Notice the rack of postcards and the counterspace to write on the right.

Courtesy author's private collection.



The back of this postcard mailed in 1951 says "I'm sitting at one of these tables writing cards and drinking a glass of wine." There are several postcard racks on display, as well as small wine barrels at the end of each table that served as mailboxes.

Courtesy author's private collection.

War I and for a variety of other reasons the nation's interest in postcards began to wane by 1915. Nevertheless, the Italian Swiss Colony Winery continued to publish postcards and because of that, much of its history has been captured on those images. The public tasting room at the Italian Swiss Colony Winery opened in 1934, which made them one of the first wineries in the region to provide free tours. In 1937, a larger space was built to specifically serve as a hospitality room with a formal tasting bar.

In 1939, the photochrome postcard, or "chrome" was introduced. These cards have a glossy finish and are easily produced using color photography. It is well known among California postcard collectors that the millions of chrome postcards of the Italian Swiss Colony Winery flooded the postcard collectors' market. There were so many in circulation that these cards remain quite common, and are often ignored by postcard collectors. Over the decades, much of the success of the winery has been associated with its mission of hospitality

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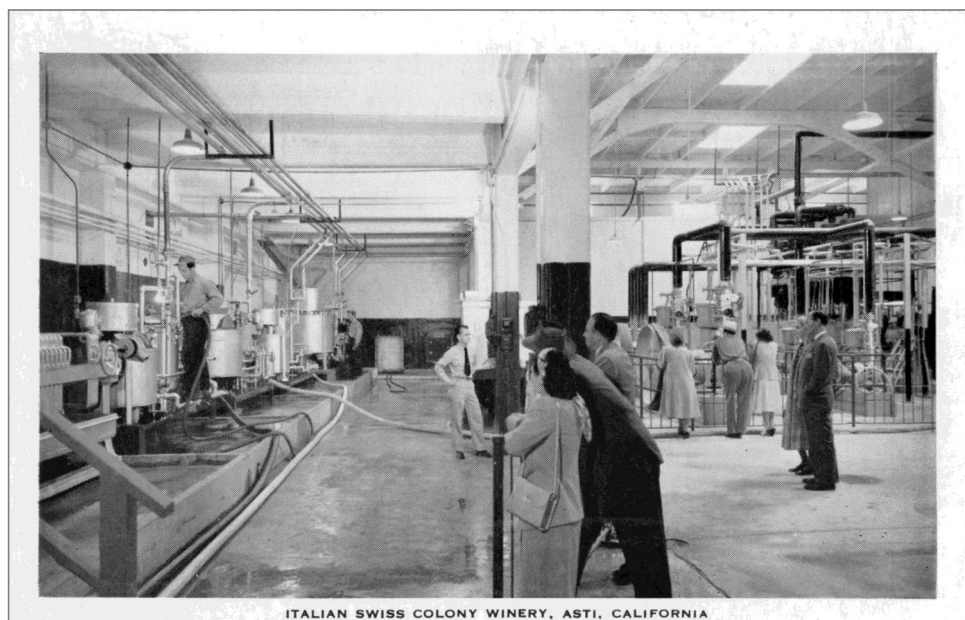
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In Joy of Scanning Recipe Part II, we'll see how to assess your images. What is it? How do I deal with a half-tone image from a newspaper? I will close out the Part II section by providing you a list of places to take your photograph to have it professionally scanned locally. I will also list my recommendation where to mail your images for scanning in case the job is just too overwhelming and time consuming.

In Part III, I will walk you through a scanning process which involves the reconstruction of a mounted photograph torn into many pieces.



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This postcard is of the Refrigeration and Filtering Room. The 45-minute winery tour showed visitors each step of the wine making process. In 1962, the winery provided approximately 5,000 tours making it the largest winery tour operation in California.

Courtesy author's private collection.

and entertainment, as well as various other marketing strategies, but collectors of vintage postcards believe the publishing of postcards was a large part of the winery's success.

Gail Unzelman expresses amazement to the sheer number of postcards produced by the Italian Swiss Colony, the most postcards of any winery in the world. Craig Blackstone continued collecting postcards throughout his life. He is now retired and has an extensive collection of Sonoma County postcards.

About the Author: Alice van Ommeren is a Deltiologist, a person that collects and studies picture postcards. She has published several books using postcards, including *Petaluma in Vintage Postcards*. She is also the editor of the San Francisco Bay Area Post Card Club newsletter.

All images are from the author's collection.