TRUDIE & STING
MAKING WINE IN ITALY

OUR GUIDE TO PROSECCO: THE WINES, THE REGION

NEW WORLD VALUES, FRENCH WINE STYLE

THE BOUNTY OF PIEDMONT: 750+ NEW RELEASES

WOLFGANG PUCK'S PERFECT MATCH
Harvest is a busy time of year in Campania, the sunny, fertile region south of Rome. As a countryside’s worth of vineyards are picked, grapes flood the wineries. But first, wine from the previous vintage must be hauled off to warehouses for shipping.

In one of those warehouses, located in a settlement called Oplontis, a man named Lucius Crassius Tertius does business. As the wine-laden carts trundle in, Crassius’ workers scramble to fill up terra cotta amphorae—more than 1,200 of them, the equivalent of 3,300 cases of wine.

But then things take a turn for the supernatural: The sky begins raining ash and rock all up and down the Bay of Naples. Fifty-four men, women and children take refuge in a storeroom at Crassius’ place, where they can see boats still tacking around in the bay—a way to safety. But no boat arrives, as Vesuvius rolls, and then it is too late.

So went the vintage of 79 A.D.

Nearly 2,000 years later, archaeologist Michael Thomas, co-director of the Center for the Study of Ancient Italy at the University of Texas, Austin, began excavating at Oplontis, located less than 2 miles northwest of Pompeii.

In 2011, his Oplontis Project team wrapped up its dig at Oplontis Villa A (better known to tourists as Villa Poppea), which, with its extravagant entertainment spaces and supersize swimming pool, was obviously a pleasure palace. The Bay of Naples was the Hamptons of its era, where Rome’s wealthy merchants, senators and other elite summered.

The team then turned its attention
to Oplontis Villa B. Even though Villa B had first been excavated in the 1970s and '80s, no one knew quite what to make of it, except that the impressively large yet mostly undecorated structure was almost certainly not a "villa" at all.

A two-story peristyle surrounds a courtyard at the heart of the complex, leading into more than 70 storerooms and modest apartments. The clues left behind under the ash didn’t seem to add up to anything terribly specific: amphora shards all over the courtyard; 27 different species of hay; "literally a ton" of pomegranates.

And in one chamber, the remains of 54 souls unlucky enough to be ashore when the cloud of ash above the volcano billowed so high that it collapsed on itself, spewing forth a 1,000° F pyroclastic flow moving at 300 miles per hour.

Though the dirty work of digging at Oplontis B will finish this summer, it will take several more years to process everything the team has turned up. But in these past few years, the purpose of the mysterious villa has come more into focus: It appears to have been a hub of the wine trade.

Thomas, now 49, brought no particular expertise in the study of old wine from his nearly two decades of excavating in Italy (beyond a fondness for rustic Chianti). In addition to being project co-director, he is a masonry analyst and all-around "dirt guy."

But in 2007, Thomas purchased San Saba Vineyard and winery in California's Monterey region from his step-father and launched the Wrath label, producing Pinot Noir, Syrah, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, learning the ropes year by year.

At 6'4" and hearty beard, Thomas looks equally the parts of vintner and archaeologist. But he fell into both vocations by accident. Born and raised in Dallas, Thomas graduated from art history to black diamonds, skiing Vail during the day and working nights as a doorman/bouncer at a club where the manager rewarded him in cash for confiscating fake IDs ("15 in one night—that was my record"). Deciding to return to his art studies, Thomas was told by one grad-school interviewer that there'd be a spot for him if he wanted to study antiquities, a road that would lead to Rome and field work.

But only as pieces fell into place at Oplontis did Thomas find himself drawn into the study of ancient wine.

Sifting through the evidence at Villa B, the team found more and more links to wine. There were not 400 amphorae, as the first excavators had thought, but more than 1,200, all in the style the Romans used primarily for transporting wine, enough to hold nearly 8,000 gallons of liquid. The archaeologists ascertained that corks that plugged some of the amphorae—a rare discovery, preserved in the ash—retained traces of wine residue on the interior side; some of these vessels must have been stacked upside-down and were full at the time of the eruption.

"And then there were the little things we started to find," says Thomas. Ruts in the road entering the courtyard match the axle span of Roman ox carts used to move goods in quantity. The draft animals would be rewarded with a hay snack. It began to look like a lot of activity went on in that yard.

No dolia (earthenware fermenting vats) have been discovered at Villa B to indicate that wine was made on the premises. But Romans employed the culleus, a big leather sack, "basically a cow sewn up," to transport wine over land by cart. And to tan and refurbish their caillet, couriers used pomegranates.

Each sack could fill 20 amphorae, waterproofed with pine resin.

"We're so paranoid about what goes into wine," notes Thomas.
wryly. Roman wine “had leather in it, had resin in it, had pitch in it, amphora god-knows-what. It’s just crazy to think what went through a Roman wine before it made it to a cup.”

But why would the Campanians deliver 8,000 gallons of wine to a storage facility situated two-thirds of a mile from the shore and fill up containers that each required two men to carry?

It turned out they didn’t. One of the researchers dropped coring tubes into the earth behind Oplontis B to take soil samples, and up came ancient ocean sediment. In A.D. 79, Villa B was right on the water. Indeed, a closer study of the skeletons revealed they’d been dusted with sand. In the carriage, someone had lost a seal ring bearing the inscription L.CRAS.TERT. on one side. On the back of the band, there’s a little engraving of a wine cup.

Now, a picture emerged of Oplontis B in the flush of activity, just before the world went dark. Villas small and grand grew wine grapes, to be sent off to crushpads. Archaeologists in Pompeii partnered in the 90s with Campanian winery Mastroberardino on a project that revealed even “the existence of vineyards inside the city, in the gardens of the houses of Pompeii,” says Piero Mastroberardino. (Mastroberardino has studied and replanted 15 such vineyards among the ruins to replicate how they once grew; they yield a wine of indigenous varieties called Villa dei Misteri.)

With harvest on the horizon, oxcarts were hustling finished Campanian wine from area wineries into the Oplontis courtyard, where cuvee were drained into amphorae. If he was indeed the boss, Cassius had his men take the big jars out on a dock behind the complex to be loaded onto boats for export. The presence of a few amphorae in Cretean and Spanish designs suggests Oplontis B was in the import business as well. Where did the local wine go? Perhaps up the coast to Rome, the most populous and thirstiest city in the world.

No one had previously considered that Oplontis B might be a “bottling” and shipping center in a millennia-old three-tier system—or that the Romans would even have had such a system—because no complex of this type had ever been discovered. But to
an American winemaker, it made perfect sense.

"If you think about the whole process, if I put it in the context of what we do at Wrath, we’re faced with the problem every winery with a facility has: You can’t have barrels full of wine and then bring in your new harvest. You have to get that stuff out, so you bottle it," explains Thomas. "They’re faced with the same dilemma. If harvest is coming, it makes sense that there’s so much wine potentially passing through Oplontis B."

It’s one part of a big picture that someone who runs the gauntlet of today’s wine industry might piece together. As John Clarke, Thomas’ onetime teacher and current Oplontis co-director, says of Thomas, "He’s been able to form new hypotheses by comparing our evidence with modern procedures."

Literature tells us that the Roman rich could be notorious label-drinkers. Shortly before the eruption, observer Pliny the Elder wrote that Campanian wine "had gained considerable credit more recently," but how much of this cow-sack stuff did a Bay aristocrat drink? "Maybe he’s like, ‘For lunch I’ll open our own wine, and then when we have our big dinner party, I’ll open the ‘grand cru’ Falernian,’” Thomas surmises.

The Eternal City’s 1 million gallets, on the other hand, could happily accommodate wine Thomas characterizes thusly: "My guess is because of Vesuvius [volcanic soil] and high-yielding vineyards, Campania could make a good quality wine at probably a lower price, at higher volumes. So it made it an attractive wine."

What type of wine might be comparable in today’s culture? Thomas laughs: "Can I say Monterey?"

In the nine years since Thomas and his mother, Barbara, purchased the 72-acre San Saba Vineyard (68 acres planted), Wrath Wines (the name is from Led Zeppelin, not John Steinbeck) has consistently released some of the Monterey appellation’s highest-scoring bottles, regularly in the 90- to 93-point range.

When he took on management of the California winery, Thomas was already splitting his time between Italy, Austin and New York City, but he was determined to elevate Wrath to the rank of its neighbors in the more rarified Santa Lucia Highlands AVA, literally across the street.

"Part of the philosophy was that we had a chip on our shoulder," says Thomas. "We’re Monterey, we weren’t considered a great vineyard before."

"We’re so paranoid [today] about what goes into wine. Roman wine had leather in it, resin in it, pitch in it ... god knows what."

—Michael Thomas

Winemaker Sabrine Rodens shares Thomas’ enthusiasm for envelope-pushing projects, like the archaeologically inspired vinification of wine in earthenware dolia, and keeps things on track at Wrath year-round.

APRIL 30, 2016 • WINE SPECTATOR 111
Along with Sabrine Rodems, his adventuresome winemaker, Thomas has made a wine laboratory of Wrath. One series of Wrath wines pairs different, complementary clones of a certain grape in the blend. There’s also a Pinot Noir made with 100 percent whole-cluster fermentation, a bit unusual for California, but, reasons Thomas, “My guess is the Romans only did whole-cluster.”

The Romans would have seen the handiwork of the Fates all over Thomas’ next wine project. In 2012, he planted at San Saba two rows of the Campanian white grape Falanghina. Some believe the Romans made it into the vaunted Falernian; today it refreshes archaeologists laboring in the southern Italian sun. No one else in California had tried growing much of it; he and Rodems didn’t know if the warm-climate variety would thrive or even ripen at San Saba. And as longtime vineyard consultant Steve McIntyre would discover, “The bees love it. And that’s a real bummer!”

Before the Falanghina’s first bearing vintage, 2014, Rodems had seen a vendor displaying a dolium at a trade show. Why not ferment the ancient grape in a 500-liter clay vat, as the Romans did? The oxidative winemaking style would dampen the peal of acidity, as would fermenting the wine on its skins for two weeks and bottling it unfined and unfiltered (the 2014 rated 88 points and costs $29).

“What at one point seemed like two totally disparate careers,” says Thomas, “have sort of come together in this wine and at Villa B in Oplontis.”

Thomas published his most recent conclusions in the 2015 Journal of Roman Archaeology (Vol. 28), in a paper titled “Oplontis B: A center for the distribution and export of Vesuvian wine.” In May of this year, he returns to the site; one of his hopes is to find preserved organic grape material that might be used to identify the type of wine the Campanians were making. “If it came back Falanghina, no one would believe me,” he laughs.

Already, though, the formerly obscure site without any fancy frescoes or fountains has added a page to the greater saga of wine history. “Villa B is this massive document of the Roman world that’s been left untouched for many years, a document on how trade happens and how wine moves around, on the value of consumption, on what Pompeii means in the wine world. It’s speaking to the tastes and needs of the Roman Empire near its apex.”

Thomas ruminates on his place in it all. “Archaeology and winemaking, I’ve always said the common thread—other than dirt—is patience. They’re both really slow endeavors.” But the element of terroir has also revealed itself to Thomas in both fields. In one Roman town, they might mark vases with the imprint of a leaping stag; down the road, same vase, but decorated with the visage of Apollo instead. “I find that parallel in wine, those kinds of regional nuances and continuities,” he observes. That, and the potential to discover something unique, surprising, even transformative, down in the dirt.