

Make your own wine with expert guidance

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[Giovanni Petretta](#) is a winemaker through and through.

"I was born in the vineyard," he said. "My mother was working in the vineyard when she had me."

This particular vineyard was in Italy, where Petretta's family had been making wine for centuries.

"My family has been involved in winemaking for generations," he said.

"Petretta is one of the three families who built Santo Stefano over 500 years ago."

When a 20th-century disaster, the Irpinia earthquake, struck southern Italy in 1980, killing thousands and damaging his house, Petretta, his mother and his brother found themselves starting over in the United States. But Petretta couldn't leave winemaking behind. Before long, he was ordering grapes and gathering friends to help make the wine.

"I'm not the kind of guy who keeps it a secret," Petretta said of his winemaking methods. He has opened [Shelter Rock](#) Winery in Danbury, where he will guide members of the winery's [Winemaking Club](#) in creating their own wines. He also makes his own wines under the Casa Petretta label, which will be available for order through [ClicktoSip.com](#).

Petretta revels in winemaking and in bringing people together to make and enjoy wine. He feels once people make their own wine, they'll prefer drinking it over drinking commercially created wines. One reason Petretta mentioned is that they can make the wine without sulfites. Some people tend to get headaches from sulfites.

But, to really prefer it, they must be making good wine with a taste they enjoy. How will they do this?

"Start with good grapes, of course," Petretta said. "Put a lot of love and energy in what you're doing. Do the right thing at the right time."

Petretta orders grapes from California. He or an associate visits the vineyards there to keep track of how each year's harvest is shaping up. California had a hot summer and the harvest was two weeks early this year, Petretta said, but now is the time the grapes will be coming to Connecticut.

"Don't waste any time, start to make your wine," he advised.

When the grapes arrive at the Shelter Rock Winery, they will need to be properly de-stemmed and crushed, which club members will do at the winery using its equipment. Then it's fermentation time, which Petretta said takes seven to 10 days.

Petretta monitors the fermentation process. "The temperature needs to be right," he said. "During fermenting, we check it three times a day, to see if it's fermenting too slow, or if the speed is too fast, I can adjust it. How is the temperature affecting it at that point?"

Petretta said he tests the juice to see what the sugar level is, as bacteria are fermenting the sugar into alcohol. Then, somewhere between seven and 10 days, the contents are moved out of the fermentation tub, then pressed into juice, which goes into stainless steel tanks to let sediment settle for a couple of weeks.

Finally, the wine is racked into wood barrels in October, and then racked again in January or February. This racking involves moving the wine into a steel tank in order to clear sediment out of the oak barrel, before returning the wine to the oak barrel, where it will sit for a few more months. The kind of oak barrel used also impacts the wine's flavor, and club members have a decision to make on this.

"French oak barrels have a gentler, slower release of flavor," Petretta said. "American oak is more aggressive. French oak is more expensive. You can

also use a 2-year-old barrel, which costs less, if you prefer less oak in the wine.

"The wood is very important in determining the flavor of wine. The toast of the barrel can be high or medium. I use medium toast." (The toast of a barrel refers to having the inside of the barrel charred to some degree during the barrel's construction.)

Club members can make appointments to check and taste their wine.

Members will also be able to customize the labels for the bottles of wine they make. A membership can be split between up to six people, with each person getting 46 to 48 bottles of wine.

While people can become members for this year's harvest and make their own wine with Petretta's guidance, those who prefer to make their own wine at home can order equipment and supplies, including grapes or the already-pressed juice through Shelter Rock Winery.

But primary for this son of the vineyards is the making of wine and enjoying it with others. "When I'm making wine, I'm happy," he said. "Even if I'm not making money, if I'm making wine, I'm happy."

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Shelter Rock Winery, 5 Shelter Rock Road, Building D, in Danbury, will have a grand opening event Wednesday, Oct. 2, 2013, from 5:30 to 8 p.m. RSVPs can be made at www.shelterrockwinery.com/events/grand-opening.