

THE WINE SPECTATOR



Owners at Ca' del Bosco making all the right moves

by Edward Guiliano

ERBUSCO, Italy—Giorgio Pinchiorri, owner of the Michelin two-star Ristorante Enoteca Pinchiorri in Florence, has pronounced views on wine. He also has a flawless 60,000-bottle cellar to back up his opinions.

Asked to name the best Italian sparkling wine, he did not hesitate: "Ca' del Bosco is number one in Italy today." Few among Italy's wine cognoscenti disagree.

Word of the emergence of Ca' del Bosco, a modest winery an hour's drive east of Milan, and the preeminence of its sparkling wine has even reached the Vatican. When the Pope visited Milan, it is reported that he drank only Ca' del Bosco at the archbishop's residence.

"It's a young firm, only about 10 years old," said Luigi Veronelli, an Italian wine writer and another fervent admirer. "They have made some very intelligent choices."

"Their soils are outstanding, and they are probably the only sparkling wine producer in Italy who chooses to vinify exclusively with grapes they have grown themselves. That's good. Also, they have an excellent cellar master from France."

The man behind Ca' del Bosco's success is 28-year-old Maurizio Zanella. He was hardly more than a boy when he conceived and created the winery from nothing—no vineyards, no cellars, no knowledge of winemaking, and no business experience of any kind. His achievement could not have been greater.

With financial backing, encouragement, and a free hand from his father, a wealthy Milanese, he has turned his family's modern country house into a 114-acre estate with 94 acres planted with vines and with a beautiful, state-of-the-art enological complex.

Ca' del Bosco is located in the heart of the Franciacorta hills in Lombardy, south of Lake Iseo and north of the Organo mountains. The lake dictates the area's microclimate. Early morning mist and fog is followed by clear, sunny and warm days—not unlike the days in California's Napa Valley—and in the afternoon cool lake air blows through the Camonica Valley and over the vineyards.

The soil, which contains much decomposed granite and drains exceptionally well, combines with the climate to provide excellent growing conditions.

With the help of a local grower, Zanella produced 500 "experimental" bottles of wine in 1973. In 1975 he produced 12,000 bottles of sparkling wine that required him to build a temperature-controlled cellar so they could age properly for three years.

Continually encouraged by the potential of his vineyard, he steadily built his operation, and when in 1978 he was ready to market his 12,000 bottles, he knew he would need a technician "he could trust blindly" if they were to realize the vineyard's potential.

He ran an ad in the local newspaper in Champagne, *l'Union*, for a cellar master. He knew in theory what he was looking for, and his father had advised him to be careful and that "someone who does that job must have black nails."

Zanella found André Dubois, who had 25 years experience in the cellars at Moët et Chandon and who has proven to be an exceptional technician.

Dubois, who lives in a house on the Ca' del Bosco estate that Zanella built for him, is certain of a brilliant future for Zanella and the winery. Asked about his boss, his face radiates admiration. "He's a prince; it is hard to believe an employer as good as he exists," Dubois said.

"I only have to ask, he gives me anything. With him quality comes before everything. Anything that might be good for the wine is pursued; money is never a stumbling block," he said.

Zanella's quest for the ultimate in quality is everywhere present at Ca' del Bosco. It's not enough, for example, that the storage cellars for 200,000 bottles of sparkling wine maintain a constant temperature of 12 C.; they also must be attractive.

Zanella instructed the masons he and his father have employed continuously for 18 years (ever since their second home was built) to arch the flat ceilings of the cellars to resemble the limestone caves in Champagne.

Also, an elaborate and expensive conveyer system for transporting grapes to the presses stands idle because it was found to damage a small percentage of the grapes.

The grapes are, of course, picked only by hand. Zanella hires the same local women each year for the harvest. "We have more control that way," he said. "We've trained them. It goes against their nature to discard grapes just because they are less than perfect. But they know what we want now."

"In the early years we would tell them to throw the bad bunches on the ground—sometimes whole fields when we were harvesting immature vines—and they would do it, but at night they would sneak back into the fields and carry the grapes home."



Edward Guiliano photo

Local help: Women from surrounding villages stand on crates to pick grapes from high trellises at Ca' del Bosco.

The winery markets four sparkling wines: Ca' del Bosco Franciacorta Pinot Brut (made from 40 percent chardonnay, 40 percent pinot bianco [pinot blanc], and 20 percent pinot nero [pinot noir] grapes), Dosage Zero (40 percent chardonnay, 40 percent pinot bianco, 20 percent pinot nero and no added sugar), Cremant (50 percent chardonnay and 50 percent pinot bianco), and Rosé Ca' del Bosco (30 percent chardonnay, 30 percent pinot bianco, and 40 percent pinot nero).

Ca' del Bosco is probably the only winery anywhere that has all its wines undergo the second fermentation in the same bottle that is sold, from half bottles right up through jeroboams, methuselahs, and salmanazars. It is rare and probably unique today for Champagne-process sparkling wine not to be transferred from smaller bottles into the large ones. For large bottles it is necessary (and dangerous) to disgorge by hand. André Dubois does this as well

Despite his meteoric success, Zanella's drive to improve the quality of his spumante has not diminished; however, he has now also set his mind on producing outstanding Burgundy-style red and white still wines.

Ca' del Bosco already markets four still wines: a white, a red, a rosé, and a red "vino novello." The reds in particular are beginning to attract attention, as is young Maurizio Zanella.



Edward Guiliano photo

Maurizio Zanella: "completely immersed" in his Italian sparkling wine operation.

A 'whiz kid's' dream come true

When he was 17, Maurizio Zanella knew what he wanted to do with his life: produce a sparkling wine like no one had ever produced in Italy—a spumante made with the same method, the same rigor, the same dedication to quality as the best Champagnes from France. He knew nothing about wine-making at the time, yet today, barely 10

years later, 28-year-old Zanella has achieved his first goal. His Ca' del Bosco sparkling wines are among the finest bottled in Italy. Zanella was interviewed for *The Wine Spectator* by New York free-lance writer Edward Guiliano.

Wine Spectator: You don't come from a family with a professional background in wine; what made you decide when you were so young to become a winemaker?

Zanella: I went to Champagne when I was 17 with a group from the Brescia area. I was very impressed with everything I saw. It was all beautiful—the vineyards, the art, and of course the wine. I also noticed that the grapes they grew for making Champagne were pretty much the same grapes we grow in Erbusco: chardonnay, pinot nero (pinot noir), and pinot bianco (though in Champagne pinot meunier is grown instead). So, I thought, why not attempt the adventure?

Just like that.

Well, yes, but maybe no. We lived in Milano and had this country house, Ca' del Bosco, in the Franciacorta DOC area where good sparkling wines were already being made—the Berlucchi winery down the road sells the most *méthode champenoise* wines in Italy—and we owned the land that was well suited for viticulture. And I was looking for something to do. Fortunately, my father provided me with the financial means and the freedom to give it a go. Of course, I didn't just plunge in. I stuck my big toe in and returned again and again to Champagne to learn and reconfirm my beliefs and little by little—very quickly really—I got in deeper until now I'm completely immersed.

In one of your promotional brochures you say that your sparkling wine "has nothing to do with Champagne, but it's awfully good." What do you mean?

The grandfather is Champagne. This is the son; it can't be a rival. In Italy right now, sparkling wines made with the Champagne method are "in," but there are no strict laws like in Champagne that say you must do this and that. Some producers can make a Champagne-method sparkling wine in six months. For them, it is a simple question of money and profit. A lot of producers like to say that our spumante is better than Champagne, and it is cheaper. I respect Champagne. I always say this is not Champagne. Champagne comes from a region in France near Paris. I don't want to pass a judgement. All I say is that I make a good wine, a good quality product, but it's not Champagne; it's what the French call *mousseux*.

What is the future of sparkling wine in Italy?

My opinion is that in the past two or three years the Italian producers have cut the cord. They had a good market for sparkling wine, and the market took what they gave, and then a lot of producers raised their prices too much. For me the future of sparkling wine in Italy is wine produced with the Champagne process. It is not nice to see producers who don't make quality wines. I think that in two or three years Champagnes from France will be back to what they were in this market and even stronger. And for me that's okay. It's better competition.

What is Ca' del Bosco's market right now, and what would you like it to be?

We make 150,000 bottles of sparkling wine and 200,000 bottles of still wine, and we want to make 200,000 bottles of sparkling and 250,000 of still. It's the maximum we can produce with our vineyards. We quickly sell out what we produce.

Where is it sold?

Eighty-five percent is sold in Italy and the rest in Germany, Switzerland, England, and the United States—currently just in a few top restaurants and selected retail shops in California and New York.

What would you like the ultimate breakdown to be?

In my opinion, the intelligent projection is to sell 70 percent in Italy and 30 percent outside.

What are your marketing plans for the United States?

About the same as they were for Italy. We always start at the top of the market. We want to reach the most discriminating wine drinkers and stay only at that level. With a new product, that's a difficult segment to reach, but I think we can do it.