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CA' DEL BOSCO: A YOUNG VINEYARD COMES OF AGE

BY PAMELA S. ALTMAN

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aurizio Zanella is a young, exuberant and rather overweight, highly successful newcomer to the world of wine. His eight-year-old vineyard named Ca' Del Bosco is situated in the heart of the Franciacorta (translation: "free area," as in no taxes) hills, between Bergamo and Brescia, about one hour by car from Milano. "To own a vineyard has been my dream ever since a visit to the Champagne country in France the summer I was 16."

Zanella, now 26, has done his homework well and achieved some unlikely victories within the highly competitive and virtually closed fiefdoms of vineyards and vintners. For instance, there is the pedantic (but to some purists, true) argument that it just isn't *champagne* unless its from the region of the same name in France. According to Zanella, who barely drinks at all, "technically, that is true, but Italian sparkling wine or spumante, as it is called, is made by the same process as the finest champagne in France." To Zanella, Moët et Chandon is world famous for its first quality champagnes, so he began his talent search there. "When I started

this vineyard, I went to France and hired a man named Monsieur André Dubois to be the chef-du-cave. He had been one of the top masters in the cellars of Moët et Chandon for almost 25 years before joining Ca' Del Bosco."

DuBois brought more to Ca' Del Bosco than just a few of Moët's secrets. He adopted modern techniques for champagne making while maintaining the cherished secrets of wine and champagne production that have made this particular vineyard so highly regarded in so short a time.

"It is very rewarding to me to see Ca' Del

by turning each bottle to the left almost 1½ inches, or 2, but no more. After the bottle makes a complete rotation, you start the process over again. You must be very careful," he again emphasizes, "or the combination will be wrong and you have to start over again. One mistake can result in two months' work gone down the drain. And—if you hit the bottle the wrong way—hzzzzz." DuBois lets out a mournful whistle between his teeth to indicate the death of the delicate grape's growth.

Before the grapes ever reach the wine cellar they naturally have to be picked. In this little town of Erbusco, Zanella maintains a staff of six to take care of the ordinary work, swelling the ranks to about 55 (mostly women) during the harvest months of August, September and early October. The reason there are mostly women is that "it's hard to find men who only work one and a half months a year," Zanella shrugs. The work is done by hand with special shears, though a few of the workers use electric shears to cut the grapes. Zanella and his staff prefer the old-fashioned method. "You must leave three branches on the arbor, but they must be the right three branches. You pick the ones that look the strongest, but not necessarily those with the most grapes on them."

There is a certain amount of snob appeal mixed with pride in the way Zanella describes his clients both in and out of Italy. "When I first started distributing Ca' Del Bosco, there were questions such as, 'Who are these people? ... don't they know that making wine and cham-



Bosco become as important this fast because my father, who owned all this land, was dead set against it," Zanella states. "For the first few years of a vineyard's life there is no production at all. You try different methods of growing grapes and then you don't produce wine. In the beginning it is very expensive with no return on your money."

"But there comes the time when the grapes are ready and you begin the production and—all of a sudden—the fear of failure or success is very close."

Zanella assumes that everyone knows the process. He is wrong. So he explains patiently, as though to a child, "the yeast eats the sugar and transforms it into alcohol. This is the alcohol fermentation process." Sounds simple enough, so why does it take years to produce great wines and champagnes? At this point Zanella throws back his head and roars with laughter. "I suppose it does take years and years, but I really don't believe that. The wine actually ferments in about 20 days (in two days, if one is not careful). White wine is fermented in stainless steel tanks but red wine needs a wooden tank to ferment properly."

As Zanella talks, M. Dubois is busy "riddling," or turning by hand the bottles of champagne. He can turn up to 1,200 a day by hand and carry on a perfectly serious conversation while doing so. "You have to be more careful than you can imagine when turning these bottles," DuBois says. "First, they must be in one position for almost two years. Then, to move the sediment, you start



Italian champagne vintner Maurizio Zanella



Red wine ferments best in wood casks



Zanella with chef-du-cave Andre Dubois



Checking for sediment



Champagne awaiting shipment

pagne require time-honored traditions?" But the good restaurants in Milano such as Savini and Marchese were very good to me." For those who may not know, Gualtiere Marchese is the prima restaurant of *cucina novella* in Milano as well as the most expensive place to dine. Marchese himself, known as "Il Divino" in the restaurant world, even has a special wine on the menu known as Ca' Del Bosco—Maurizio Zanella. Ca' Del Bosco is also available in the Gallia, the first hotel in Milano to carry these wines. As far as tasting a Ca' Del Bosco product in the U.S., it is easier to find than one might suspect. In Los Angeles, you can drink Ca' Del Bosco in Spago (the first Italian restaurant to carry the label in America), and also at Valentino's and Rex. In New York, Le Cirque is the restaurant to find Zanella's wines, or one can buy them at Sherry-Lehmann on Manhattan's East Side.

In France, however, they get a little trickier to find. Last summer, Zanella took his wine to a trade show in Bordeaux to improve the image of Italian wines in France. "It was pretty sad. There were wine experts from all over the world tasting and loving our product, but not one person from France would even come to try it. They don't believe that the Italians can do this very well." About the only place you can drink Ca' Del Bosco in Paris is at an Italian restaurant named Carpaccio, located on the Avenue Marceau. The owner, Sig. Cecconi, has Ca' Del Bosco products on the menu because he feels they deserve a chance and also because of the chauvinism involved.

Whether or not you believe that champagne only comes from France, or that you must let the wine breathe for an hour or so ("if it makes you feel better you can do that," Zanella says), but as far as he is concerned, the glass is as impor-

tant as anything else. "How the glass is washed and cleaned can have a large effect on the taste of the wine. More people in restaurants should send back the glasses instead of the wine." If the glass smells of detergent then it will change all the properties of the wine.

Zanella spends a large part of each year traveling the world to check on his wines and the various restaurants where they are served. He says this routine has contributed to his huge girth. "When I got into this business I weighed 50 kilos (approx 110 lbs.) less. But I must taste everything in the restaurants and I really love to eat," he confesses over lunch at a favorite restaurant near his vineyard. "Perhaps someday I will be able to stay home and not eat so much."

Sure.

And perhaps someday the French will recognize Italian spumante as the world's second greatest champagne. ●



Pruning the arbor with special shears, leaving three branches, "... but the right three branches."

Photographs by GRAZIELLA VIGO