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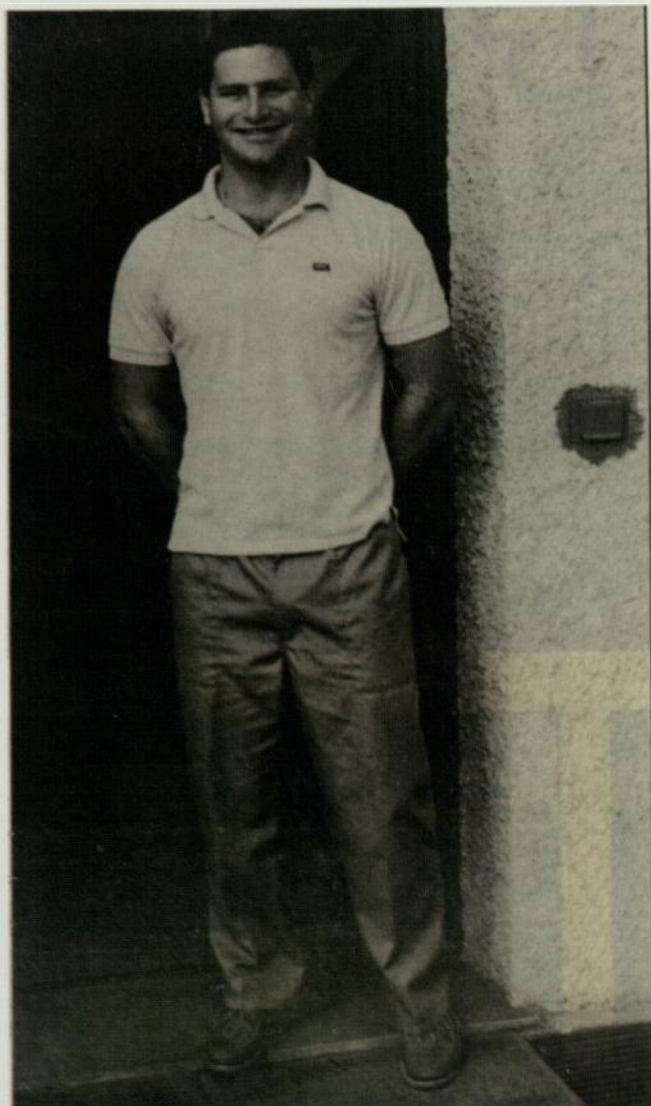


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When Italy Calls, Larky Moves



Brian Larky: 'Dubois taught me some tricks to round off my college training'

Davis Graduate Learns His Trade at Italy's Ca' del Bosco From a Sparkling Wine Master

By Jeff Frees
Erbusco, Italy

Brian Larky might be skiing, scuba diving or sailing today. Instead, the 24-year-old University of California at Davis graduate is working as the enologist at Ca' del Bosco, one of Italy's premier *spumante* estates.

After graduating in 1985 with a degree in fermentation sciences, Larky applied for a job as a helicopter-skiing guide in British Columbia. "I wanted to take a year off before settling into a winery," he said. But the operators wanted a Canadian national. He next considered sail boat racing or scuba instruction at a Red Sea resort. Then one summer morning the phone rang.

The call was from Italy. The caller was Maurizio Zanella, the thirtyish founder of Ca' del Bosco. Through a family acquaintance he had heard of Larky. Zanella had a small problem. His winemaker, André Dubois, was getting old, and Zanella, one of Italy's most eligible bachelors, had an expanding social calendar that was absorbing more and more of his time. In short, he needed qualified help fast.

It didn't take long for Larky to catch a Milan-bound jet. This was the oppor-

'They not only took me under their wings, but integrated me into their operation' — Brian Larky

tunity that most Davis graduates dream about. Not only is Ca' del Bosco a first-class operation, but Larky would be working with Dubois, the 62-year-old

Frenchman who was the cellar master at Dom Pérignon for 20 years before coming to Italy. He is regarded as one of the world's most skilled makers of sparkling wine.

"It was like a dream in more ways than one because a bad case of jet lag kept me in a dreamlike state for a week," Larky said. "Then there was the new place, new people, new language to further confuse matters."

The first six months at the winery provided Larky with an entirely new view of wine production. Though he had worked at Gundlach Bundschu, Far Niente and Domaine Chandon in California, he had never seen wine made as Ca' del Bosco makes wine.

"Dubois was just amazing," Larky said. "He simply intuitively knows the right thing to do, though we have all the most modern equipment to direct us. He riddles all the bottles himself and bottles the reserve lots with an old bottling apparatus he brought from France. I would just follow the man around in awe. At night I'd write down what I saw in the day."

Best of Old and New

Larky was learning the Ca' del Bosco wine philosophy: The finest wines are made by combining the best of the old and the ultra-modern. Here a 19th-century press is used on the grapes for sparkling wine because Dubois believes that new presses apply too much pressure. But the juice from these pressings is fermented in automatically controlled steel fermentation tanks.

Dubois disgorges and bottles the reserves on his pre-World War II machine next to a \$300,000 automatic disgorging and bottling machine used for the regular bottlings. The old and the new work in harmony.

"Beside learning so much, I found that André and Maurizio would listen to my ideas," said Larky. "I'd mention how we did things in California and they'd say, 'OK, let's make a sample lot and see what happens.' They not only took me under their wings, but integrated me into the operation. This was good for confidence."

Early this year, Dubois decided to retire to his native France. That left



Larky will make brut, rosé, crémant and reserve sparkling wines

'We try for a Ca' del Bosco style, not a Dom Pérignon, in all the wines'

— André Dubois

Larky in charge of making Ca' del Bosco's brut, rosé, crémant and vintage reserve — without his mentor. He also had to make Ca' del Bosco's other wines: a Franciacorte red and white, a Pinot Noir, a Chardonnay, a novella and a Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot blend (see accompanying column by Anthony Dias Blue).

"Maurizio and I have been scurrying around trying to do the very big job Dubois used to do. It's more of a time problem than a mind problem because Maurizio knows what to do and Dubois taught me some tricks to round off my college training," said Larky.

The most challenging problem for Larky hasn't been the technical aspects of winemaking, but the aesthetics of wine. Because of American drinking laws, the young enologist had only a year of serious wine tasting before leaving for Italy. Though he knew all about making wine, he wasn't certain how it should taste.

"I think this is a real problem for all university-trained American winemakers, and it's why Europeans have a jump on us — they've been drinking wine all their lives," Larky said.

This shortcoming has been remedied a bit over the past few months. Larky has shared many a bottle of wine with Maurizio, who has loved wine since childhood. Tastings at the winery with visiting wine journalists have increased Larky's tasting knowledge.

One of the things Larky learned was that Dubois was not trying to re-create Dom Pérignon in Italy. "We try for a Ca' del Bosco style, not a Dom Pérignon, in all the wines," said Dubois. "It's lighter, maybe a little more flowery, and except for the reserve wine, it's not aged as long on the yeast as most Champagnes."

What was the most valuable thing Dubois taught him? Larky answered, "Oh, there's too much to say. The first thing he said was, 'Brian, always remember, wine must be your only woman.' I thought he was joking. But after seeing some of the beautiful women of Italy, I think he was probably serious. It's no problem, though. When you make sparkling wine you don't have time for anything else."

Jeff Frees is a free-lance writer in Colorado Springs, Colo.



André Dubois, one of the world's most skilled makers of sparkling wine

ANTHONY DIAS BLUE



New Italian Success Story

It's a familiar story. The son of wealthy parents falls in love with the idea of making wine. He persuades his father to bankroll an experimental vineyard on the family's country property and then, with the reluctant support of his father and the banks, proceeds to build a showplace winery complete with a network of underground caves.

At first he uses an established and experienced winemaker, but after the older man retires and becomes a consultant, he hires a talented young winemaker fresh out of the University of California at Davis. Within a few years of its start, the winery becomes well-known for crisp sparkling wines, richly oaked Chardonnays and supple Cabernet Sauvignons. The wines, which are in short supply, are tightly allocated to only the finest restaurants and shops. A few cases are even exported.

This success story, with variations, has recurred with pleasant frequency in California over the past few years. The pattern has repeated itself one more time. The news is that the story I have outlined above did not take place in California; it happened in Italy.

The typical Italian success story usually begins with a count or a duke who planted a vineyard in the 14th century. Slowly, over the centuries, the estate is expanded and modernized as each successive count or duke takes charge. Throughout the long story there is never any question that the first-born son will succeed his father in the wine business.

Maurizio Zanella's father is in the trucking business. No one in the Zanella family has ever been involved in doing anything more with wine than drinking it. "My father thought I was crazy," Maurizio says. "He humored me, but he still can't understand what I'm doing. When he looks around here, he just shakes his head."

"Here" is one of Italy's most beautiful and modern wineries. Located just outside of Brescia and less than an hour from Milano, Ca' del Bosco (the house in the woods) is a wonderful combination of country charm and modern enological technology.

Mixture of Varieties

The winery is at the top of a hill, surrounded by 94 acres of lush vineyards that were carved out of the dense woods. The vines planted are a mixture of varieties: Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc; Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Barbera and Nebbiolo. Ca' del Bosco is located within the Franciacorte appellation, and the winery produces sparkling wines and a still red and white within DOC regulations.

But the wines that most interest Maurizio Zanella and his 24-year-old, California-born winemaker, Brian Larky, are the Chardonnays and Cabernet blends.

I first became acquainted with Zanella's wines through two of America's greatest restaurateurs, Piero Selvaggio (of Primi and Valentino in Los Angeles) and Sirio Maccione (of Le Cirque in New York). Although only a little more than 300 cases of the wine were made, both

restaurants had a few bottles of the 1982 Maurizio Zanella Signature red, a blend of 40 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 30 percent Cabernet Franc and 30 percent Merlot (around \$20 at retail when you can find it). I was extremely impressed with this delicious combination of California ripeness and velvety texture plus French finesse and elegance.

How did these two fine restaurateurs happen to have Zanella's wine? Well, it seems that Maurizio, despite the seriousness with which he approaches the wine business, is quite a gregarious fellow.

When he is not tooling around his estate in his massive Range Rover, he travels the globe, hobnobbing with the rich and famous. In the stairwell that leads to the cellars, there is a picture of Maurizio sipping sparkling wine with Grace Jones.

How Good Are They?

Just how good are the Ca' del Bosco wines? Very good indeed, it turns out. Zanella began production of sparkling wines in 1978 and his wines are considered by many to be the best sparklers made in Italy. He uses the champagne method for every bottle, including jero-booms and methuselaha. A blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc goes into each cuvée.

There is a lovely non-vintage brut (\$22 in the United States) that is crisp, remarkably elegant and richly yeasty; and a Dosage Zero (\$22) that is lean and dry with a lovely soft texture. Ca' del Bosco also produces a small amount of Crémant (\$25) from a blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc. The wine is soft, lush and deeply fruity with clean, well-focused flavors.

The Zanella Chardonnays are quite remarkable. The 1983, which was the winery's first vintage of this variety, is a wonderful combination of complexity and brashness. The wine was aged in new French oak barrels (as is every Ca' del Bosco Chardonnay) and it has a rich varietal flavor with plenty of attractive oak intensity. Only 1,800 bottles were made.

1984 was a lesser year, but the Chardonnay from that vintage has the same depth of flavor as the 1983 — it's just a bit leaner and subtler. More than 550 cases were made of the 1984 wine which, like its predecessor, is priced at \$20. The 1985, tasted from the barrel, may be the best of the three. It combines the richness of the '83 with the finesse of the '84.

Among these superlative wines, I still am most taken with the Signature red. The 1983 version (\$22) is, if anything, even more impressive than the 1982. It has a very accessible, lush flavor of herbs and fruit that, once you have gotten past its initial charm, opens up into multiple levels of complexity and nuance. The wine is wonderful now and should improve for several years.

Maurizio Zanella had a dream and he made it come true. Ca' del Bosco is a triumph and I'm sure we can expect truly great wines to issue from this very special winery for many years to come.