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LETTER FROM ITALY

Life in the fast lane

ANYONE WHO thinks that Italian winemakers are living in the past should spend a little time with Maurizio Zanella. Now pushing 30, the owner of the Ca' del Bosco estate at Erbusco in Lombardy could look back with pride on a career in wine spanning nearly half his lifetime, but the only way Maurizio Zanella looks is ahead at full speed.

Zanella was a teenager when he somehow convinced his well-to-do father to finance his schemes to create vineyards and cellars on the family's wooded property in the Franciacorta DOC zone 40 miles east of Milan. Now, many billions of lire later (read millions in pounds or dollars), Ca' del Bosco, the 'House in the Woods', is producing some of Italy's finest modern wines from about 40 hectares of vines.

His first goal was to make a *méthode Champenoise* that would challenge fine champagne in quality. He persuaded André Dubois, a cellar master at Moët & Chandon, to join his quest, providing the ultimate in accoutrements in a setting that would be the envy of Epernay. To create it, he moved a hill out of the way and in one year built a domed and tunnelled ageing cellar whose intricate stonework might have taken Medieval artisans the better part of a decade to complete. Then he shifted the hill back on top of it all so that the temperatures in the arcaded galleries would be just right.

Some experts — not only Italian — rate Ca' del Bosco's *Champenoise* as the best outside Champagne. From Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay come Franciacorta Brut, Dosage Zero (*a pas dosé*), Crémant and a little Rosé, plus the gold-label *brut millésimato*. Grapes for this extraordinary vintage wine are selected bunch by bunch and crushed gingerly using a small hand press. The *cuvées* are aged in small oak barrels before going into bottle on the yeasts for four to five years. André Dubois does the *remuage* and *dégorgement* by hand. The 1980 vintage was released in late 1986 at a price not much less than Dom Pérignon.

Zanella shuns comparisons. 'It is not champagne, it is Ca' del Bosco, with its own personality and style,' he insists. 'The price is based on actual costs, on the time and effort involved. It is a very good wine. Only the best *Champenoise* has such character and finesse. It will be even better when we get our vineyards into shape.'

He has been converting vineyards from the customary high trellising, which favours high yields, to low-trained vines at a density of 10,000 per hectare — as in certain vineyards of Champagne and Burgundy. But Italian agricultural officials have objected, threatening to bulldoze the new vineyards because they don't conform to tradition. 'Tradition?' Maurizio fumes, 'What they mean is mediocrity.' He hopes the issue will get to court so that his expert witnesses can give the Italian wine establishment a lesson about quality in a *cause célèbre*.

Zanella, who drives a Range Rover on the backroads and a Ferrari on the *autostrada*, doesn't limit his pace to sparkling wines. In 1981, he blended Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc with Merlot and named the result Maurizio Zanella. His oak-aged Chardonnay has been winning acclaim since 1983.

Dubois is about to retire to a consulting role in Reims. Zanella's new winemaker is Brian Larky, a recent graduate of the University of California at Davis. If anything, Larky's enthusiasm is even greater than the boss's. The current drive is to make a 'great burgundy' at Ca' del Bosco, and with the 1985 Pinot Noir already reminiscent of a fine Volnay, Maurizio Zanella seems to be off to his usual roaring start.

Burton Anderson

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