

Ca' del Bosco's Uphill Ride

By Kim Marcus
Erbusco, Italy

A love of speed and daring: Maurizio Zanella counts motocross racing among his passions

In the foothills of the Alps, Maurizio Zanella makes some of Italy's most stylish and expensive wines

If Maurizio Zanella, 33, didn't make some of the best sparkling wine in Italy, his estate in the foothills of the Alps in Lombardy would be a monument to youthful overindulgence.

Massive wooden beams support a modern hilltop villa filled with fine Italian leather couches and trendy sculptures that would be at home in a Los Angeles wine bar. A stroll out the front door leads down a brick path to a huge circular piazza that doubles as a helicopter landing pad and is emblazoned with his winery's name, Ca' del Bosco (house in the woods).

Zanella's domaine in the forested hills just above the Po River Valley has cost \$35 million to build.

New vineyards of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon surround his estate, which is topped with the familiar red terra-cotta roof of the Italian countryside. While the cultivation of some of these varieties runs afoul of Italian viticultural regulations, it allows him to make a run for wines of a world-class reputation. These include Chardonnay, a Cabernet-based blend, Pinot Noir and his sparklers. "We have a lot of problems with the agricultural department and politics. They have said I wanted to make a revolution," the gregarious Zanella says.

The son of a Milan trucking magnate who disdains the wine industry because he considers it unprofessional, Zanella is the first of his family to venture into winemaking. This status provides a freedom he finds attractive in a nation where winemaking titles can be handed down from the middle ages. "I was not in the position that I had to copy my father or my grandfather. But I had to make sure what I did was right,"



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He has written his own computer software to keep track of the wines in the cellars, which feed like the spokes of a wheel into a massive subterranean central dome. They look like they should have taken decades to build, but they have all been constructed since the late 1970s when Zanella decided to expand the winemaking operations at what had been his parents' summer estate. He borrowed money for the expansion on a bank loan secured by his parents, and there's clearly no shortage of capital.

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In part, Zanella was forced to play the game because of the character of the region's traditional Franciacorta wines. They are innocuous at best, though Zanella and a select few producers make pleasant, moderately priced, quaffable white, red and rosé wines. The area has a much better reputation for producing fine sparkling wines.

But the game is also a matter of choice for Zanella, and there's little doubt he wants to be one of its grand masters. Given his youth and relative success so far, he is well positioned to become a winemaker to be reckoned with. He is counted among Italy's most traveled winemakers — along with Angelo Gaja and Piero Antinori. Like Gaja, he often cruises on the autostrada at speeds of up to 120 mph while talking on his car phone to contacts around the world. He likes motocross cycling, and with his slicked-backed, shoulder-length hair and love of speed, he seems well equipped for the role. But it is also apparent that Zanella's lifestyle takes its toll: He once had his stomach stapled to control his weight. This is a man not satisfied with moderate consumption in life.

While Zanella's estate speaks to the size of his vision, the prices he's set for his wines make a statement that some consumers may find hard to swallow. His bid for international stature has translated into high prices. Though his wines have been of very good to outstanding quality, they lack the overall track record to command such prices. For example, his 1986 Chardonnay, tasted blind by *The Wine Spectator* tasting panel, rated an 85 on the 100-point scale and cost \$37.50. It was like a California Chardonnay in style, rich with lots of oak (all his wines are fermented in oak except for the Franciacortas) and full-bodied, with buttery, melonlike flavors. Of course, he may just be following the trend of top Italian Chardonnay producers, for whom prices of \$30 and \$40 per bottle are becoming the standard.

His 1985 red signature wine, appropriately named Maurizio Zanella, sells for \$38 and was rated 92 by *The Wine Spectator*. A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, it's a smooth, supple wine with good balance and acidity and rich berry and cherry flavors. His 1988 tasted from the barrel bodes well: Though characteristic of Zanella's still wines with a lean style, it had good, deep cherry and plum flavors with nice, spicy overtones. Also tasted from the barrel, his 1988 Pinot Noir, which he calls Pinero, had deep raspberry aromas, toasty oak and good, tart fruit flavors. His red wines are crisp and usually show good balance.

Zanella has been interested in wine-making since he was 16 when he took a field trip to the wine regions of France with some of Italy's top enologists. He took it to get away from his regular classes but soon found himself fascinated with what he was learning about winemaking. The first stop on his itinerary: the cellars of Domaine de la Romanée Conti. Since then, he says one of his goals has been to make Chardonnay as good as the white Burgundies he tasted then. He's certainly reached their price level.

The French connection was also a key element in his sparkling-wine production. Until 1986, the sparkling wine-master was André Dubois, who had been the cellar master at Moët & Chandon for 20 years. Dubois, who still consults for the winery, set the style for Ca' del Bosco sparklers, of which the best of the bunch is Zanella's non-vintage Spumante Brut. The recent release rated 88 and sold for \$25 per bottle. It is full-bodied, very smooth, creamy and elegant, with a touch of vanilla and hazelnut on the finish.

His other sparklers include Dosage Zero, which rated 87 (\$25), a Crémant that rated 82 (\$29) and a rosé that, when tasted at the winery, was still an unfinished wine. It tasted herbal and green and costs \$25 per bottle. Zanella also makes a vintage sparkler in very small quantities called Millesimato. The most recent vintage sold was 1983.

"I don't want to make wine for long aging. I want to make a wine that is at its best within the first few years," Zanella says. "I will not be disappointed if my wine is coming apart in 10 years."





Ca' del Bosco is nestled in the verdant hills near Bréscia



Leather couches and modern art: Zanella's expensive tastes are not limited to wine but are definitely trendy

At a Glance

Ca' del Bosco

Erbusco, Italy

Owner: Maurizio Zanella

Founded: 1968

Winemaker: Maurizio Zanella

Vineyards: 124 acres

1988 production: 34,000 cases

Wines produced: Franciacorta Bianco (Chardonnay blend), Franciacorta Rosso (Cabernet blend), Chardonnay, Maurizio Zanella (red blend), Pinero (Pinot Noir), Ca' del Bosco Brut, Ca' del Bosco Dosage Zero, Ca' del Bosco Crémant, Ca' del Bosco Rosé, Ca' del Bosco Millesimato (vintage)

For now, Zanella is overseeing wine-making, but until June, his winemaker had been Brian Larky, a young Californian who Zanella hired straight out of the enology program at the University of California at Davis in 1985. Larky is still consulting for the winery and is setting up a national distribution system for Ca' del Bosco wines from Los Angeles. He says Zanella's success stems from the high quality of fruit that can be grown on the estate and from hard work in the cellar.

In Ca' del Bosco's 124 acres of vineyards, some rows of grapes stand only 3 feet high and are as closely spaced as some of the top vineyards in Bordeaux, with up to 4,000 vines per acre. To concentrate the crop in older vines, some of which are taller than 6 feet, Zanella has pruned them severely. Recently he bought an 11-acre vineyard nearby for the production of Merlot, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir.

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir traditionally have been grown for sparkling-wine production in the region, and from there experiments were made by Zanella to see what type of still wines could be made, according to Larky. At one point, Zanella was warned by the Italian viticultural bureaucracy that his vineyards would be bulldozed because he was making wines that weren't approved for the appellation. As in France, Italian growers may only make wine from certain varieties and in certain styles in each wine-growing region. Zanella threatened to go to court, and his vineyards remain.

"Lombardy, unlike Chianti, Montepulciano and Piedmont, didn't have a wine that was well known around the world," Larky says. "If we want to be considered one of the best wineries in the world, we have to produce wines that can be found worldwide."

Larky characterizes Zanella as a well-respected renegade within the Italian winemaking world. "I stayed as long as I did because Maurizio is such a unique individual," Larky says. "He does have the financial reserves to do things, but that only gets you off the ground. He's only interested in doing things the best way."

That philosophy also makes some of Zanella's wines hard to find on retail shelves in the United States. Approximately 90 percent of his wines are sold in restaurants in a marketing strategy that Larky says is designed to educate consumers without the price shock that would happen in a wine shop.

Production is not expected to grow by more than another 3,000 cases, Larky explains, and there are no plans for expansion after that. The biggest project in the next decade will be to replant all of the estate's vineyards a little at a time in order to get even better fruit. "It's crazy work we have done here, but I am happy," Zanella says. □

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From the Editor

Do not throw this issue away. If you do, chances are, you may later regret it. This is one of those issues that for serious wine collectors, investors and drinkers comes along once every five or 10 years. The topic was so important that we saved it for the Nov. 15 issue, which is one of our most important during the fall season and is distributed at The New York Wine Experience.

The message of this issue is pure and simple. With the great 1985 and 1986 vintages, California Cabernet Sauvignon has arrived.

We believe, without qualification, that these two vintages represent the beginning of a new era of wine appreciation for California Cabernet on a level that none of us can comprehend today, but will when we look back 10 years from now.

As an observer of the California wine market for 20 years and a serious collector of Cabernets during this time, I can say that these two vintages will place California Cabernet on the world stage for the first time. And because of the plentiful production, relative to earlier great vintages, these wines will experience high levels of consumption at fine dining establishments all over the world.

The author of this cover story is James Laube. Jim, a senior editor and columnist, has been with *The Wine Spectator* since 1980. I consider him one of the "guardians" of our writing and tasting reputation. His judgment is sound and objective. As a member of our tasting panel he has tasted blind and rated more than 15,000 wines during the last decade.

This issue allows you to immediately select Cabernets for your cellar. It also will give you insights into the exhaustive research that Jim has conducted for a new book that you will want to own.

The book is entitled *California's Great Cabernets, The Wine Spectator's Ultimate Guide for Consumers, Collectors and Investors*. Without question it is the most comprehensive book ever written on California Cabernet.

More important to you, however, is the fact that it offers uncompromising blind tasting notes and ratings — all wines have been tasted within the past nine months — on more than 1,200 of the state's finest Cabernets and from dozens of vintages.

The book contains ratings of reserve 1985's and 1986's, many not yet released, as well as many unpublished notes and ratings from barrel samples of the 1987 vintage. With this book you can develop an intelligent, strategic investment plan.

The book also contains appendices that detail all wine ratings alphabetically by winery, by vintage and by score, with information on each wine's production, release price and current market price. The data is incredible.

Perhaps the most controversial chapter in the book — and the most valuable — is the one that creates a California classification similar to the Bordeaux 1855 system. In it you will likely see one or two fifth growths that you would have bet were first growths and vice versa.

The classification system was based on a number of factors. Most important were Laube's blind tasting results and the track record of the winery — along with realistic and demanding views of the wine, its winemaker, the vineyards and most of all the wines' future. Not all Cabernets improve with age. This book tells you which ones will age beautifully and which ones won't, and recommends when each wine should be consumed.

I believe that this book, *California's Great Cabernets*, will serve to raise the reputation, stature and acceptability of California Cabernet worldwide.

I am also quite proud that with this book we are entering a new business, wine book publishing, as the book is published by Wine Spectator Press. It is the first in a series of wine books we expect to publish over the next few years.

The book will be available in book stores in the United States in December. The cover price is \$29.95, and the book is 464 pages in length. If you are in a hurry to get this information before it is widely available, call The Wine Spectator Collection catalog division at 1-800-622-2062, and they will put it in the mail within 24 hours. If you wish to have it before anyone else, it can be shipped by Federal Express.

For Cabernet lovers here is a taste of heaven.

My best to you,

Marvin R. Shanken
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Editor and Publisher



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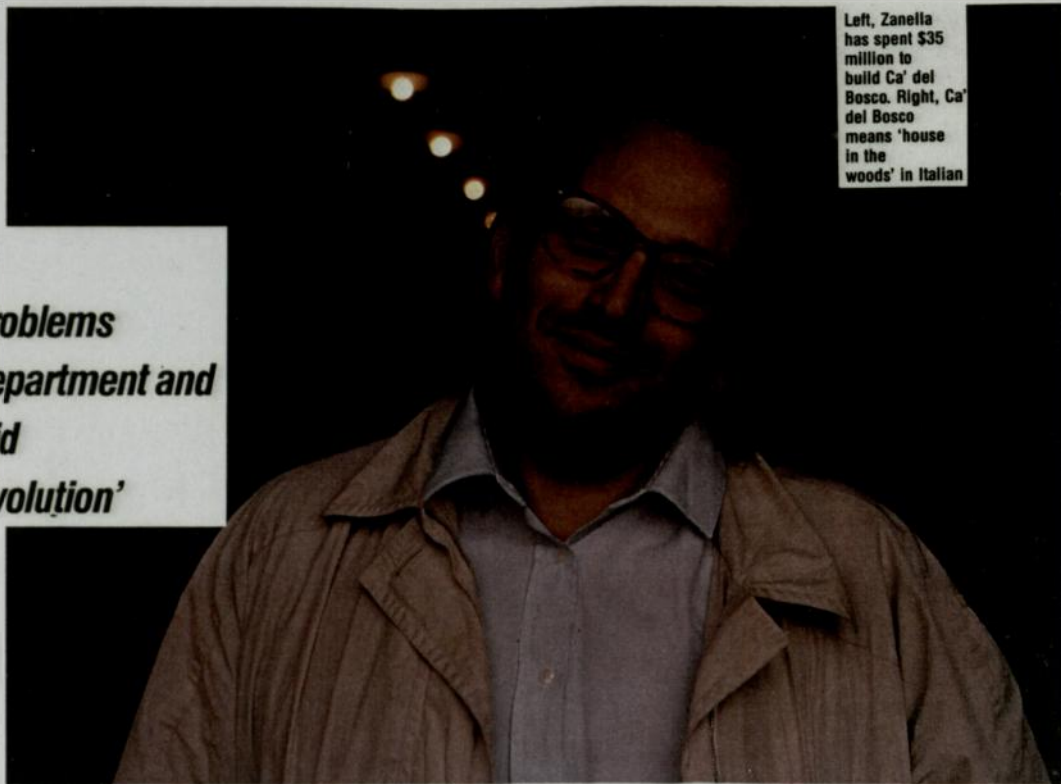
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