

MAVERICK VINTNER

Meet the man behind Ca' Del Bosco, one of Italy's best new wineries
BY ANTHONY DIAS BLUE

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wealthy Italians, Signor Zanella, a successful trucking executive, had sought a way to circumvent the relentless urbanization of the agrarian Italian society. He had bought the farm to supply his table with fresh eggs, chickens, vegetables and wine, and as a retreat to reestablish his link to the soil. Now he knew exactly what to do with his rebellious son. Maurizio was "exiled" to Erbusco, an obscure rural area just about an hour's rough drive from Milan.

A TURNING POINT

"I paid very little attention to farming when I first got there," Maurizio told me. "I spent most of the time racing my motorcycle." But in 1972, at age 16, the young Zanella took a government-sponsored agricultural trip to France. The attraction for him was three days in Paris, but this opportunity for fun was sandwiched in between visits to wineries in Burgundy and Champagne.

The older Italian enologists who were on the trip with Maurizio sneered at the French winemaking techniques. They didn't see the need for small barrels, vineyard designations and hands-on, traditional methods. In Champagne, for instance, the enologists were impressed only by the big, commercial firms; Maurizio, on the other hand, was fascinated by the careful, custom techniques he saw on a visit to Krug.

When he returned to Erbusco, Maurizio paid more attention during the grape harvest and crush. He continued to ride his motorcycle, but he began to develop an interest in wine.

THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS

Over time this mild interest grew into a passion. Six years later, in 1978, after convincing his father to expand and modernize the farm's old winery, Maurizio produced his first sparkling wine.

"My father thought I was crazy," Maurizio admits. "He humored me, but he still can't understand what I'm doing. When he looks around here, he just shakes his head." Maurizio called just shakes his head. Maurizio called the estate Ca' Del Bosco, which translates as "the house in the woods." Meanwhile, his motorcycle was gathering dust in one of the barns.

INSTANT SUCCESS

Ca' Del Bosco was an immediate sensation. The sparkling wines were in-

stantly elevated to the top rank of Italian spumante, but there was much more to come. In the next few years, while maintaining his preeminence in sparkling wines, Maurizio has produced astonishing Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Bordeaux-style claret.

What used to be the Zanella family vegetable farm has been transformed into one of Italy's most modern wineries. The 152-acre property has 117 acres of vineyard planted to Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo, Barbera and the newest, Sauvignon Blanc. The state-of-the-art winery produces more than 30,000 cases of wine, half of which are spumante, made by the costly French *methode champenoise*. The rest are mostly red and white Franciacorta (the area's DOC appellation), a fresh and charming traditional local wine. A few hundred cases of superlative Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and a Cabernet Sauvignon-based Bordeaux blend are also produced. All are estate grown.



"Unlike most Italian wine people, whose families have been in the business for hundreds of years," says Maurizio, "I had no preconceived ideas. I could learn from the French, from the Americans, and make exactly the kind of wine I wanted to make."

THE BRAINS BEHIND THE BUSINESS

At 33, Maurizio is a jolly, ebullient man who obviously enjoys wine, food and the other pleasures of life. Unlike some of the other vintners who have been dubbed "genius" by the international wine press, Maurizio doesn't take himself too seriously, nor is his ego so inflated that he won't enlist the help of others in his numerous projects.

In achieving his first objective—the production of world-class sparkling wine—Maurizio enticed André DuBois, a former cellar master at Moët & Chandon, to join his staff. Then, when

he turned his attention to Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet, he hired Southern California-born Brian Larky, fresh out of the University of California at Davis, as winemaker.

The Ca' Del Bosco Chardonnay is a big, luscious wine with lots of toasty oak and intense varietal flavors. It may very well be Italy's best Chardonnay (the closest competitors are Gaja and Avignonesi). Like Gaja, Maurizio is not shy about pricing. The wine, if you can find it (only eight hundred cases are made each year), sells for \$35.

Pinero is the proprietary name Zanella has given to Ca' Del Bosco's Pinot Noir. Although not yet in the Burgundy class, this wine is soft and fresh, with complex structure and round fruitiness. Its four-hundred-case production is sold for about \$60 a bottle.

Perhaps the most exciting Ca' Del Bosco wine is the Maurizio Zanella "signature" red, a Bordeaux blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. The wine is velvety and lush, with ripe berry fruit flavors and a subtle kiss of oak. It sells for \$38 a bottle; 1,600 cases are made per year.

THE STUFF OF MEMORIES

Three years ago I was lunching with Maurizio at Le Cirque in New York, one of the few American restaurants lucky enough to have the complete Ca' Del Bosco line on its wine list. A well-known Bordeaux producer, owner of an important classified estate, was at a nearby table, and the two vintners exchanged glasses of their own wines.

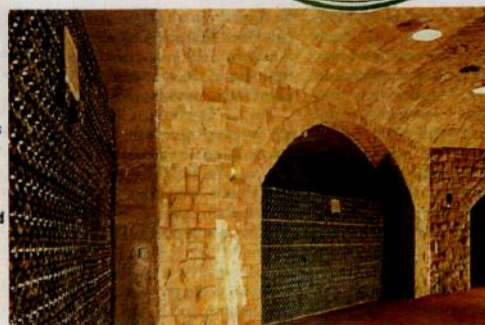
Eighteen months later I was visiting the same French vintner in the Médoc, and one of the first things he said to me was, "Do you remember that fantastic wine we drank in New York?" The Zanella wines are memorable indeed.

Maurizio Zanella has mellowed somewhat from his motocross days, but he still pushes his Ferrari to its limit on the autostrada. Around Erbusco, however, he drives a Land Rover—carefully, especially when it holds his pretty wife Tiziana and their three-year-old son, Brando. These days, Maurizio's boundless energy is channeled in the direction of making better and even better wines. □

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The pioneering Maurizio Zanella (opposite) is making some of the most interesting new wines in Italy at his beautiful estate, Ca' Del Bosco (left), outside Milan. In the winery's extensive storage cellars (top), bottles of his splendid Pinot Noir, called Pinero (above), get better and better with time.



Young Maurizio was a problem. At 15 he was completely uninterested in his schoolwork. In fact, he didn't bother to attend school very often. Instead he spent his days cruising around the streets of Milan on his motorcycle.

His father was concerned. What could he do to keep this young ruffian out of trouble? Then he remembered the farm and country house he had bought outside of Brescia in 1963. Like other

