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ON THE GRAPEVINE Leslie Martin

Italians experiment with varietals

WHEN BRIAN LARKY was invited to work the grape harvest in Italy in 1985, his Italian vocabulary consisted of three crucial words: *pasta*, *Ferrari* and *ciao*. These days the UC-Davis graduate not only speaks rapid-fire Italian, but also has just completed a five-year stint as a winemaker at the prestigious Ca del Bosco winery in the foothills of the Alps in Lombardy.

The American winemaker joined a panel of other prestigious vintners including Count Ugo Contini Bonacossi, Giorgio Grai, Vittorio Fiore and Paolo De Marchi at the recent Kapalua Wine Symposium on West Maui. The winemakers exchanged thoughts about institution versus innovation, tradition versus technology in the vineyards of Italy.

In order to compete in the world market and gain international stature, some Italian winemakers have been venturing beyond cherished traditions and experimenting with grapes other than those long associated with their particular wine-growing region.

During the discussions, the Italian vintners highlighted their successes with the classic French varietals that catapulted California onto the world scene more than 20 years ago.

Larky's prominent position as winemaker and director of operations of an Italian winery goes to show just how eager the Italians are to broaden their horizons.

Having recently shifted from winemaking at the \$35 million Ca del Bosco to consulting and representing the winery's products here in the states, Larky offered his views of the Italian wine scene.

"Italy is undergoing a revolution. It's the most dynamic wine region in the world now. France is quantified, codified and stabilized. You know what to expect from each area. In Italy, we're still learning whose wines are good, whose are bad, what regions are best adapted to certain varietals and how to achieve consistency," he observed.

At Ca del Bosco, owner Maurizio Zanella has been cultivating French varietals such as pinot noir, chardonnay and cabernet that have gained an international following. Despite his successes, Zanella has fought battles with the Italian bureaucracy over the rigid guidelines of the DOC, or *Dominazione di Origine Controllata*—similar to the Appellation Controllee laws of France that determine what grapes can be grown where and that establish standards of quality.

Brian Larky at Ca del Bosco in Lombardy.

Zanella was once warned by the powers that be that his vineyards would be bulldozed because he was making wines that weren't approved for the appellation. By threatening to head to court, he silenced the threats.

"Unlike the Chianti, Piedmont and Montepulciano regions, Lombardy doesn't have an ancient history of known wines, so we had to put ourselves on the map with internationally recognized varieties," Larky explained.

"Twenty years ago, Italian wines couldn't be put on an international stage. That doesn't mean there weren't great wines. It's just that there wasn't a lot of focus on understanding how to produce consistent quality."

Although Larky believes that Italians should concentrate primarily on Italian varietals, he applauds the vintners such as

Antinori and Gaja who are devoting a small percentage of their entire production to international varieties.

Why? Because he thinks that the experimentation with wines for the world market has a positive effect on the country's wines as a whole.

"The quality of standard wines—Chianti, for example—is being elevated tremendously because of new ways of working with the grapes, new equipment and keen attention to overall quality. So, 20 percent of production is increasing the quality of 80 percent of the wines."

From his vantage point, Larky considers California to be 20 years ahead of Italy: "You're ready to quantify now. Although there are still some conflicts about defining certain viticultural areas, Californians have an enormous understanding of consistency and quality thanks to a spirit of innovation and experimentation."

During the three-day conference at the elegant resort, the forever curious and experimental vintners like Randall Graham of Bonny Doone revealed their increasing fascination with the traditional grapes of Italy.

"When I went to Italy in 1985, no one would have ever dreamed of planting barbara and in prime cabernet country in the Napa Valley or sangiovese in the Santa Cruz Mountains," said Larky. "But now, that's just what's happening."

Leslie Martin is the wine and spirits editor for Country Living Magazine.

EASTBAY DINING GUIDE INSIDE



BY GARY REYES/THE TRIBUNE