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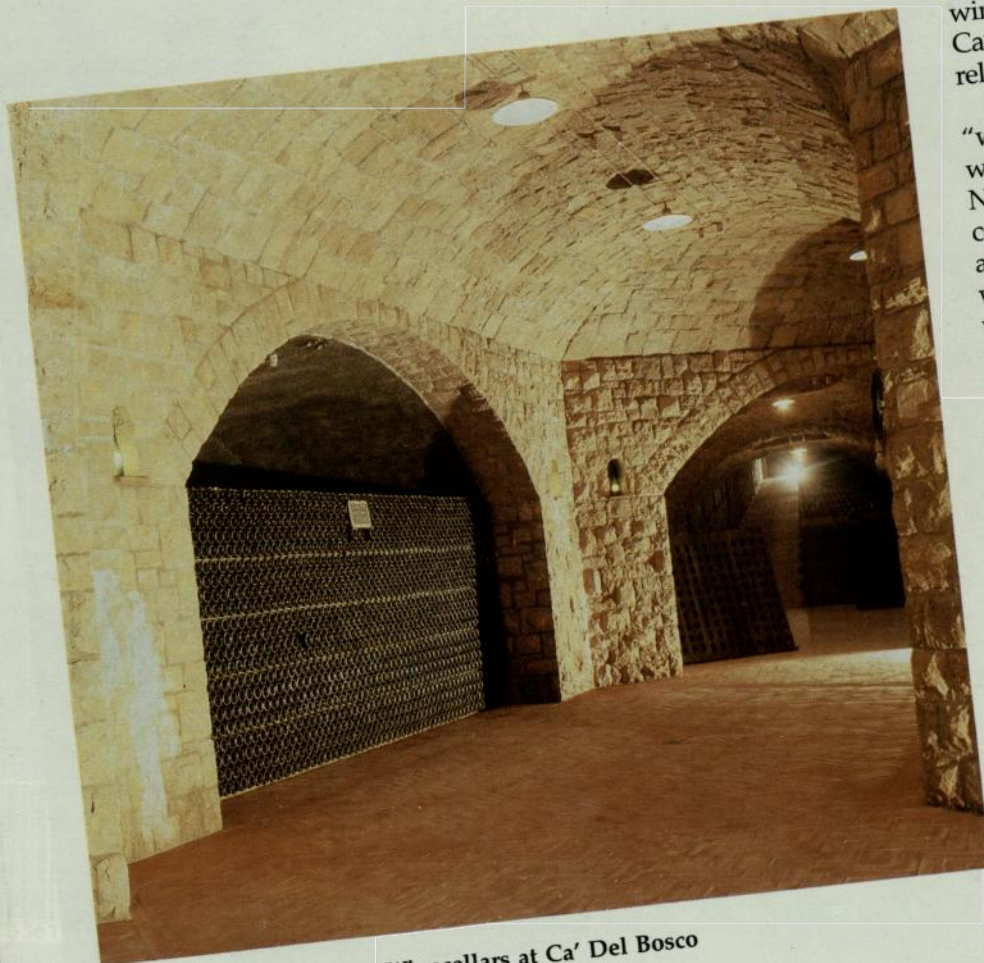
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ITALY

CA' DEL BOSCO'S

MAURIZIO ZANELLA

Richard L. Elia



Winecellars at Ca' Del Bosco

We don't follow in the footsteps of tradition in making our sparkling wine, because to do so is to follow mediocrity . . . French owners of sparkling wines in California really don't want their wines to be great; they want to keep them one level lower than their Champagnes.

Statements like these continue to make Maurizio Zanella, owner of Ca' Del Bosco, a provocative personality. Even when he's not being disputatious, Zanella has no difficulty receiving attention from the press: his wines do that for him. Besides, Zanella has an infectious laugh, a charming and comic character, which exhibits none of the reserve of the Milanese. He is, moreover, all the public relations the

winery needs, which explains why Ca' Del Bosco has, in fact, no public relations department.

"Yes, I am unhappy," says Zanella, "with California sparkling wines, which are uninteresting and boring. No, I don't say this to diminish the competition, because we don't have any competition. At Ca' Del Bosco we do not make sparkling wine, and we do not make Champagne: we make Ca' Del Bosco, a wine with its own style and personality." Zanella may appear arrogant, but he isn't. He exudes confidence—a confidence that comes from wealth and breeding, where what is a hesitating interrogatory to others is an unmistakable announcement to him.

We met Zanella again on one of his regular U.S. tours. He looked much the same as a year ago: rotund, talkative, and smiling effusively, like some movie star before an adoring public. Perhaps the only thing different was his hair—a ponytail of sorts angling awkwardly at his neck—a revived coiffure of his earlier days as a campus radical in Milan. "I am travelling the U.S. looking for good distributors—those who will not let my wines go unrespected," he says with a sense of frustration. Zanella can afford to be choosy. His wines are in limited supply and the demand for them is great; besides he's rich and can afford to be selective. "My wines belong in the best restaurants, not sitting idly on dusty shelves. It is amazing to me how some people get to be distributors in this country."

Ca' Del Bosco is in Erbusco (Lom-



bardy), an easy 45-minute ride east of Milan. Frankly, the wines are amongst the best and most expensive in the world, and Zanella intends to keep it that way, by sparing no expense to maintain quality. At Ca' Del Bosco, he's moved hills, replaced hills, re-arranged vineyards, bought the best equipment, built extraordinary tunnels for his cellars, and placed a new hill upon those cellars to insure temperature control. Moreover, he's ripped up several vineyards and is re-planting new vines just three feet apart—the shorter distance is cost intensive, but will deliver the quality he wants. "The only thing I want in this business is quality; otherwise why have it? We do not need any more mediocre wine in the world. I want great wine—in all we make about 10,000 cases—which of course is expensive, but it's what our consumers want."

Zanella is undoubtedly right: Ca' Del Bosco sells out almost instantly, despite the cost: Dotage Zero (his well-known sparkling wine) is \$30 a bottle retail; and the Chardonnay is \$40. Incidentally, Zanella's most recent Chardonnay was placed into a QRC California Chardonnay blind tasting as a "surprise" bottle and proved to be the unanimous winner. This was not surprising since Zanella's wines regularly win "best of the best" awards at wine competitions. His Pinero has already been viewed as a rival to DRC wines; his sparkling wines have done a proverbial "number" on many French Champagnes, as has his Cabernet Sauvignon. Who says that Italy can't make great Chardonnay or Cabernet? Certainly not Gaja, nor Antinori. Zanella's feelings are anything but mixed when it comes to bottle aging. "I'm sure my wines will age well."

But who cares? I make wine for today; I want wine that's ready to drink. I have tasted some 15-year-old Pomerol that's drinking like my own wine now. Why spend \$40 for a bottle of wine that you have to drink ten years from now? I'd drink water before I would do that . . . in fact I prefer water to much of the competition."

The circumstances behind Zanella's involvement with wine is the stuff of fiction. His father, a wealthy transport executive, bought Ca' Del Bosco to grow natural foods. Zanella at this time (1968) was still a student in Milan. A self-described "radical-hippie," Zanella was injured in the student strikes. His father was otherwise unamused, and took him from Milan to continue his education in the country surroundings of Ca' Del Bosco. Zanella, the summer before, vacationed for the first time



Ca' Del Bosco

in France's wine district. The moment he saw Ca' Del Bosco he didn't envision natural foods, but vineyards. Not much interested in academics (Zanella admits to "know-

ing nothing about politics" but "everything about motorcycles" in those days), he turned to viticulture. He broached the subject of vineyards to his father, who "hated

wines" and who "never saw the inside of a wine cellar," yet who said with not a little exasperation "Do as you like." Zanella did. At age 17 he started the vineyards; his father supported him for the next eight years. By age 25, Zanella was financially free and worked the vineyards without any financial help. He's since become his own millionaire in the process, even more so when the wine world understood that what he was producing was indeed exceptional.

"What do you do for a viticultural encore?" we asked. "Who wants one?" he replied flatly. "I have visions and many more beginnings, not endings. There is a need, for example, to intensify the quality of my wines even further. Make it greater. You know, with quality and greatness, my wine imagination is unlimited." □