

IN TWO SECTIONS

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SECTION

H

THURSDAY
MAY 9, 1991

LOS ANGELES TIMES

ABOUT WINE

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In an encyclopedia on wine written almost a decade ago, wine author Hugh Johnson made reference to the Italian property Ca' del Bosco and its dynamic owner Maurizio Zanella.

It was a classic typographical error and an ironic twist at the same time. Not only is the owner's name Maurizio Zanella, but his wines are anything but vanilla in character. In fact, his wines are a dramatic testament to vision and drive.

And money. For the project known as Ca' del Bosco is no ordinary winery. Set at the foot of the Alps, in the tiny town of Erbusco, it is a sprawling hillside estate that may have cost \$30 million or more to build and includes an incredible network of underground caves for the making and aging of the wine.

Perhaps the early lack of recognition for Zanella and his project derives from the simple fact that Zanella is a perfectionist; although he began re-developing this project in 1972 to create the greatest wines in the world, the quality of the wine didn't show until a decade later.

On a visit to this amazing place the first thing one sees is a huge main building that appears large enough to house the winemaking. Actually, it's a hospitality center, filled with leather couches and arm chairs, sculptures and artworks. Most of the production is done below ground.



Maurizio Zanella at his 125-acre Ca' del Bosco winery in Italy.

When foreign visitors arrive, Zanella, 36, hoists the national flag of his guests from a 40-foot flagpole at the front door and leads them out onto a broad mosaicked piazza that also serves as a helicopter pad. When I visited, we sat on a stone bench and talked about the rebel that did all this.

"I was a radical, a student demonstrator in 1968, in Milan," he says. "My father was so frustrated with me, he sent me here," to the family's summer home in Lombardy, then a mere eight acres. "I was sent into exile," he says nonchalantly.

At school, young Maurizio learned agriculture, but nothing appealed to him until a field trip his class took to the Burgundy district of France to see a winery. This was no ordinary winery; it was Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, one of

the greatest of all wine producers in France.

"In Italy at the time, we drank wine to go with spaghetti and meatballs," he said. "We drank a lot of wine, and it was cheap. Very little of it was fine wine, but when I tasted the DRC wines . . ." His eyes began to roll. "I decided I wanted to make that kind of wine."

His father, Albano, had been successful in the trucking industry. Zanella asked him to bankroll his plan to expand the summer home into a major wine-making facility. To appease the rebel, the father consented.

A flood of spending followed. Land was acquired and planted and the winery was built. The result is one of the most astounding wineries of the most astounding winery facilities I have ever seen. To make room for the vines, Zanella removed some of the forest, which gave rise to the name of the property: House of the Woods. (Ca' is local dialect for *casa*, house; *bosco* is woods.)

Today Ca' del Bosco has 125 acres of vines planted tightly—about 2,500 vines per acre, about five times the amount in California vineyards. The theory is that the vines will compete with one another for survival, which will make for smaller berries and more concentrated flavors. In the underground winery, thousands of square feet of cellar space are laid out so that red wine can be made in one location, white wine in another and sparkling in yet another.

The first wine maker here was André Dubois, who had been cellar

master at Moët in France before being wooed here by Zanella. In 1985, however, Zanella decided to hire a wine maker from California.

"One day in August, I got a phone call from this guy in Italy and he says if I want to make wine in Italy, a plane ticket is waiting for me," says Brian Larky. "I had never met this guy before, so I asked him what his time frame was, and he said, 'the harvest starts next week.' I thought he was crazy."

Larky, a graduate of the wine program at UC Davis, is adventurous, but not about to jump into something without checking. "So I called Piero Selvaggio at Valentino and asked him what he knew about Ca' del Bosco. And he said, 'Oh, you must go. You must see it.' So I decided to go."

Larky, who looks and acts like comedian Kevin Pollack, has an intensity similar to Zanella's, with eyes that flash and a body that moves even when he's sitting still. But even he was unprepared for the outrageous lifestyle he'd find.

"The day I got there, there was a lunch that lasted till 4 p.m., then a dinner that lasted till midnight, and I was still jet-lagged and I spoke no Italian. But I could tell these guys were serious."

Larky made wine at Ca' del Bosco until 1989, when he left. "Maurizio felt it was time for me to settle down, marry a local girl," says Larky, now 28. "I wasn't ready for that."

He now helps set up distribution for the Ca' del Bosco wines in the

United States and is helping distribute other small-production Italian wines. However, he still acts as a consultant to Zanella, traveling to Lombardy often during the year.

When he's at the property, he stays in a home on the estate that is his, locked when he's gone. He says he feels compelled to remain with Zanella, at least part-time, because "his passion for quality is like a rabid dog foaming at the mouth."

One of the marks of that passion is the way the wine is bottled. Empty bottles from the factory are placed on a conveyor belt and rinsed, so no dust remains. Most wineries do this. Then, however, Zanella goes one step further. The bottles are rinsed with the wine that will eventually fill them.

The rinse-wine is eventually sent through a series of filters and then is sold off in bulk.

Also in the winery is a laboratory that looks as if it came from a hospital. It includes all the latest scientific equipment for analyzing wine down to levels only a chemist could decipher. And there are numerous other systems that help to make the wines better.

The Ca' del Bosco wine that achieves the greatest acclaim in Italy is (not immodestly) named simply Maurizio Zanella. It is blended from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot and it's a deep, dark and concentrated wine with a faint dusty-cherry note and loads of complexity.

The 1985 version, which is hard to find, sells for about \$45 a bottle. It reminded me of a cross between a Cabernet Sauvignon from Ruthenford in the Napa Valley and a Pauillac of Bordeaux.

A better value and a great example of Lombardy wine making is

the 1987 or 1988 Franciacorta Rosso, a blend of Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Barbera and Nebbiolo, the traditional blend of the region. This wine is sublime and complex, with a dash of pepper adding zip to deep fruit and wonderful depth. At \$16 it's an excellent value. (The 1988 is a little richer and deeper.)

The 1989 Franciacorta Bianco (\$16), a 60/40 blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc, is rich and creamy with loads of character.

Ca' del Bosco first gained fame about 1985 for its sparkling wines, and they remain exceptional, though fairly pricey, ranging from \$25 to \$40 a bottle.

The winery also makes stunning—and expensive—Chardonnay and Pinot Noir (the latter called Pinero).

Wine

In 1972, Maurizio Zanella set out to make the best wines in the world. Now his Ca' del Bosco wines are among Italy's best.

By Dan Berger, H37

THURSDAY, MAY 9, 1991 H37