

MAURIZIO ZANELLA: CHARM AND DISRUPTIVE ENERGY

How did an unruly street-fighting youth become one of Italy's leading vinous entrepreneurs? Margaret Rand meets the man behind Ca' del Bosco to discuss life, luxury, and the pursuit of fine Franciacorta

What would be an archetypal wine entrepreneur story? It would start with somebody with no background in wine, or very little. It would involve a rebellious child who, after many tribulations, finds his way with the help of a mentor and his own self-belief and turns into the disruptive hero of his own story. It would end with the hero bestriding the world, or nearly.

Maurizio Zanella wears red Gucci loafers to bestride the world, and if he's not bestriding the world, he's astride a Harley-Davidson, which probably feels very similar. He's keen on Gucci: The hospitality staff in the winery are kitted out in Gucci casual chic, and when you buy something in Gucci, you apparently get offered a choice of tea, coffee, water, or Ca' del Bosco. I asked if you get offered Gucci when you buy something at Ca' del Bosco, but the answer was not too expensive. The close links are based on Zanella's friendship with the author of the "Gucci miracle: €1 billion to €10 billion in four years," says Zanella. And as you might infer from such an association, Ca' del Bosco is moving deeper into the luxury goods sector.

A glance at the winery might tell you that, too. Don't stand on the helipad; there's a helicopter about to land to take you on a tour of the company's vineyards. There are large chunks of site-specific art in and around the winery: a life-size rhino; a cast metal liquid explosion; a monumental marble half-head and shoulder; the estate gates, the commission for which annoyed the artist because he said he didn't do gates, only monuments. "Cut it in half," said Zanella. The sculptor of the monumental marble head said he only did small sculptures in marble because it was difficult to find big enough pieces. Zanella told him that he'd never be Michelangelo. "Why are sculptors never as famous as painters? Painters do one piece, sculptors do three pieces, six pieces. You will never be famous. I want one piece." The sculptor did it.

Sculpture is more or less mandatory in smart wineries now. Would Zanella have liked to be a sculptor? He has no ability, he

says. But if he hadn't gone into wine? "It's difficult to think what I would have enjoyed like wine. Probably something where I could have put my influence on design. Something creative, like architecture, perhaps. I don't want to say fashion, but I like to discover the beauty of life."

This would possibly not have been the attitude of the juvenile Zanella, who was more of a street-fighter; but let's start at the beginning.

Winding back to the beginning

He was born in Bozen/Bolzano, and when he was two his parents moved to Milan, where his father had a business. When he was 12, they decided to buy a farm to grow their own food, rear rabbits and pigs, make wine—that sort of thing. His father called Guido Berlucchi, whose wine he loved and gave as presents, to ask him to help make a vineyard. This was around 1958.

Within a couple of years, Maurizio began to be involved in student protests, however. "When I was in private school, all those next to me were fascists, so I became a communist because I wanted to be different. The public university was next door, and there was fighting in the streets with the police. For me it was very exciting, playing war instead of studying. So, I lost the year [at school]. My father was very upset. He changed my school from a private to a public school, where they were all communists, so I became a fascist."

The street-fighting did not stop, however, and he became more expert at fighting—"I was very strong, 14, and stupid"—and got in trouble with the police. He also lost a second year at school. "You can't stay on at school if you lose your year twice." The police came to see his father, lawyers were called, and there was a right old rumpus.

After that, he was, bizarrely, sent to Manchester docks, in England. "I was living with a very simple and poor family. I was there from May to September [1970]. I learned what life is, not war." There followed a sort of internal exile on a small farm

Photography of Maurizio Zanella by Helen Light



In the early 1970s, Luigi Veronelli came into Zanella's life. "He was my cultural father; he was a philosopher, a writer. He took me under his wing, and we traveled together and he taught me. He opened the doors of quality wine to me. He didn't teach me how to make wine, but he taught me the mind-set of no compromise"

in Franciacorta, where he lived with the farmer in the middle of nowhere. The cattle and chickens did not benefit much from his attention, however, and he spent his time roaring around on a motorbike, pretending to go to school in Isco but never actually going.

Anyway, one day he was on the farm when a man from the agricultural department of Lombardy called to see if anyone wanted to go on a study day to France. It sounds as improbable as a stint at Manchester docks; the plan was to visit the best wineries in Burgundy and Champagne, followed by a weekend in Paris. Zanella guessed what his father would say, so he rang his mother to say that he would like to study wine, and, well, there's this trip... He didn't mention Paris. His mother said, "Wine?" and agreed.

The party was full of young Italian aristos on a jaunt: "Wine was fun for them. In 1970s Italy, wine was something to eat with, not for savoring and enjoying." André Noblet welcomed them to Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, and "the Italians criticized everything. There was an old lady grafting vines in a hut, and the Italians said, 'How stupid. We get them ready done from the nursery; we're smarter.' There was a horse working the vineyard, and they all laughed and said, 'We've come all this way to see what our grandfathers did! We're more advanced than them.' Then in the cellar, there was mold on the walls, and they said, 'That's not possible in Italy—we have ceramic; we're clean.' Then they saw small barrels, and said, 'My God, my grandfather had those, but now we have big wood or concrete or plastic, but not small.' There were six wines, and they said, 'Why six wines, if they're all Pinot Noir? Just mix them all together.' Then we were given a white wine, and they said, 'They don't know that white should be served before red; they're ignorant.' They were offended."

As they left, Zanella asked if he could buy some bottles. The price was startling; and when he told his companions, their first reaction was to say, "Stop the bus! They've robbed him!" No, said Zanella: I want my wine. At which point, they laughed and offered him 300 or 400 bottles of their wine for the same price.

The idea that three bottles of DRC could sell for the same price as 300 from one of his noble colleagues gave him furiously to think. He wanted to make wine. But he didn't have a cellar.

"My father was a genius, in my opinion, and he understood that I had some interest. He said, 'If you want a cellar, you do it.' I said, 'What? How?'" So, he went to the bank and asked for money: 160 million lire. Because he was still only 16, he went with his mother, who cried. His father had to sign

everything (this was a long while ago), but it was set up to look as if he had nothing to do with it. And Maurizio built his first cellar in 1973. "I did it alone. My father never said, 'Do it like this.' He saw that I finally had an interest, and he controlled the money but he never controlled the details."

It wasn't plain sailing, of course. He advertised for a cellar master from Champagne and received seven or eight replies. "My father said, 'Choose one with black fingernails.' So, I did the opposite and chose a man in a tie, from Avize." That didn't work out, so he went for his second choice, André Dubois, who'd been at Moët and had black fingernails. "I was so lucky."

Striving to realize his dreams

Around this time, Luigi Veronelli came into Zanella's life. "He was my cultural father; he was a philosopher, a writer. He took me under his wing, and we traveled together and he taught me. He opened the doors of quality wine to me. He didn't teach me how to make wine, but he taught me the mind-set of no compromise. He gave me the knowledge to be one of the first wineries in Italy to start." He means one of the first of the new wave; this was around 1975, when the renaissance was beginning. "I was so lucky with the timing. Ten years earlier, no one would have bought one bottle. Ten years later, there would have been 220 [good wineries], not one or two. If you're one of the first, you have an advantage."

Even so, for the first 20 years "it was difficult not to be Tuscan or Piemontese." In New York, he says, they thought he couldn't be Italian, because Italy didn't make good wine. "From 1890 to 1960, 70 years of a bad economy destroyed the tradition and culture of wine. [...] I was dreaming always of this—this being where he is today—but thinking back, it was impossible to change in 40 years. But I was young, so I said I will do it. I was hungry, and Veronelli was helpful and gave me confidence that I was on the right road. But I never saw a penny back for 30 years. Veronelli would say, 'Hold tight.'"

He continued to invest. In 1994, his father suggested that if he wanted his dream to become reality, he would need an outside investor, because the family couldn't go on giving him money. "My father was a genius." His suggestion was that Zanella find a partner and enter into an arrangement with the family whereby one part would be sold and the property leased. "I argued with him for two years: Why should I lose control? He said, 'You own the land and should know now that no one will interfere.'"

And so it was that the Santa Margherita added Ca' del Bosco to its portfolio. More than 60ha (150 acres) remain personally owned by Zanella and his sister, and these are, he says, the best vineyards. "Santa Margherita are still partners," says Zanella, "and they don't interfere in production"; they're involved in finance, sales, and exports. "We pay their organization in some export markets. And they're so strong financially that they tell the bank what to do, not vice versa."

Investment continues: in 2017–19, investment in vineyards, cellar, and technology will come to €49.5 million, says Zanella. Sales are expected to be €35 million.

But it was only when Santa Margherita arrived on the scene that Zanella started to feel financially secure. "My father was very smart; he insisted. I was still denying that I needed a partner to make my dream into reality." His father has "never

put his foot into the cellar. He's very proud of Ca' del Bosco, but he was never involved."

Making Franciacorta bloom

Perhaps it's time for us to go into the cellar, though, and the vineyards. There are about 250ha (620 acres), in eight villages (hence the helicopter), all on hills except for Cabernet and Carmenère, which are on flatter land outside the two amphitheatres of hills that are the core of Franciacorta. For sparkling wine, there is Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Erbamat, the relatively newly approved indigenous variety. The vineyards are impressive: high and often steep. They're planted with a mix of massal selections from their own vines, and a variety of clones. All are picked by hand and then selected by hand. They're 100 percent organic now.

As they made progress toward organic viticulture, however, problems arose in fermentation. Those organic grapes would develop strange aromas in fermentation; it turned out that copper on the skins was the problem and that it happened in dry years, when copper residues weren't washed off by rain. "I said to Stefano [Capelli, the enologist], 'What did your grandmother say you should do before eating an apple? Wash it.' In every industry, they wash the fruit, except in wine, because it's blasphemous to say water."

And so developed what now has the snappy title of Cluster Wellness Procedure, which consists of washing and drying the grapes before pressing. "It gets off 90 percent of impurities," says Capelli. "*Débourbage* will get the biggest particles off. But if you wash the grapes, there's no need for *débourbage*, so you get better aromas, as well as better fermentation. [...] We privilege the aroma of grapes. We're very different from Champagne in that way. We're evolving a style of our own."

And yet the criticism most often leveled at Franciacorta as a wine is that the wines are sound and well made but don't have a particularly exciting style. And it has sometimes been Zanella himself who has made this criticism.

"We miss tradition. To get good results, you have to have changed your vineyard at least three times. You correct your mistakes in your second planting, and you only get it right with the third. If it's an average of 33 years between plantings, you need 100 years to get a good result. Franciacorta is doing a very good job, but it's still in its second planting of vineyards. We are some of the oldest, and we're changing our first vineyard for the third time in about ten years' time. In 20 years, we'll have the final and best palette. We have to get that tradition."

"We try to valorize what we have by making our rules very strong to oblige all vintners to go in a very straight direction: We have the lowest production per hectare, the lowest proportion of juice from one kilo of grapes, and longer times on the lees. I hope that will speed up the process. In 40 to 50 years, the region will be where it wants. It has happened as it has so far because of strong rules and special terroir. I avoid stupid comparisons with Champagne. They are two different regions, two different terroirs, two different characters."

Zanella's legacy

Nevertheless, sourcing a *chef de cave* from Champagne, as Zanella did with Dubois (and then Capelli trained under Dubois), is a way of acquiring the tradition that Franciacorta lacks; and you could infer the same approach when it comes

Ask Zanella his strongest point, and he says, "Passion. It doesn't feel like work. I can't imagine my life without this. Wine came before family, before everything. It's not positive, but it's true. If there was a class with my son, and it was more important to have a tasting with Delmas, I would go to Bordeaux, not to the class with my son"

to strengthening a position in the luxury goods market. His in-house PR used to work for Loro Piana, for example.

Wine, he points out, is a luxury good unlike any other. "Annunziata Clementi needs ten years. What luxury good needs ten years to make? We have a deeper culture, and we have a shareholder who is the gentleman upstairs"—he points heavenward. "They work under a roof and decide how much they make. Our major shareholder is sometimes not nice to us, as in 2017, when we lost 60 percent. [...] The reality is different" from that of other luxury goods.

Having your wine accepted into luxury circles doesn't depend on getting high marks from critics, he believes. "It's frustrating, but it's reality. You have to balance your own ego with reality. You have to make the experts happy, and the moneyed sector." Annunziata Clementi went visibly upmarket with the 2008 vintage, when the cuvée name took over from the producer's name as the most important thing on the label. It's been appearing at Christie's for a couple of years, he says, and will be at Sotheby's this year. "It's starting in London and New York. Probably someone is selling or someone is buying. [...] It will take at least 10–15 years to get progression, but pricing is going up as we wait."

And what then? Will his children take over in due course? They're not, at the moment, working in the company, but who knows? His daughter is working for Gucci; his son works for another winery in Franciacorta. What he hopes he has passed on to them is passion for whatever they do: "Either they have the same passion or not. If not, it's better they stay out." Ask Zanella his strongest point, and he says, "Passion. It doesn't feel like work. I can't imagine my life without this. Wine came before family, before everything. It's not positive, but it's true. If there was a class with my son, and it was more important to have a tasting with Delmas, I would go to Bordeaux, not to the class with my son. I always gave priority to what people considered work. It took a toll on my private life. I have good relations with my children because they're generous, but I always feel I haven't done enough to stay close to them."

"If I do an analysis of my private life, it's not negative, but I could have done a lot better in my private life. I have a nice son; he's well educated and has no problems, but for sure I miss not being close enough to him. There was no time..."

The truth is, I think, that he's still a street-fighter underneath. There's a disruptive energy under the charm, a restless drive that says that everybody, including him, can always do better. There is always more world to bestride. ■