

THE Red Heart of a Sparkling Man

MAURIZIO ZANELLA OF
CA' DEL BOSCO ARGUES
HIS CASE FOR THE
“SUPER LOMBARDIAN”
CATEGORY

by Lars Leicht

Maurizio Zanella describes the style of Maurizio Zanella Rosso as “more slender than the Californians, more immediate than the Bordelaise.”



PHOTO: NICOLA UGHI



Ca' del Bosco founder Maurizio Zanella's namesake wine, a red blend made in the style of Bordeaux under the denomination Sabino Rosso IGT, bears his signature on the label.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CA' DEL BOSCO



The vineyards and winery of Ca' del Bosco in Italy's Franciacorta region.

The wine world automatically associates Maurizio Zanella with Franciacorta, the bottle-fermented sparkling wine of Lombardy in Northern Italy, and rightfully so: After all, his winery, Ca' del Bosco, is one of the producers responsible for putting it on the map, thereby realizing his dream to understand, emulate, and improve upon what is arguably the world's most famous (though, Zanella might argue, not necessarily its best) bottle-fermented sparkling wine, Champagne.

But Zanella's signature can instead literally be found on a different wine, a red made in the style of Bordeaux—another French region that is arguably the world's most famous, in this case for red blends. He's more willing to agree with that point, as he has endeavored to meet its benchmark perhaps even more passionately than he has the one involving bubbles.

This backstory revealed itself when I recently caught up with Zanella on his first trip to New York, a city he adores, in over four years. We met at Peak, the stylish new restaurant on the 101st floor of 30 Hudson Yards, and started our lunch with, of course, his flagship Cuvée Prestige Edizione 43—labeled as such because it's the 43rd annual rendition of this classic multivintage Franciacorta. In

that moment the wine served to ground Zanella, who was seemingly overwhelmed by the bird's-eye view of what is arguably the world's most famous city (no argument from him on that point).

"You must pardon me, but I'm a farmer," he told me. "I'm not used to all this." He then settled in and, in preparation for tasting three vintages of his eponymous red blend, ordered the restaurant's renowned American wagyu burger, served rare in what I can confirm was a very appropriate pairing.

Burger in hand and wine in glass, Maurizio Zanella the man began to recount how Maurizio Zanella the wine—currently a blend of 45% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Merlot, and 25% Cabernet Franc under the denomination Sabino Rosso IGT—came to be. In explaining its history, Zanella dropped so many names that I thought to ask our server for a broom and dustpan to pick them up.

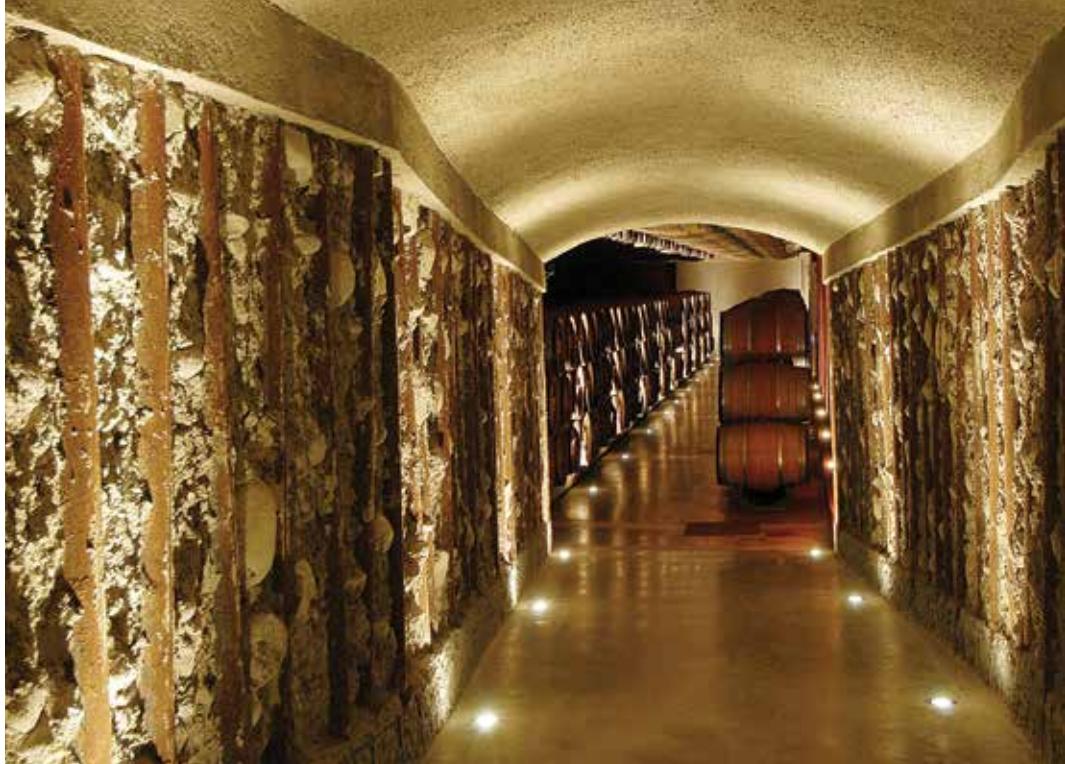
The first was none other than Napoleon Bonaparte, the French general and conqueror who codified, quantified, and catalogued pretty much anything he came across, including the vineyards of Franciacorta. Though production of sparkling wine in the hills north of Brescia can be traced to the late Middle Ages, according to Zanella, a Napoleonic cadastral map from the early 19th century

shows a not-insignificant 1,000 hectares of vineyards in the area. They were exclusively dedicated to red varietals to produce Bordonsì Magher—translating in local dialect as “a lean Bordeaux.”

In the late 1960s, the denomination for red wines in the region called for Cabernet Franc and Merlot in dominant and roughly equal proportions to be blended with lesser and roughly equal proportions of Nebbiolo and Barbera brought by migrant farmers from neighboring Piedmont. Ca’ del Bosco planted a vineyard to meet these requirements, and the first vintage—1975—of the winery’s Rosso di Franciacorta was made accordingly. But as Zanella traveled around, including on a 1978 trip to California with Italian journalist Giulio Gambelli and famed Friuli producer Mario Schiopetto, he observed that the world’s great red wines typically feature a predominance of Cabernet Sauvignon. He pursued a path that would make his wine ineligible for the historical and arguably (though, again, perhaps not to Zanella) more prestigious Denominazione di Origine Controllata and relegate it to the lowest common denominator, Vino da Tavola, or table wine, as the IGT designation did not yet exist. Thus was born the inaugural 1980 vintage of Maurizio Zanella Rosso: a “Super Lombardian” wine we still recognize today as being as rebellious and iconic as its namesake.

Part of the evolution of Maurizio Zanella Rosso was the early revelation that the Cabernet Franc in Zanella’s

PHOTO: SANDRO MICHAELI



vineyard was not, in fact, Cabernet Franc. A 1985 shipment of vines from a new French nursery supplier—chosen over Italian competitors by a frustrated Zanella seeking greater reliability and authenticity—looked nothing like the Cabernet Franc already in his vineyards, and when the nursery refused to take it back, Zanella took the case to court. Despite the testimony of noted Italian viticultural professor Mario Fregoni at a time before the existence of scientifically verifiable DNA testing for grapevines, famed French ampelographer Pierre Galet successfully proved that what was shipped to Zanella

was indeed genuine Cabernet Franc. It turned out that what had originally been planted in Ca’ del Bosco’s vineyard—and in thousands of other vineyards throughout Northern Italy—was Carménère.

That left Zanella and other impacted producers with a double conundrum: what to do with the existing Carménère and its lack of recognition by Italian wine laws. His immediate solution was for Ca’ del Bosco to craft a monovarietal red named Carmenero, trademarked to avoid conflict with DOC regulations that did not permit using the varietal name on the label. His next mission was more laborious but perhaps most fundamental: to change the Italian wine laws to recognize “Cabernet Franc and/or Carménère,” thus legitimizing hundreds of wines that might otherwise have been technically fraudulent. “In our Italian style,” declared Zanella, “we saved the ‘children.’”

Enter the next member of the hit parade of names: famed restaurateur Giorgio Pinchiorri of the Michelin-starred Enoteca Pinchiorri in Florence. In 1981, he was traveling with fellow enoteca owner Cesare Solci of Milan and stopped at Ca’ del Bosco to taste the two barrels that Zanella had made; each gentleman purchased one on the spot.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CA’ DEL BOSCO



A view of Ca’ del Bosco’s vines in the 1980s, the same decade Maurizio Zanella Rosso debuted.



The cellars of Ca' del Bosco.

Around the same time, Zanella made a return trip to California, bringing along his father, Albano; his agronomist and mentor Antonio Gandossi; and Ca' del Bosco winemaker André Dubois, all a bit reluctant about the voyage. "I had to push them onto the plane," Zanella said. Another name-drop alert: His main contact in the U.S. was prominent Southern California restaurateur Piero Selvaggio, who introduced Zanella to local wine icons Robert Mondavi, Paul Draper, Warren Winiarski, and André Tchelistcheff.

After Zanella stayed at Mondavi's home during the trip, he returned the favor by inviting Mondavi to his own home in Italy in 1982. Zanella recalled that when Mondavi visited Ca' del Bosco's cavernous cellars, he told his fellow travelers that while some had called him crazy for the level of investment he'd put toward his project in Napa, Zanella was likely "crazier than me." Zanella's signature on the label of his eponymous wine evidently inspired Mondavi to use his and Baron Philippe de Rothschild's signatures on Opus One, for which he asked Zanella's blessing. "Of course he didn't need to do that, but I said OK, as long as he would send me six bottles from every vintage," Zanella said. "I wasn't greedy and didn't ask for a whole case of 12. And I did receive six bottles for the first five or six vintages until Mondavi was no longer a formal part of it." Tchelistcheff, for his part, was also a frequent guest at Ca' del Bosco and of-

fered informal advice on making Maurizio Zanella Rosso.

California was an inspiration to Zanella because its modern age of winemaking started in the late 1960s, around the same time as Franciacorta's renaissance. "Napa is the same age as Franciacorta. It is different from Italy, but similar to Bordeaux," Zanella explained. "If they can be cowboys like that, so can we! I wanted to show everyone that we can make great wine in a different way than Italy was doing at the time."

Describing the style of Maurizio Zanella Rosso as "more slender than the Californians, more immediate than the Bordelaise," Zanella cited additional moments over the years that helped elevate the wine's esteem—of course involving more names. U.K. critic Michael Broadbent called it "smart," "pleasing," and "unusually attractive" in the April 1987 issue of *Decanter*, and back in the U.S., New York restaurateur Sirio Maccioni became a friend and often recommended the wine to his prestigious clientele. French chef Gérard Boyer of Domaine Les Crayères in Reims ordered a few bottles of Ca' del Bosco Franciacorta but was so impressed with the Maurizio Zanella Rosso that he purchased 30 cases; he had the temerity to serve it blind at a press dinner, shocking most of the guests who guessed it was a high-end Bordeaux, creating a minor controversy, and generating high praise for the wine in the French and Ital-

ian press as a result.

When our lunch at Peak was over, I asked Zanella what he wanted his namesake wine to be most recognized for. "Above all, elegance—the quality should continue to increase over the coming years naturally, but the wine should always show elegance. After all, look where we are," he said, once again taking in the scene high above Manhattan. "We're at the top of the world!" **SJ**

Maurizio Zanella Sabino Rosso IGT, Lombardia, Italy (\$105)

Maurizio Zanella says the style of his namesake Rosso—a blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Cabernet Franc, and 25% Merlot—is "more slender than the Californians, more immediate than the Bordelaise." Oregano-tinged boysenberry and vanilla-blessed clove demonstrate its alluring array of aromas. The palate is silky, seamless, and ethereal, with tart pomegranate on angel-wing tannins. A wisp of sweet basil echoes with juicy, ripe black cherry and a thin line of pencil lead. Remarkable mouthfeel and constant delivery of generous fruit, grounded by gravitas. **98**

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