

Altura

Interview

This interview with Francesco Carfagna took place in his vineyards in November, 2011.

Tell us about the history of *Altura*.

We took over the vineyards -which represents about 3,5 hectares- in 1999 from an old man who'd abandoned the property. Through the 80's and 90's, abandonment of agriculture on the island had been the norm. Everyone thought we were crazy to spend money on setting the vines back up again! It was certainly a very difficult and expensive process[]

But I believed in Giglio wine, which was not quite dead, but almost. And so we began to do the opposite of what everyone else was doing, which was to restart cultivating our land. I'm proud to say that other vineyards have since been restored; Giglio wine is again drinkable and flowing across the world!

In past centuries, Giglio was famous for its wines. The entire island used to be completely covered in vineyards, though it's hard to believe when you look around and all you see is this "jungle"! The dream is to see the island completely covered in vineyards again, but I think it will take at least 500 years!

Can you tell me about the indigenous grapes you work with?

There are many grapes grown on Giglio, but the main grape is Ansonico. It is a gold, oval grape, and it used to be widespread all over the island because it has many good characteristics. For instance, the skin is strong, and this means that it travels very well. Entire ships worth used to be brought to Rome and all over Italy to be sold, because Ansonico is as good for making wine as it is on the table.

The reason Ansonico ultimately became so prominent is because it permitted families to live off their land. Up until very recently, most people born on Mediterranean islands made a living off agriculture. Now it is tourism.

What was your personal journey into wine?

There are two big roots, one that links me to wine and the other to the island.

My father had always made wine, and I always went with him to help. So I've been making and drinking wine since I was very young. It was always something I wanted to do and I told myself "I will make wine before I die!".

As far as the island, I was born in Rome and I came to Giglio for the first time when I was 9 for the holidays. I instantly fell in love. *Altura* is simply the combination of these two loves; I had always felt drawn to move here, and because I knew of Giglio's rich past and tradition in winemaking, I put the two together!

You've been a supporter of what you refer to as "*Alive Wine*" since the late 80's through

your restaurant Arcobalena. Most people would now refer to these as "natural wines". Having been around these for so long, how do you feel about the current context of natural wine in Italy and beyond?

I think that wine is by itself natural if you don't poison it. That's what I learned from my father, who only used grapes. He taught me that making wine is simply helping along a natural process.

When we began 12 years ago, there was still no talk of natural wine. And now, even poison is natural! But we've always been focused on making a quality product, and it seems strange to me that people who work with such similar ideas, with such a clearness of mind and heart, would fight amongst themselves by saying: "*He's less natural than me*", or "*I'm more natural than you!*" or "*I'm more natural than both of you combined!*".

I think we all share the same heart and passion, but people are getting too caught up in their discussion of "true" or "natural" wines. So I prefer to say "*Alive Wine*". Because that's what it is! A wine must have its own strength, must follow its own path.

What's the work like in the vines?

Everything is done by hand. If you've seen the land, you know there is no alternative. We let the grass grow most of the year, cutting it only once (we don't clear the remains). We use very limited powdered sulfur treatments (about three a year), because otherwise we'd have some serious issues with oidium. Believe me I've tried without it, and I didn't pick up one grape. I would love to find a way not to use it, but so far have been unsuccessful.

The soil is of course vibrant and healthy, full of the bacteria and insects that inhabit it. And we focus on very low yields (30 hl/h). Rabbits and goats freely roam the vineyards, which is nice except that they are always eating the grapes! They are contributing to the low yields!

And in the cellar?

I do add very small quantities of sulfur during vinification (in bottle is comes out to about 25 mg per liter). This has been a hang up for some people, who have adamantly told me that I should not do this. Again, just like in the vines, I have tried□ A big part of the last 12 years has been experimentation, and honestly I do think that the wine comes out quite good without any added sulfur during vinification. But with a very small quantity, I personally find it more pleasant than without it.

Last question. What do you like to drink?

All good wine!