

Vittorio Bera & Figli

Interview

This interview with Alessandra Bera took place in Los Angeles in March 2011.

Tell us about the Bera estate.

We are a small estate, which is common in Piemonte. We own 10 hectares of vines in the commune of Canelli and for the last two years we've also been renting 2 hectares, also in the area. Our best known cuvée is our Moscato D'Asti and represents the bulk of our production since we are in a great area for this variety. Six of our hectares are Moscato. We also grow Cortese, Arneis and Favorita -with which we make the Arcese cuvée - in white, and in red we grow Barbera and Dolcetto.

You work with the rest of your family, right?

Of course! I work with my brother Gian-Luigi who does most of the work in the cellar and our father Vittorio who is the founder of the estate. He is still a very strong presence and oversees pretty much everything we do, especially in the vineyard.

In a way you are directly responsible for Louis/Dressner discovering many of the Italian wines we currently work with. How did that happen?

I've been working with my family for a long time now and over the years I'd befriended many French vigneronns who were involved in France's natural wine movement. They were the ones, in particular [Pierre Breton](#) and [Thierry Puzelat](#), who told me I should contact Louis/Dressner. This was around the time of the Dive Bouteille; Joe and Kevin were there and we were introduced. I then wrote them an email about wanting to work with them: they agreed and I think this was the inspiration for exploring more natural Italian wines. They asked me to organize a tasting with a small selection of estates I liked. We did this at my house and I brought in wines from Stefano Bellotti ([Cascina degli Uliivi](#)), Nadia Verrua ([Cascina Tavijn](#)) and [Angiolino Maule](#). This served as a launching point for Louis/Dressner's passion for great Italian natural wine.

What's the work like in the vines?

Very simple. My father took over the estate from my grandfather in 1964 and continued working the exact same way. He once told me "Why should I poison myself? My father was able to work without chemicals so why can't I?"

We are working traditionally: everything in the vines is done manually, with the exception of the occasional plowing to get rid of weeds, which we do with a tractor. We've been certified organic since 2000, but as far as I'm concerned we work traditionally; the work methods are the exact same as my grandfather's. Some newer additions include the use of green fertilizers by planting selected legumes in the fall that help the flow of nitrogen into the roots of the vines. In the spring we bury them so they can be closer to the roots. Under no circumstances do we trim the vines, opting to tie them up manually. We use copper and bouillie-bordelaise to prevent mildew. We hand harvest.

And in the cellar?

We've been making entirely natural wine in the cellar for many years now: no inoculation and respect of terroir. For me the cellar work is secondary; the real work is in the vines. We are perfectionists in the vines because we want our grapes to be as pure as they can be. We have very low yields which obviously helps the maturing process. Once we get those grapes to the cellar it's pretty straightforward.

Moscato is a little more complicated because it is partially fermented: the tradition of this style of wine is to prematurely stop fermentation in order to reach 5.5%. This is a more involved process that requires technical skill, but again our Moscato is made in a traditional fashion. That's why our Moscato is so complex: we use very ripe grapes of the utmost quality, and by not manipulating it with chemicals in the cellar it remains bright and expressive.

For the reds, everything is done in concrete tanks; we don't use any wood. I find them to always taste alive and fresh. We prefer concrete to stainless steel. And even though we don't use wood, our reds are wine that truly benefit from aging in bottle. This helps them evolve, open up and be more expressive. We never filter the reds. Reds also spend a long time on their lees, 18-24 months or more depending on the cuvée and the vintage. My brother Gian-Luigi is an adept of lees: for him it helps the wines develop in structure and complexity. Never any racking, just a *débouillage* when we bottle. Very little sulfur, just a tiny bit at bottling to help preserve the wines because they have great aging potential.

How do you feel about your DOC, and more specifically how do your wines fit into the notion of "typicity" of a region?

This is a delicate matter. Just like in France we have problems with DOCs. We feel that we make wines that are typical of the region and truly reflect their terroir, their soil and their grapes. However our wines don't necessarily correspond to the image of our DOC. Our Moscato is always too rich, the color is too dark, something is always wrong! But with the exception of the Arcese, which is our only table wine, we fight for our wines to remain part of our DOC because we feel that Cannelli is the purest, most expressive appellation for Moscato. It would be disrespectful to renounce it. This is Moscato D'Asti, what it was then and what it can be now.

What's your stance on natural wine?

Again this is a bit complicated. In many cases, for wines made naturally, the proof is in the wines themselves. It has become a bit trendy as of late, especially in Italy where the debate on natural wine is very new compared to France. And people still aren't clear what "natural" wine really means. I think a lot of people fixate too much on sulfur, and to me this is a fake problem.

Speaking for myself natural wines are wines that reflect their terroir, soil, and vintage. Wines that aren't standardized, that aren't the same every year. I find the expression of different terroirs to be a beautiful thing. It gives the wine a character, an ability to distinguish itself.

How do you feel about your wines?

Wines from Piemonte are easy to drink. They are complex and structured but always fresh, with a lot of minerality. In such you can drink them at any point in a meal, and it's fun to see what pairs well. The Moscato, on the other hand, is obviously a great dessert wine but I really appreciate it as an aperitif. With food, I think it pairs well with a stronger goat cheese or a blue cheese.

What are your favorite wines to drink?

I like all wines and I like all cuisines. There are no absolutes; I like to try everything. I obviously drink a lot of natural wine because I have a hard time drinking anything else! As long as they're easy to drink and inspire me to drink them again! If they don't disjoint the meal and work in harmony with food, I like it! And to be perfectly honest, I like drinking the wines of my friends!