

Fattorie Romeo del Castello

Fattorie Romeo del Castello in Randazzo in Etna, Sicily.



Rosanna Romeo and Chiara Vigo.

Profile

Proprietors Rosanna Romeo and her daughter Chiara Vigo are taking the historic Fattorie Romeo del Castello to a higher level.

The estate of 14 hectares is surrounded by a lava flow from an eruption in 1981 that threatened to take away the entire 30 hectares of the domaine. Luckily, their 100 year old vineyard of Nerello Mascalese was spared. They have also planted some new vines of Mascalese from massale selection. Now the vineyards are spread over 14 hectares by the Alcantara river at 700 meters on Mt. Etna. They also have a thousand year olive tree and some hundred year oak trees; how great is the soil there?? All of the vines are in albarello (goblet) training, the traditional cultivation method of the region. They are helped in the vineyards by Salvo Foti's I Vigneri team of vineyard workers and Salvo has been helping them with natural winemaking. The grapes are hand-harvested, fermented in open wood vats without yeasts or enzymes and temperature controlled. Sulfur is used sparingly, if at all. The wines are aged in older oak casks for about 14 months then bottled without fining or filtration. The Vigo shows all the remarkable characteristics and potential of this perfect match of terroir (pure volcanic ash and lava flow) and a delicious grape variety only found in this corner of the world.

Interview

This interview with Chiara Vigo took place at L'Herbe Rouge in February, 2012.

Tell us about Fattorie Romeo del Castello.

The estate dates back to my great grandmother, and was inherited by my mom, whose maiden name was Vagliasindi. My grandfather produced wine through the first half of the 1900's, and the label he used was a huge inspiration, so we've kept it. The name of the estate and cuvée is also the same. My father was from Naples, but moved to Sicily when my parents got married in the 70's. He maintained the farm, but didn't produce any wine. When he died in 1987, and my mother continued this work until 2007, when I moved back to Sicily.

In 1981, Mt Etna erupted and the lava destroyed a big part of the property. It was a great tragedy that really affected my parents: prior to 81, they had about 60 hectares of land, but under these tough economic circumstances they were forced to sell a lot of vines. In the end, the farm became half the size. We have 14 hectares of vines, as well as olive trees, pear trees, chestnut trees, oak trees and of course lava! The only grape we work with is Nerello Marscalese: the 14 hectares are old vines (70-100 years) that produce the wine I currently offer, and we've replanted 10 hectares of very young vines that haven't produced any fruit yet.

What brought you back?

I've always been attached to this place: I grew up there and it's where my father died... But it was never the plan to study oenology/agronomy and start making wine here!

After high school, I studied and lived all over the place. I studied mass media communication in Bologna, and got my doctorate of the arts in Venice. By then I already knew I wanted to come back to Sicily, and began thinking about combining art with the island. This inspired my thesis, which revolved around studying wine labels designed by artists. The focus was on Italian and French labels, and this really drew me into the world of wine.

My research brought me to Paris for two years, where I eventually finished my thesis. I then spent a year in Milan adapting it into a book called *Arte e Vino*. I moved back to Sicily in 2007, and decided to live in Randazzo. I was all alone there for two years, and it was very hard. So now I spend the winter in Catania and stay in the country the rest of the year.

So what made you decide to make wine from your land?

Through a chance encounter with Salvo Foti in April 2007. He made me understand that I had a treasure, something I wasn't really conscious of. He gave me the confidence to start making my family's wine again.

I didn't really like wine until my stay in France. Before that I'd only had wines from Etna, which I really didn't like. They were very basic and lacked elegance. So at that point I actually believed I disliked all wine! But in the process of writing my thesis, I began actually tasting the bottles and that's when I realized that I actually liked it! I'm happy to say that wines from Etna have really evolved in the last decade, and that there's a new wave of great wine being made here.

What's the work in the vines like?

We've continued to work the same way as our ancestors. We've never used any chemicals in the vineyard. I've recently reintegrated wildlife to the vines, especially during the winter. We use copper and sulfur, and that's it. Because Salvo mentored me and works organically, we have never thought of working any other way. And honestly, if there is any point in continuing, it's through this type of agriculture. I can't ever imagine using chemicals.

How is the wine made?

Salvo Foti is my oenologist; he trained me in 2007 and 2008 at other wineries where he was calling the shots. At the moment we don't have a cellar on the property, which is frustrating and something that needs to happen soon. We actually have an edifice called a palmento dating back to the 1700's, and this is where the wine had always been made. Unfortunately, Italian law would never let us use it for security and hygiene reasons. I'm torn because I really need a cellar, but at the same time there is so much history there that I really want to renovate it and turn it into a museum.

You had a recent visit from Stefano Belloti of Cascina Degli Ulivi right?

Yeah, we met last year in Milan. I told him my story, and he was really intrigued. Then I basically asked him if he could help me! He came to Etna for the first time in his life in January (2012). I really hope he can come back to give us some more great advice. We've already started planting grains between the rows and implementing some of his techniques. My goal is to one day work in his very unique take on the biodynamic philosophy. I look forward to visiting his farm to see what he does first-hand!

At what point were you introduced to wines made with native yeasts?

Again, through Salvo. I restarted the estate to reconnect with my ancestors, so it was completely logical to work the vines and make the wine just like they had. I can't envision any other way to do it.

Can we talk about the new *Allegracore* cuvée?

We started with the Vigo wine in 2007. I used my last name as an homage to my father, because he worked this land and died here. But we'd originally wanted to call the wine *Allegracore* because it's the name of the parcel. I love the name, because it means "*the place that makes a happy heart*"! This was not possible because D.O.C legislation dictated that everything made in my area had to be Etna Rosso. But thanks to a dedicated group of vignaioli who fought against this, as of 2011 you are allowed to write the name of a parcel on an Etna Rosso.

So now the base wine will be called *Allegracore*, and the Vigo cuvée will only be produced in great vintages. *Allegracore* will be cheaper because it's aged in stainless steel. The Vigo will be made the same way as 07 and 08: stainless steel fermentation then aged in barrel. At least for now!

Visits

This visit at Fattorie Romeo del Castello took

place in April, 2012.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos by Lauren Feldman, Shawn Mead and Ian Becker.

After lunch at the excellent *San Giorgio e il Drago*, we hopped in our cars to visit Rosanna Romeo and Chiara Vigo of [Fattorie Romeo del Castello](#). The estate is located just on the outskirts of Randazzo, so it was a very quick drive. A long dirt path off the main road brings you to the 17th century house where Rosanna and Chiara live part time (their main residence is in Catania).



Rosanna, who is a local, inherited the farm from her grandmother in the 70's. She then married Mr. Vigo (originally from Naples), and together they took care of the farm and vines, but sold all of the grapes. After his death in 1987, Rosanna continued to maintain the farm alone. Her daughter Chiara, after travelling the world to pursue her masters degree, become a published author as well as a certified [kundalini yoga](#) master, decided to return in 2007.

From an early age, Chiara found herself drawn to the parallels between works of nature and art. Inspired by this connection, she found a perfect middle ground with wine labels: this passion became the foundation of her masters' thesis, which she later developed into the great book [Arte e Vino](#). After many years yearning to return to the farm, a chance encounter with [Salvo Foti](#) in 2007 gave her the perfect reason.

"He made me understand that I had a treasure, something I wasn't really conscious of."

She returned almost immediately with the goal of independently bottling wine from her family's estate for the first time since her grandfather in the 1950's. Because of her lack of agronomical and oenological knowledge, Salvo offered to mentor her by showing her how to tend the vines and make the wine. 2007 was the "first" vintage of the *Vigo* wine, the cuvée being an hommage to Chiara's father.

The 14 hectares of vines are 70-100 years old, all in Nerello Mascalese.





In the background, you can see the huge wall of lava that borders the vines.



[Mount Etna](#) is one of the most active volcanoes in the world, and its massive eruption in 1981 almost completely destroyed the entire Romeo Castello property. The flow's original trajectory was headed directly towards the house, but at the last minute took a right turn, sparing the property. It was a

great tragedy that cost the family a lot of land, but's it's also the very reason why the wines are one of a kind. The lava wall heavily affects how the winds hit the vines and how temperature is contained, thus creating a unique micro-climate. The result is a bright, concentrated red with a ton of personality.

At no point have chemicals ever been used in the estate's history. Chiara has recently reintegrated wildlife into the vines, and Stefano Bellotti of [Cascina Degli Ulivi](#) is consulting on how to incorporate biodynamic practices. His first visit was in January; he plans to return in summer, and Chiara can't wait to visit his farm to see what he does first hand.

Walking back, we got to see this 1000 year old tree.



At some point, another completely different tree started growing OUT of it. Pretty trippy man!

I then petted Rosanna's dog because it was super cute.



About a ten minute walk South of the house, Chiara has replanted vines -also in Nerello Mascalese- that have yet to produce fruit.



They aren't too far from the Simeto river.



If you look closely, you can see exactly where the flow of lava that borders the vines ended. The river is very dry this time of year, but fills up considerably.

We then visited the old palmento, which is adorned by that creepy [leatherface](#) thing that was just as terrifying in person as it is in the picture.



It was time to taste, so we stepped into the house. First up were the 2007 and 2008 *Vigo*'s which have both been available in the US before. Since Chiara is such a label geek, it's no surprise that she has spent a lot of time thinking about her own designs. The *Vigo* label features a map showcasing the exact place where the lava flowed through her property (highlighted in red).



It was inspired by this map of the 1981 eruption of where the lava flowed.



Next up where the *Allegracore* wines, which are new and about to be available in the United States for the first time. Chiara explains the idea behind this cuvée in her [Louis/Dressner interview](#):

"We started with the Vigo wine in 2007. I used my last name as an homage to my father, because he worked this land and died here. But we'd originally wanted to call the wine Allegracore because it's the name of the parcel. I love the name, because it means "the place that makes a happy heart"! This was not possible because D.O.C legislation dictated that everything made in my area had to be Etna Rosso. But thanks to a dedicated group of vignaioli who fought against this, as of 2011 you are allowed to write the name of a parcel on an Etna Rosso. So now the base wine will be called Allegracore, and the Vigo cuvée will only be produced in great vintages. Allegracore will be cheaper because it's aged in stainless steel. The Vigo will be made the same way as 07 and 08: stainless steel fermentation then aged in barrel. At least for now!"

It is quite glou-glou. The labels are pretty cool too, and will change every vintage. Here is the initial line up for 09, 10 and 11, along with the original label used by Chiara's grandfather on the far left.



For the first three, Chiara has actually used pictures of the original art nouveau wallpaper in the house. You can actually see the electrical wiring!



FATTORIE
ROMEO DEL
CASTELLO

ALLEGRA CORE

2009

ETNA ROSSO D.O.C.

Carta da parati (sala da pranzo)

Luca Vitone



Here is it is real life. Not too sure what's going on with that clown though...



Wines



D.O.C Etna Rosso "Allegracore"

Soil: volcanic, sandy, stoned

Grapes: Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappucino

Exposure: North

Altitude: 700 m

Vinification: fermentation and maceration for 12 days in 5000 l stainless steel vats.



D.O.C Etna Rosso "Vigo"

Soil: volcanic, sandy, stoned

Grapes: Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappucino

Exposure: North

Altitude: 700 m

Vinification: fermentation and maceration for 12 days in 5000 l stainless steel vats. Malolactic fermentation in 225 l wood barriques. Aged in barrique for 12 months. No filtering. At least 6 months aging in bottle before release.