

Fattorie Romeo del Castello

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!