

Arianna Occhipinti

Interview

This interview with Arianna Occhipinti took place in Forno, Italy during the *Vini di Vignaioli* fair in October, 2011.

Tell us about about your estate.

I started making my own wine in 2004, right after I'd graduated from university. Everything started with my uncle (**note:** Giusto Occhipinti, the O of the COS wines) when I was 16; he invited me to come help him out at Vinitaly, and I thought to myself: "I can miss 4 days of school!", so I quickly agreed to come with him.

I knew nothing about wine, but it was a fantastic experience. I met a lot of people and was immediately drawn to it. I decided to study it, and while I was in university, I started learning more about agricultural and oenological practices, which ultimately led me to focus on natural winemaking.

So again I started in 2004, with just 1 hectare. Now I'm working with 12 hectares of Frappato and Nero D'Avola. 6 years ago, I planted a vineyard of whites, which are Albanello and Muscat. These are all grapes local to my area, especially Albanello which really isn't produced much anymore.

My farm is in organic agriculture and I'm certified.

I like to make wine, and I like to make wine from where I come from. My region is a fresh area in the South-East of Sicily, between the mountains and the sea. We receive fresh winds from the mountains, and it's important to me to capture this in the wines. The result is fresh and elegant, with nice acidity.

Making wine connects me to my homeland and lets me bond with my roots. It's a wonderful job, and I'm very lucky.

Can you elaborate on the growth of your estate from 1 to 12 hectares? Do you own everything?

I own 10 hectares, and have been renting 2 hectares of 55 year old vines for 6 years now.

What about that first hectare?

My parents had bought a country house while I was in university, and there was an hectare of vines attached to the property. I rented it from them the first year; the vineyard was abandoned, which was really good because a) it had never been exposed to chemicals and b) I had to work it back into shape, which taught me a lot.

With this I made 2000 bottles of Frappato and 2000 bottles of Nero D'Avola. After that, I progressively planted around the first hectare: the 10 hectares are all in one place, and the 2 hectares of old vines are 500 meters away from the farm.

You've never worked with chemicals then?

No. I was lucky because I was surrounded by natural winemakers at the very beginning of my journey. My mind was set, and I was even getting into fights with my teachers at university about it. They wanted to teach a recipe to make wine, but thanks to a many outside influences, I knew that this wasn't the way I wanted to work. I've been working naturally since the first vintage.

I was a little afraid at the beginning, because I'd conceptualized everything I wanted to do in my mind, but it was all theory and no practice. I made my first vintage when I was 21; I had the book knowledge, but my real education was in the vineyards.

I remember when I pruned for the first time, I asked two locals to help me out. We started in different rows, and after 50 meters, one of them looked at me and said: "Ari! You are taking pictures of the vineyard! You need to get to work!" They talked about how I probably wanted to get it over with as soon as possible to get back to the city, and that their son had left the country a year prior.

But even back then, I knew I wanted to stay and make wine from this place. It's important that Sicilian people remain at home. We have the possibility to start something important: our territory is ready for a fresh new start.

I want to be an example for young people who leave Sicily in search of something better or more important than the country. I want to show them the importance of tradition and the beauty of being attached to a sense of place.

What's the work in the vineyards and in the cellar?

I'm certified organic, but don't put it on my labels because I feel the law for organic certification is a bit convoluted. In Sicily, it is easy to work naturally thanks to the weather, specifically the wind. I use copper and sulfur in the vineyards. I let grass grow. I don't work the soil in the winter and do so only two times a year, both in the summer.

As far as the cellar, the most important thing is to have the highest quality grapes coming into it. If you have good grapes, the cellar work is easy. All you do is follow the evolution into wine. It's very important for me to use the natural yeasts from the grapes to start fermentation, because this is the grape expressing itself. If I really need to, I'll add a tiny bit of sulfur at bottling; never before.

Of course every producer will have his own interpretation of the wines they are making. I like making long macerations: 1 month for the *SP 68* and the reds, 10 days for the white. I do a lot of punchdowns during fermentation, let it macerate a few more days and then I press.

Some wines are aged in big and old Slovenian barrels that I bought from Piedmont. I've had those since the beginning. The rest stays in stainless steel.

Can you tell us about the *Tami* project?

The *Tami* project was an idea that came to me a few years ago, and that was to prove that it's possible to make good, simple, natural wine in Sicily. *Tami* is something I've started with some friends who own some vineyards in Contrada, a district close to mine. Three years ago, we agreed we would convert their vineyards to organic viticulture. In 09, we made the first "all grape" vinification. The goal was to take good grapes and make a simple, every day wine. There is a white, and two reds.

The vineyards are about 10 years old. The wine is made with a short maceration (1 week) and then six months in stainless steel. We do filter it because it's very young.

A big part of this project is also to give younger people an opportunity to try a simple but delicious wine, something that can introduce them to the pleasures of wine.

How do you feel about the term "natural wine"?

I make natural wine, but this is a term I'm beginning to be less and less comfortable with, because its implications are very complicated. I really want to stress that my main goal is to make a good wine that reflects where it comes from, and for me the only way to successfully do this is to make the wine naturally.

When I first started, people were just starting to talk about natural wine. It was very important to me to think about all these issues, and in those early years I definitely had a more militant attitude about it. Making natural wine was a mission, something worth fighting for.

Now that I've grown up a little bit, the mission is making wine of terroir. You have to respect the vineyards, and nature in general. When I wake up in the morning, I want to feel free. Making this wine is my opportunity to feel free.

So again, my goal is not to make natural wine, Working this way is a process to make good wine.

Anything to add?

I'm very happy with the current situation in the U.S, which I consider to be a very important place for natural wine right now. I feel comfortable with the people who drink wine there. I feel that there is a really good interpretation of natural wine there.

It's simple: people drink the wine, and if they like it, they buy it. In most other places, the idea of natural wine is difficult because people think too much; in the U.S, people are more open to new experiences and they are not afraid of tasting something new.

Italy and France are the two biggest wine producing countries in the world, so we consider ourselves to have the most "knowledge" about wine. Yet we always follow the trends of the market. This has destroyed traditional winemaking. I know that natural wine is fashionable right now, but I also know that people really believe in these wines: they drink them because they like them, not because these are the wines of the moment.

The difference in the U.S is that people have less prejudices about how the wine should be made, and they react to what they like rather than what is trendy. We reflect too much: we should drink more and speak less!