

La Stoppa

Interview

This interview with Elena Pantaleoni took place at L'Herbe Rouge in February, 2013.

Tell us about La Stoppa.

La Stoppa is located in North-West Emilia-Romagna, and was founded at the end of the 19th century by a lawyer from Genova named Gian-Carlo Ageno. He was the first to give value to this land by planting vineyards. In the the 1920's, he had to replant because of phylloxera, so the oldest vineyards we have are from this period. In the aftermath, Mr. Ageno planted many varieties as an experiment to see what was suited for the area.

In 1973, my father -who worked his entire life as a printer- purchased the estate. During the war, he was based in the country side and would pass by the vineyards on his bicycle daily. It was his dream to buy La Stoppa, and when he was finally able to afford it, he made it come true. I personally started working here in 1991.

For our first 20 years of ownership, we vinified every vineyard and grape variety separately. But in 1996, we decided to eliminate most of the early ripening grapes (Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Tokay, Pinot Gris, Grechetto...) as they are not exactly suited for our hot climate. Instead, we focused on replanting Barbera, Bonarda and Malvasia, all local grapes.

We are about 250 m from the sea, working mainly on clay soils. The majority of our production consists of red wines produced with Barbera and Bonarda. We are a rather large estate: 32 hectares of vines and 28 of forest. We make one dry white wine, *Ageno*. We also make a few sweet whites.

Could you elaborate on how the decision to replant local varieties was taken?

For many years, we tried our best to make, for example, a great Pinot Noir. We were always putting our work into question, and eventually came to the conclusion that even if we produced a great Pinot Noir, even if it was the best Pinot Noir in the world, it would still be a copy of something that is already available on the market. This in turn made us realize that these grapes weren't suitable for our place. They ripen too early, as it is very warm here.

Before you made this decision, how much of the estate was already planted in Barbera and Bonarda?

About 50%.

Were you personally satisfied with the Pinot Noirs, Sauvignon Blancs and Cabernet Sauvignons you were producing?

Some vintages, very much. But if you want to be an honest winemaker, it's very dangerous to try making wines based on your personal taste. I think it's our job to make a wine from a place, not to force something based on personal taste. If I really want to drink great Pinot Noir, I'll buy some from Burgundy.

What's the work in the vines like?

We have been certified organic since 2008, but have been working this way since the early 90's. Most of the work is done by hand.

I inherited this estate from my father, and I think one of my nieces and nephews will probably take over. Therefore I feel like a guardian of this place, and I want to preserve and maintain its sanctity. I know the vineyards can last much longer than I ever will!

And in the cellar?

When we started, we were using indigenous yeasts to ferment the wines and minimal intervention in the cellar. There was however a 10 year period in the 80's where we experimented with selected yeasts. But we had always wanted to work traditionally, so this did not last.

We do long skin macerations, because we are in a warm area and want to extract as much as possible. We never add sulfur during vinification. We use stainless steel, cement and wooden tanks for fermentation; big and small barrels are used for aging. The wines need slow and natural oxygenation.

How do you feel about the D.O.C system?

All of our wines are IGT. I don't believe that the D.O.C valorizes place, at least not in our region. We have the right to use 18 different grapes in our DOC (Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay...), and can make still, sparkling, sweet...

The panel who judges the wines is composed solely of winemakers for the region's biggest cooperatives. They don't care about tradition and history; they are more concerned by what the market needs. For example, a lot of Barbera/Bonarda based wines are de-acidified and made slightly sweet.

How do you feel about the ongoing "natural wine" debate?

Personally, I like to say: "*I make wine*". That is what we do. Wine has always been made this way: even as little as 50 years ago, all the great wines of Italy were "natural" simply by being rooted in tradition. I'm astonished how things changed so much, so fast. People were so quick to forget. I'm talking for us old world producers; if I were in Chile or the United States, maybe I would think differently. But in the old world, wine has always related to a sense of place.

Today, young people who are discovering wine for the first time need a little bit of a helping hand to understand this. So I understand why some choose to use the term "natural wine". Maybe for some, it helps them grasp the concept of artisanal vs industrial. But maybe we should be taking things further. For example, I am not against listing all the ingredients like all other food products. This way people would be more aware of what they are consuming.

I laugh when people argue that no wine is natural because it requires the intervention of man to be produced. Of course! But most small, independent estates take an industrial approach to making wine! In the end, it's simply an approach: you are not following the taste of the market or your own personal tastes, you are making the wine that the place and the vintage gives you.

Do you think people are becoming more receptive of this approach?

I think it is becoming easier to sell wines solely off the fact that they are full of personality and that they express something more than a low price point.

What do you like to drink?

I like lighter, more acidic white from more Northern climates. I'm a big fan of older wine. I find that a 20 or 30 year old bottle can be moving.