

Cascina degli Ulivi

Interview

This interview with Stefano Bellotti took place at the *Vini di Vigniaoli* fair in Fornovo, Italy in October, 2011.

Can you tell us *Cascina Degli Ulivi's* history?

In my late teens, I was living in Genoa. The city was never my thing, and I was drawn to a rural life in agriculture for as long as I can remember. In the city I felt trapped in a prison.

My family had a small farm they'd purchased after the war, which was more or less abandoned. I decided I wanted to do something with it; I was trying my hardest to be a peasant! At the beginning, I was cultivating a large amount of agricultural products: cereals, vegetables and of course the vines.

We don't have the best conditions for agriculture here, and I quickly realized that the only things truly thriving were the vines. My work with wine did not start out of passion: I was simply considering what worked best for my land and if could make a living as a peasant.

This was the end of the 1970's, and the systems of agriculture Italy began using marked the end of peasant agriculture and the beginning of chemical, industrial agriculture. I understood almost right away that this was a trick, a way to tie down the peasant to industry, to imprison him.

This was before anyone was talking about organic agriculture, though people were nonetheless moving towards it. When I heard about it, I told myself that this would have to be the agriculture of the future, that we couldn't continue in an industrial model.

Did you ever try these chemical products on your land?

There was so little information at the time, and yes the first few years I did use some chemical fertilizers. This was my only offense; I've never used herbicides or anything other than copper and sulfur.

But I quickly realized that my grapes were rotting from the stuff. So I stopped immediately!

What about in the cellar?

I've always been weary of modern oenology. For a long time, hyper technological wine was in style. Doing the opposite hasn't always been easy, and it's not always obvious what to do in that type of situation.

There was a time were I had to make compromises. For example, to sell wine to Germany in the late 80's/early 90's, my clients asked me to the wine to be as "standard" as possible. They wanted it to be organic, but to taste conventional. This is how Germany works with their own wines, and it's also why organic wine there isn't natural: it's an industrialized product made with organic grapes.

So for my German clients I would yeast my base wines. I was doing what people asked of me so I

could make a living, so I could continue making all the other cuvées with native yeasts and not go out of business.

Can you describe the climate of organic/biodynamic agriculture in the early 80's?

I was working completely organic by 81; back then I wasn't aware it was an actual thing (it hadn't reached Italy yet), but I knew I wanted to work this way.

In the early 80's, there was already a movement happening, but if you worked organically, sometimes you felt a little isolated, different, or not productive enough. This was a time of "production for production's sake", so it left us wondering if we really were making the right decision... This was obviously nonsense on our part!

In 1984, I met a farmer who was working biodynamically. I instantly saw an agriculture that was working better. As a kid who grew up in the materialistic 70's, I didn't quite trust the whole biodynamic vision, but I saw the results and knew something about it was working. So I started, and I am very happy. It has opened up the world for me, made it more complex and interesting.

A lot of people think biodynamic agriculture is some sort of religion. It's not. When you see the results, you can see that it's an agricultural model that works. And if one day a better model comes along (or contributes to biodynamics), I'll be very happy!

Can biodynamic agriculture work anywhere?

The preparations created by Rudolph Steiner have incredible power. They are very simple, inexpensive (free in fact!), and they act towards optimizing agricultural conditions. The proof is all around the world: it works well in Brazil, in Australia, in Egypt. These are obviously places with completely different agricultural conditions.

The point that most people miss? For these preparations to work in the first place, your land needs to be alive. If you put on a biodynamic preparation on a soil that's dead, it stays dead. It's not a miracle! It's just a model of common sense that takes conscience of the earth and the plant. Whether it's perma-culture, synergy or whatever you want to call it, the soil and the plant need to be alive in order to grow and thrive.

Most of the growers I've interviewed who work biodynamically seem to share your pragmatic approach. In your opinion, why is that many people still have this notion that biodynamic agriculture as some sort of goofy, hippie cult shrouded in mysticism?

That's a very complex answer, and we'd need to be here all day for me to give you a complete idea of why people have this impression.

Biodynamic agriculture was born in the 1920's. It spread quickly through Germanic speaking countries, but was heavily persecuted by the Nazis. This is how it spread internationally: people went elsewhere. Then we had World War 2, then we had the aftermath. The post war economic model became completely linked to industrialization, to productivity and materialism, and everyone kind of forgot about biodynamic agriculture.

It was a time where people were being *too* Cartesian, and biodynamic agriculture lent itself to a vision of a world that couldn't be controlled by science; it was too much of a free spirit to work in a model based on uniformity and productivity.

So biodynamic farmers became the minority of the minority. And because these farmers were going out of their way to pursue this style of agriculture, they were billed as esoteric, as sorcerers, as part of a sect.

We now live in better climate for biodynamic agriculture, but it took a lot of work from guys like Nicolas Joly to speak of a new kind of biodynamic model, to speak up and let people get a better idea of what we do. So I think we're growing out of this image. There are still people that aren't convinced, and that's fine.

Some criticize that what we do is too esoteric. Well yes, biodynamic preparations are esoteric! Almost everything we do is partly esoteric, because science can't explain everything. If I look at you from across the street and at that exact moment, you happen to turn your head towards me and we make eye contact, that's not something you can calculate, plan, measure or explain. To understand this is simply to acknowledge being part of a larger whole.

Can you tell me tell me about the very special kind of Dolcetto you work with?

In our area we grow a very special variety of Dolcetto, which is essentially the father of all the Dolcetto you see today. In the local dialect we call it Nibio. We're not sure where the etymology of this name comes from; the answer is lost somewhere in the last 1000 years. There are written accounts of it by the Republic of Genoa before the year 1000!

Nibio is characterized by very small berries and red stems. It therefore doesn't produce very high yields. But it's an extremely interesting grape, because it's one of the most tannic you'll find anywhere, yet these tannins are light and don't rip the inside of your cheeks off. It makes a special wine: it's a bit of a wild child when it's young, but it can be aged for an extremely long time. After 10 years, the wild child becomes a very elegant gentleman!

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

The main role of anyone who works in agriculture is to make sure their soil has good microbiological structure. This is the "factory of life".

Vineyards are a monoculture, so what you need to do in that case is bring as much biodiversity as you can to your land in order to promote a healthy soil. We have a system where every year certain rows are left untouched all year. We won't even step on them! This gives the soil the opportunity to regenerate and revitalize itself. And the next year, we leave the one next to it alone. In such every row gets "a year off". The grasses that grow are all different types, and most are wild. We then use the biodynamic preparations during spring and summer.

In the cellar, and I jokingly say this as a provocation, but I do almost nothing. I hate the term "wine maker". It's cacophonous! Wine makes itself, it just needs a little help from the human touch. We're there to guide and accompany the wine as it becomes wine, and that's it. Humans don't make wines: microorganisms do. This is a sacred world we don't understand anything about! Even if you use preselected yeasts, you can't intervene further than choosing the direction the wine will take.

For someone who's been making wine this way since the early 80's, how do you feel in the current context and popularity of natural wine?

I've always said that our force is the truth. When you start drinking natural wine, or eating natural cheese, natural bread, natural food ☐ When you start eating REAL food, products from the earth that

have a true link to their terroir, you don't go back.

Right now we are at an event (*Vini di Vigniaoli*) where 99.9% of the people here are real. And when you're constantly surrounded by people who respect nature and agriculture, you almost forget that most others don't. Everyone imagines it's this huge movement because it's all you read and hear about when it comes to agriculture these days. But we represent 0.0001 % of the global production of wine. We represent nothing! In all of Europe, we are maybe 500! And usually these are always small producers.

There are wine factories in the area that make more wine every year than all the natural winemakers put together! Some produce up to 10 million bottles of wine a year. People don't necessarily realize this because they are sold in China, India, Brazil and everywhere except Italy. You can be in Brazil right now drinking a local wine I've never heard of!

From a media standpoint you're hearing a ton about natural wine, but in reality we are a small group of people. There are benefits to this though; 20 years ago if you worked naturally you were considered the devil, and I even had to hide that I was making biodynamic wine to certain customers. Things have changed, and this is a good thing.

Can you tell me about the new *Semplicemente* wines?

The vocation of my vines has always been, in my mind, to make wines that can be aged for a long time. Serious wine. The trouble is that if you're looking to buy wine to cellar, in Piedmont people tend to lean towards Barolo, or Montalcino or Tuscany.

So I decided, instead of making serious wine, I just wanted to make wine. Wine to drink. I make a red and a white. It worked out really well because instead of making wines that you have to intellectualize, I've also produced ones that just win you over, a wine you don't think about, that you take great pleasure in drinking. You don't need to worry what about the region or the varietal or the nose or whatever. When you do this you are intellectualizing wine, and wine doesn't give a shit about being intellectual. So it's "Simply" red or white: you bring them to the table and you don't think about it, you just drink it. That's it.

Anything to add?

Everyone's talking about natural agriculture and natural wine these days. This is important, but what's more important is that we all have to realize that agriculture almost doesn't exist anymore. Here we are in Italy, the country with the best terroirs in the world, and our rural areas are deserted. No one wants to live there anymore. If you have a kid and live in the country, their future is jeopardized!

There is so much we can produce from this land. We need to all work together, and people need to come back to peasantry. If we want to see another evolution in humanity, it has to go through agriculture. In the last two generations, we've seen an 80% drop in rural population. We've also gone from 60% of our land being used for agriculture to 3%.

Urbanization has caused serious social problems, and we need agriculture to bring us out of this hole. Especially in a country like Italy. We may be the number one gastronomical country in the world, but gastronomy isn't about chefs. It's about agriculture. You can't be making food with pigs raised in China; you need to use the local black hogs that live in the woods.