Chinati Vergano

Chinato, Americano and Vermouth blended to perfection by retired chemist Mauro Vergano.

Mauro Vergano. Photo by Alex Finberg.

Profile

After earning a degree in chemistry, Mauro Vergano studied oenology and viticulture at one of Italy's top schools. Soon after, he started working in the "flavors and fragrances" sector of a company full-time as a chemist. In his 15 years there, Mauro spent extensive time mastering the equipment that produce fragrances, all the while training his nose to correctly identify aromatic blends.

In the late 70's, Mauro channelled his combined interest in wine and aromatized fragrances by producing small batches of his own Chinato. For years it remained a hobby, but with the encouragement of his friends and family, the idea of turning his passion into a full time job started to grow on him. Three years after retiring, the first bottles of Chinato were ready for sale.

Pushing things forward, Mauro released the *Luli* in 2003, a Moscato based Chinato that remains the only one of its kind on the market. Next was the *Americano*, a twist on traditional vermouth; by using the relatively unknown grape Grignolino as the base wine, Mauro has created a light, untannic and aromatic delight. The most recent addition to the lineup is a Vermouth made in a more classic, Piedmontese style.

Mauro uses only the finest ingredients, and his cupboard is full of herbs and spices sourced locally but also from around the world. The same is true for the sourced wines: the *Chinato* is produced from Giuseppe Cortese's Nebbiolo, the *Luli* from Vittorio Bera & Figli's Moscato, the *Americano* from Cascina Tavijn's Grigolino and the Vermouth from Cascina Degli Ulivi's Cortese and the Bera's Moscato.

Interview

This interview with Mauro Vergano stems from a series of emails in November 2010.

You used to be a chemist before you made wine right?

Exactly. After earning a degree in Chemistry, I started with a chemical company where I worked for about 15 years. This period of work was particularly useful for me: firstly, because I learned how to use certain instruments and equipment, but also to experiment with my recipes.

Secondly, because the company produced substances used in the "flavors and fragrances" sector I was able to practice on my aromatic blends for years; especially to "train" my nose to recognize all the nuances of fragrances.

I must say, however, that ever since I began studying Chemistry I have held a great interest in the world of wines. In fact, once I finished my degree in Chemistry I did a Master's Degree in oenology and grape-growing at one of the most prestigious institutes in the country. This allowed me to bring together my passion for wine and my passion for aromas and fragrances.

Furthermore, I mustn't forget the notions that my father, a pharmacist, and my uncle, a producer of wines and vermouth, handed down to me. In particular my uncle who in his old-age guided me through my first experiences.

At the end of the 70s I started my first trials to make *Chinato*. For years preparing *Chinato* had been a hobby for me: I made it for friends and relatives. Naturally, as the years went by my experience in mixing herbs and spices grew.

When I stopped working in the chemical industry, the idea of transforming my passion from just a hobby into a real job grew on me more and more. It took me about three years, but finally in early 2003 the first bottles of *Chinato* were proudly displayed on the shelves of my laboratory.

Now that more than 7 years have passed, I must say I am really happy with the choice I made. I acknowledge that it has been hard work and risky, but I am aware that my work has been appreciated and enjoyed success well beyond anything I could have dreamed of. My products are highly respected and that makes me very proud and encourages me to improve on them further and to create new products, too.

Your *Chinato* is very classic while your *Americano* is a more modern, unique expression of this style of wine. What was the inspiration for the *Americano*? How do you feel about classicism versus modernism in wine?

I'm not sure if I should define the *Americano* as a modern product and the *Chinato* as a classic one. All of my products are based on the tradition of aromatized wines which started in Piedmont at the end of the 1700s and which has been carried on by larger and smaller producers ever since.

I think that we can say that the *Chinato* is a more classic product because it reconnects with the tradition of the Barolo Chinati; that said, the *Americano* also comes from the ancient tradition of Vermouth and has been a typical Piedmontese aperitif for more than a century.

All of my products have ancient origins, but they are not simply repetitions or copies of old products from more than 100 years ago; rather they are a re-elaboration that is born of the use of different wines (like Grignolino in the *Americano*) and mixtures of herbs that are no longer what they were in the past (nowadays nearly all herbs are cultivated and no longer grow wild).

Perhaps this is the difference: every product is the synthesis of traditional recipes that are interpreted with the tastes and imagination of today's producers.

Are the bitters you use a secret recipe?

They are secret in part because the ingredients used to aromatize wines are always more or less the same. Surely the quantities are secret; this is probably the only true secret to my products.

The truth is that my products are the result of re-elaboration and modification of old recipes. Why re-elaborate them? Simply because, with a bit of ambition, I have wanted to modify them and further adapt them to my taste and to the wines that I have chosen as my base wines.

You source your grapes from winemakers many would consider as "natural wine" producers. What's your take on the ongoing debate on natural wine?

In my opinion, natural wine is actually a wine that is as "simple" as possible.

"Simple" because it doesn't contain any of the elements that, firstly in the vineyard and then in the cellar, would make it heavier and more complicated.

"Simple" because its fragrance and taste are different from the ones that technologically and scientifically cutting-edge growing and wine-making tend to standardize.

"Simple" because it changes from area to area, from vine-type to vine-type, from year to year and from producer to producer.

"Simple" because it respects the environment and is healthier for those who drink it.

"Simple" because drinking natural wines is a more moving experience: they are full of flavors and fragrances, more easily digested and never "heavy".

"Simple" because natural wine expresses itself more freely, more finely. It is more alive, it has a stronger bond to the area it comes from and of which it is the expression.

And in conclusion,

"Not simple" because in order to choose a natural wine, you have to go beyond a mere tasting; you have to get into how the individual producer actually works. I must say that it has been easy for me to work side-by-side with them because I have been fortunate to meet, get to know and appreciate the wine-makers first and the wines second. Once you have taken that step there is no turning back.

Wines

CHINATO

This was my first creation. The wine I use is a Nebbiolo from Barbaresco that comes from the Rabajà hill. It is produced by Giuseppe Cortese's winery in Barbaresco; this is a small-scale producer who, in my opinion, produces excellent quality wine even if it is not organic. I usually use a two-year-old wine since I want the final product to retain that fresh "winey-ness". The extract is the result of a complex mixture of aromatizing substances. Besides China in its Calisaya and Succirubra varieties, there are particularly bitter ingredients like Chinese Rabarbaro and Ginseng, while the aromatic

component comes from spices and herbs like cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, coriander, bay leaf, etc. What makes this wine characteristic is the extreme persistence of its aroma due to its perfectly balanced ratio between sugar, alcohol and aromatic extract content.

LULI

I must say that producing a Chinato from Moscato wine was my first big challenge. First produced in 2003, it was the first product of its kind present on the market.
The wine I use is a Moscato d'Asti with a higher alcohol content (more than 10%) compared to the ones that are commonly available. As is well-known, the Moscato I use comes from the prestigious winery of Vittorio Bera & Figli. I have to admit that when I was first looking for a Moscato for the first attempts I used wine from various producers, then I was lucky enough to meet Gianluigi Bera and his Moscato and I haven't left them since. His Moscato's fragrance and its full-bodiedness meld perfectly with the aromatic extract composed of citrus zest, cinnamon and vanilla. These fresh and sweet aromas are balanced by the bitter flavour of the China (Calisaya and Succirubra) which give it a persistent taste that is absolutely unique.

AMERICANO

I would like to describe it as a traditional Vermouth/Bitter Piedmontese aperitif. The use of Grignolino as the base wine was one of my (few!) good intuitions; naturally, the choice of producer could only fall to the Grignolino from Casina Tavjin: a wine with an intense, dry fragrance that has the right body and isn't particularly tannic. In a word: the best Grignolino that I have ever tasted. Like all Vermouths, the extract contains Absinthe (in this case a mixture of the Maggiore, Gentile and Pontico varieties). But in order to transform a Vermouth into an Americano you have to integrate the herbs at its base with other more bitter ones like Gentianella, citrus zest like Bitter Orange and Chinotto.\\

A brief description of the production cycle which all the products share:
The first step is the preparation of the extract or "concia". This is done by leaving a mixture of chopped herbs and spices in alcohol for about 20/30 days. Then the extract is filtered and left to age for a few months.
The second step is the actual preparation of the product. To make the product I mix the extract, sugar and alcohol. The last step is clarification followed by filtering which produces a clear product with long-term stability.

Vermouth

Vermouth is the only fortified and aromatized wine with a precise historical origin. It was first concocted 1786 in Turin by Benedetto Carpano. Since then the Vermouth has become one of the most famous drinks in the world both as aperitif or as an ingredient in cocktails. Its name derives from the German word "Vermuth" which means Absinthe, one of its main components. Originally, the base wine was Moscato, but different wines have been used over time.

In my case, the base wine is a blend of dry Moscato and Cortese, another typical white grape of Piedmont. This mixture gives a correct balance between acidity and flavor.

The mixture of herbs and spices is very complex, dominated by herbs such as thyme, marjoram, basil, oregano that provide fresh and aromatic notes. The Absinthe component mainly in the variety "Gentile" contributes to the bitter taste. As is the tradition Vermouth should be light yellow, clear, sweet /bitter and fragrant.

Service suggestions: It must be chilled or with ice cubes, zest of lemon, sparkling Water or soda (seltzer)