

Camillo Donati

Lambrusco & Malvasia from Camillo Donati.



Camilo Donati. Photo by Alex Finberg.

Profile

The Donati estate is a family estate started in 1930 which is now run by the third generation of Donati -- Camillo, his wife and their children. They cultivate 11 ha of vines (7 of which they own as Tenuta S. Andrea and 4 which are leased at Tenuta Bottazza) using organic and biodynamic practices. They are about 20 km away from Parma in the hillside at an altitude of around 250 m with an eastern exposition.

There are a number of diverse strains of the Lambrusco grape family, but the main Lambrusco grape of the Parma zone is Lambrusco Maestri and it is planted on flat plains because of its characteristic resistance to humidity and mildew, and also for its relative abundant fruit. For this reason, the Donati do a severe pruning to produce low yields of better quality.

The Malvasia Candia is historically from Crete, arriving in this part of Italy many centuries ago, and it is also one of the oldest known grapes. Up until 30-50 years ago it was only vinified in sweet and demi-sec style, but Donati now makes both a dry and sweet Malvasia.

The range of vines at the estate also include: aromatic Sauvignon Blanc, Moscato Giallo, and Barbera. They also have a little of Trebbiano, Pinot Blanc, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. All the grapes are vinified and bottled separately.

All the grapes, including the white, are fermented like red wines (with skin contact), without temperature control, and use no other controls or enhancers at fermentation, no fining, no acidification or de-acidification, no selected yeasts, etc... They make Malvasia Dolce (sweet) from a stopped fermentation by filtration through a sack filter and it remains at about 4-6% alcohol with a bit of natural sweetness balanced by acidity. The other wines are fermented dry, including the Lambrusco.

The carbonation of these *frizzante* wines comes from the traditional method of refermentation in bottle, a method that does not require preservatives and which makes this wine, unlike those produced in *charmat* method, age better. The wines are not filtered and are topped with a crown cap (a traditional closure for some decades in this region). There may be resulting sediment and the bottles should be poured somewhat carefully without a lot of intense movement.

These are very delicate and natural wines that have immense glugability and unique character. They are meant to be drunk simply as you would a refreshing beer or cider at cold temperature (even the red) with simple foods. They go particularly well with cold cuts, prosciutto and dry sausages and *gnocco* - fried squares of dough - that are traditional in Parma.

Interview

This interview with Camillo Donati took place in his tasting room in November, 2011. It was conducted by Kevin Mckenna, and translated by Pietro Straccia.

Tell us about your estate.

We are located 300 meters above sea level, 30 miles south of Parma. Our vines are planted in RITOCCHINO and Guyot. We have about 4000 plants per hectare, mainly planted with Malvasia, Lambrusco Maestri, Barbera, Sauvignon, Trebbiano, Fortana and Croatina. These are the major grapes. In total we work 12 hectares of vines: 7 1/2 of our property and 4 are rented.

We practice natural viticulture, but go beyond being just organic and biodynamic in the sense that there are zero chemicals in the vineyards and zero chemicals in the cellar. We produce sparkling wines with a natural secondary fermentation in bottle, as per our local tradition. Sparkling (*frizzante*) wines were born in Emilia because of our traditions of very rich (fatty) cuisine. Pork, salumi, Parmigiano Reggiano, butter: that's how the *frizzante* style originated, as a way to cleanse the palate and help digest the fatty foods. Bubbles help with that process noticeably.

You continue to work traditionally, but today this is quite rare in your area...

Sparkling wines had been made the same way for centuries, but in the 70's everyone started producing *frizzante* wines with the *charmat* method. I believe that *charmat* kills the wine. A dead wine goes into the bottle, and many, many preservatives are needed to keep the wine going for 6 or 7 months. On the other hand, a natural *frizzante* wine can last 10, 15, 20 years. Logically, you will no longer have predominant fruit after the 3 or 4 years where the secondary and tertiary aromas surface, but the wine is alive and it ages and matures slowly, just like we do.

If I kill a wine beforehand just so that I don't have sediments or to have clarity, then what is the point? *Charmat* is a dead wine that cannot go beyond 6 months to a year. After that it becomes undrinkable because it's dead. A chemical preservative is not capable of sustaining something dead.

What's the work in the vines like?

I use biodynamics as a means to re-balance my vines, but only if they need it. I don't work the vines this way year in, year out. I'm a Christian, not an [anthroposophic](#). I use biodynamics simply as a tool to balance my vines if, for example, a hail storm or a similar event were to occur. In cases where the grapes' photosynthesis can be really compromised, I stimulate the soil with 501 cow horn silica. But if everything is going smoothly, I don't add anything.

I'm convinced that natural wine is made in the vineyard and not cellar. The viticulturist should be so careful as to obtain the most balanced vines in the environment in which they live. There is no biodynamic or natural recipe that works the same everywhere; everything depends on where the vine lives. Microclimate, land, soil... For example, we have very rich clay soils with a very high PH, and get a lot of water stress in the summer months. We try to make sure that the vines are healthy in our environment, and if you can get as close as possible to this, then even younger vines will be able to produce incredible fruit.

Did you always work in the wine sector or do you have another occupation? How did you find your way into wine?

I started vignaioli work in 92, but before that I used to work as an employee in a Salumificio (salame, sausage factory). MY father had one hectare of land that my grandfather had planted for family use. But doing this was probably in my blood and DNA because I love nature. That's why it has been a lifelong decision. I thank God to be able to do what I do because every day I'm in contact with the vines. I can't wait to go in the vineyard.

I always hope to spend as much time as possible in the vineyard. I believe the winemaker is an integral part of his wine, his vines, and his environment. Kevin, if you came to cultivate my vineyard and into my cellar you would make a different wine, because you are Kevin and I am Camillo.

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

I have made a life decision. The first thing I commit to is to make a Natural Wine. But natural and drinkability must go hand in hand. A natural wine shouldn't be an excuse to have wines with bad odors or flaws. Natural wine should be good. One thing should never be at the expense of the other. Nature without compromises: It's a way of life.

Can you tell us about your involvement in *Vinnatur*?

[Vinnatur](#) was born from the split of the *Vini Veri* group. In fact, the last *Vini Veri* assembly we had as a group was in this room. That day, [Angiolino Maule](#) resigned as president.

I decided to follow him, but I still remain friends with everybody. I followed him because I believe, like myself, that he puts a lot of love and passion in his viticultural work and leaves the commercial aspect out of *Vinnatur*. *Vinnatur* is a community of wine growers established to grow together, where everyone involved can bring in their experiences and technical knowledge to share with everyone else.

Therefore, together we can improve, experiment and always move forward towards natural and quality production. Each individual winery takes care of their own commercial work: in this way the association is not molded as a commercial entity, and that is exactly what has always divided similar groups. But Angiolino has always gone his own way, and I followed him.

I'm very happy because up till today, *Vinnatur* has been a very dynamic association with many experiments being done, some of which I am part of. We are now working on a new experiment to eliminate or at least greatly reduce sulfur and copper treatments in the vineyards. We already use these (copper/sulfur) in a way that there are no traces in the wine, but we are experimenting and trying other products that one day will eliminate the use of sulfur and copper. This excites me a lot because one should never stop trying to better themselves.

Visits

This visit with Camillo Donati took place in November, 2011.



Words by Jules Dressner, photos by Alex Finberg.

We began our visit at Camillo's new cellar, which conveniently overlooks his vines. After tasting some 2011 tank samples, Camillo kindly explained his vinification process.

Everything begins in an old concrete tank from 1968 that originally belonged to Camillo's mentor Ovidio (the "Ovidio" cuvée, made with Corvina grapes, is named after him).



The tank has only ever been washed with hot water, and has accumulated over 40 years of tartaric deposits, which is one of the secrets of Camillo's process (the [Baudrys](#) do the same thing with their concrete tanks).



In this tank he makes a pied de cuve for each varietal. The juice remains in this tank for a maximum of 3 days for the whites and 7 days for the reds.

The rest of the grapes are then harvested, destemmed, pressed and placed in stainless steel vats on the skins. After fermentation, he racks off the gross lees but keeps the fine lees, which are essential for the wines to re-ferment in bottle. If the residual sugar is where he wants it to be (12-18 g per l), he leaves the wines as is, but since he lets them reach their maximum alcoholic fermentation, the wines are often dry so he blends it with his Malvasia Dolce.

This is the traditional way to make Emilia-Romagna Frizzante, but almost all producers in the area now use charmat method, which for Camillo completely defies the purpose of making this style of wine in the first place:

"Those who have settled for methode charmat are missing out on the beauty of life and have settled for monotony."

We then checked out the vines, which have all been planted by Camillo in Guyot on heavy clay soils.





We ended the visit by tasting the 2010's, which took longer than usual to referment and have just been released (they should just be getting to the States). We tasted the only way one should when drinking Donati: alongside local panchetta and aged Parmesan (a 24 month, a five year and a 10 year). The 2010's are spot on, particularly the Malvasia Rosa (with 5% Barbera) and the very lively and fresh Lambrusco.

Wines



IGT Emilia "Il Mio Rosso"

Grapes: Lambrusco Maestri, Bonarda, Croatina, Sauvignon Blanc, Trebbiano



IGT Emilia "Malvasia"



"IGT Emilia "Malvasia Rosa"



IGT Emilia "Trebiano"



IGT Emilia "Barbera"



IGT Emilia "Lambrusco"