

Camillo Donati

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.