

Montesecondo

Interview

This interview with Silvio Messana took place in Los Angeles in March 2011.

Tell us about *Montesecondo*.

Montesecondo is a farm my father purchased in 1963. At the time we lived in Tunisia, as both my grandfather and my father had vineyards and olive groves there near Lybia. They had some money to invest and at the time it was very inexpensive to buy land in Tuscany. In fact, if there was a house on the land it was even cheaper because nobody wanted one. Back then there was no "agriturismo" as there is now with tourists renting houses in the area. Most Chianti was being made by bigger producers who'd buy grapes from smaller growers. There was therefore no benefit and little initiative in starting your own small winery. Of course there were some exceptions.

Moving along, my father got the land at a very good price and started planting vines. He started with 15 hectares. At the same time, Gadafi came along and took all our properties near Lybia. This left my father starting from scratch; he wasn't broke but there was no money to invest and his hopes of opening a winery never worked out. The vineyards had been planted though, so he joined a cooperative where he sold his grapes to a company that bottled everything.

This is how I found the farm. My father died when I was 22 and this was in 1978. I was studying at a university in Florence at the time, and had no choice but to start running the farm. This basically meant keeping things as my father had set them up: growing grapes and selling them to the cooperative.

Around 1985 I graduated from university and wanted to move to the States. I got a scholarship in Berkeley and in Boston, and decided to sell the farm. It proved to be a very difficult task.

Nobody wanted farms in Tuscany; there was no market for it. Finally, I found a producer who made the down payment and I left that September. A couple of months later I got a call from my family telling me the sale didn't go through. The farm was still ours.

I was in the States, and my mother started splitting her time between Tunisia and Italy to manage the farm herself. Because she was living there part time, she restored the house, which up until then was in unlivable conditions.

Being a musician, I needed to find a way to make some money so I started selling wine. I worked for a couple of companies in New York and through that I met quite a few people in the wine industry, including some producers. This was key for helping me in what I started doing when I got back to Italy.

By now it's the year 2000. I leave the States, move to Tuscany and decide that I will produce and bottle the wine myself. Because of changes in regulation for Chianti Classico at the time, I was only allowed to work 12 of my hectares. So what I did when I first arrived was to replant four hectares. Mostly Sangiovese but I was also advised to plant some Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Back then everybody would blend these two into their Chiantis. Syrah and Merlot were also used to make

the wine stronger. The idea was to have a bigger wine that could compete with Bordeaux. This is what Tuscany aspired to.

When I started bottling in 2000 I had four tanks and that was it: no winery. I made 3000 bottles that year. I tried to blend the Cabernet and Petit Verdot with the Sangiovese, but I didn't like that so kept those separate. I was only working with those four hectares at the time and stated focusing on how to sell the wine.

What's the work like in the vines?

It has changed a lot over the years. When I first started I didn't really know what I was doing. I made a lot of calls, went to visit a lot of growers and asked a lot of questions. Through trial and error I got to where I am now. I still have a lot to learn but I now feel I have control of what I'm doing.

I started working organically in 2003 and switched to biodynamic viticulture in 2004. The first years I was too concerned about losing the crop and not being able to produce quality grapes. It took me a while to understand this was an unrealistic fear but at the time I was doing absolutely all the farming and the winemaking: the vineyard work, the tractor, spraying, pruning I even built part of the winery myself!

Coming from a completely different background, my only point of reference was my father, who had previously managed the farm by growing the grapes and selling them to the cooperative.

Instead of following this model, I felt it would be a good experience to go into every aspect of grape growing and wine making. It was a lot of work but also a lot of fun. When you find out just how much effort this takes you can't help but learn some humility. It gave everything a greater value.

What make you choose to work organically and then biodynamically?

Working biodynamically is a learning process that I improve on every year. One thing's for sure: the vineyards have changed and the wines have changed.

The Steiner philosophy has been in our family for years now: all of the children went to the Steiner school. The framework of biodynamic farming come from Steiner's philosophy, so in that sense the seed was already there.

My first year in the vineyards I used chemical products and working with them was taxing. I could feel them affecting my body. I needed to find a solution but I felt that organic was too much of a compromise, so in 2003 I went to a seminar featuring Nicolas Joly (**editor's note**: Nicolas is a vigneron who makes great wines in Savennières. He continues to be a seminal voice in biodynamic viticulture, and has written [this book](#) on the subject).

I was familiar with the type of wine he was making, and thought they were interesting and unique. I was ready to make a change, but more importantly I needed a change. The seminar was in Bologna; I came home the next day, threw out all my chemicals and started working biodynamically.

You mention a change in the wines. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

I'm in an area where long maturation and maceration is what people go for. The philosophy is: if you do more to the wine, it will be more of a wine, it will be a better wine. When I first arrived in Tuscany I tried to make wines in this style.

The 2005 vintage was very difficult and I had to rush my harvest and leave about 25% of the grapes in the vineyard. This ended up being a blessing in disguise because it was the first year I realized I could have higher acidities. All these years I'd been harvesting in over ripeness. That was the starting point in a radical change in my wines because since 2005 I've been harvesting differently. Sangiovese tends to lose acidity very quickly and I realize this now. It seems like an obvious statement but it took me a while to realize what a difference a few days or a week could make.

Working biodynamically has helped too in the quality and maturation of the grapes. I see a much better balance in my vineyard now. Up until 2004 I used to sell part of the harvest in bulk and 2005 also marks the first vintage I bottled every single grape of the vineyard myself.

What about in the cellar?

For reasons I can't really explain, I progressively stopped using industrial yeasts before I went into organic farming. 2002 was my last vintage using industrial yeasts. We concentrated on the work in the fields rather than the winery and it worked perfectly. I've never had any problems with native fermentations.

How do you feel about your DOC, and more precisely where your wines fit in the idea of typicity?

I don't think the DOC of *Chianti Classico* has necessarily helped the denomination. The story of my Rosso Toscano is quite interesting, because when I first made it in 2003 it was with Sangiovese from Chianti Classico vineyards and the chamber of commerce denied the authorization to bottle twice. The first time it didn't have enough color and the second time that it had too much color, which showed me that either way, they did not want that type of wine. They wanted a more traditional Chianti, which are usually blended with non indigenous grapes and marked by wood. Of course this makes them very tannic and much bigger wines. This was the standard that had been set. For me this is not what Sangiovese should or could be.

I think a lot of people, when they try my Chianti for the first time, they say "Oh. That's different." Unfortunately this standardization has made people lose their appreciation of Chianti. When I travel around Italy and do tastings, I can tell that people aren't excited by Chianti anymore. I understand, because they tend to be all the same. They're not territorial anymore, they don't reflect the place where they come from.

If you look at what Chianti wholesales for, it has really gone down in the the last year. In fact most of the farms that have made a name for themselves in Chianti are run by non Tuscans. I feel that people have forgotten that Sangiovese is a grape that can stand its own ground, which is a pity.

What's your take on the whole "natural wine" debate?

Wine should taste like the land it comes from. Wine should identify itself by its terroir. I'm doing my best to create selection massales and make wines unique to the area. People should make an effort to grow territorial grapes, indigenous grapes. But it can also be fun and interesting for a consumer to have a Cabernet from Tuscany, which is why I make one. Why not? Cabernet has actually been in Tuscany for a couple of centuries.

As long as you're are producing a wine with strong territorial identity, you're doing the right job, because the wine is going to taste like your land and not like every other wine.

For me biodynamic viticulture is a tool, not an end. I'm certified organic and in the process of getting my biodynamic certification as well, but I don't put it on the labels. I do however owe it to my customers -for their integrity and respect- that they have legitimate proof that I work this way.

The real problem is that organic and biodynamic certifications are not entering the winery in the right way. You can find organic wine which is from organic grapes but in the winery you can filter it, add tannins, a lot of sulfites... Organic wine is not the same as natural wine.

For me biodynamic farming has been a fantastic tool to get a very strong link between the terroir and the wines. This has a lot to do with my grapes, but also a lot to do with how I work in the winery.

But to get back to the question, I'm not really in favor of the term "natural wine". I feel that the word "natural" is misleading and if you talk to a customer about natural wine they might be a little bit puzzled. They might ask "What is not natural? Are other wines made from water and powder?" So again I refer to territorial wines. I'd like to see somebody at a blind tasting with my Chianti and say "Oh. That's Montesecondo's Chianti". He'd piece it together because he could taste the land, the soil, the microclimate...

I also try to avoid the term because shouldn't we be on normal shelves? Aren't our wines just normal? Why qualify ourselves as "natural"? I know we are the minority but for me we are the normal ones. Why talk so much about what we do? We should take more about what everybody else does: additives, preservatives, spraying chemicals. None of this is very natural.