

# Federico Orsi/Vigneto San Vito

## Interview

**This interview with Federico Orsi took place over a Facetime exchange in February, 2017.**

**You're not from a winemaking family right? How did you get your start?**

That's not entirely true. All of my family, but particularly my mother's side, are farmers. They've historically had lands in the western part of Bologna. Many of my cousins are still active and work near me. My parents were actually the first generation to step away from agriculture; my father still works as an engineer in Brazil, where we moved when I was 3 years old. I grew up there, then left at 19 to go to college in Bologna. After getting a degree in engineering, I started working as a business consultant.

My goal at the time was to get an MBA abroad. But I had also developed a passion for wine during my studies. The seed was actually planted when I was quite young, as my grandfather was also a wine lover and accumulated many great bottles from his visits to Burgundy in the 50's and 60's. My mother and uncles were used to great bottles at home, which weren't even that expensive at the time.

So this passion for wine transferred from generation to generation, and upon my return to Italy I took a sommelier course and started working in restaurants. It was a part-time job during my studies.

Around 2005, we found out that a winery two miles from our house was for sale. I talked to my family about it, almost as a joke, and they encouraged for me to go for it. But it wasn't in my original game plan, and furthermore I felt that economically I could never make it work.

My wife wasn't happy with my original plans with the MBA, which probably meant moving to the US or France; she therefore kept insisting that if any part of me wanted to start a winery, I should go for it. And despite my parents, siblings and fiancée giving me the green light, I still resisted for a long time! They finally convinced me, and I told them we could do a five year test-run. If I could not make it successful after five years, we would resell it.

So together with my family we took over the winery in 2005. I dropped my MBA and divided my time between consulting and the farm. Year after year I found my time at the winery increasing, and eventually it became full-time.

**Was the winery already called San Vito?**

Yes. Azienda Agricola San Vito.

**What exactly did you take over?**

We took over the original cellar and vines. We have two neighbors who we've been renting vines from for many years as well.

**Can you give me a precise breakdown of the estate?**

We own about 9.5 hectares and rent about 5.5 hectares. Seven of those are planted in the indigenous Pignoletto, which produce *Sui Lieviti*, *Posca Bianca* and the single vineyard *Vigna del Grotto*. *Vigna del Grotto* is a steep slope of older vines, and represents about 1.6 hectares of land.

We then have about 2.5 hectares of mixed white grapes: Alionza, Albana, Malvasia and still a bit of Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling.

Then in red we have two hectares of Negretto and Cabernet Sauvignon and one hectare of Barbera.

### **When you started, you had no real knowledge of viticulture or winemaking right?**

Almost none.

### **Tell us how about that learning process.**

When I took over the winery in 2005, everything was done conventionally. My original plan was simply to find the best way to market myself; I was aware of being a very small winery in a relatively unknown area. My initial goal was to work with grapes indigenous to this land, to make a wine that corresponded to Bologna. I wanted the wine to distinguish itself; not to make something for the sake of being different, but to express my region.

Through research I discovered biodynamic farming. I found the concepts to be far more interesting than the rest of what I'd come across, and decided it could be a means to obtaining a product closer to nature. This was right at our beginnings, and we started converting the vines in 2006.

### **So you came to biodynamics on your own? Were you aware of other biodynamic or "natural" estates flourishing around Europe?**

I knew of some, for example [Radikon](#), Gravner and [La Stoppa](#). These estates all struck me as unique, and inspired me to study up on what these producers were doing.

Another big influence was the film *Mondovino*. It made me second-guess what I'd been drinking over the last decade, and opened my eyes to the standardization of wine.

### **So did you study viticulture and oenology?**

I started going to many tastings from likeminded producers as well as meetings for biodynamic farmers. By 2007, we decided to stop using selected yeasts, no clarification, not filtering, etc... We had great results on the red, which was very encouraging! For the whites, however, it took another two years of experimentation to get good results.

### **Tell me about the Posca wines. It's one of the more unique projects we import.**

To be honest, it came by chance (**ed note: The *Posca Bianco* and *Posca Rosso* are non-vintaged wines blended in a unique solera style. A hand stamp indicates the date of the bottling.**) The idea started in 2008, the year we started making all our wines naturally. In 2007, we started the [Mercato della Terra](#), a farmer's market in Bologna promoted by [Slow Food](#). Because the wines were less balanced than they are today, I thought we could sell them as bulk wine. We wanted to encourage customers to re-use their glass bottles in an effort to reduce environmental impact.

I'd read a study from Tuscany where each bottle produced consumes about 2 kilos of Co2. I'm

talking about the whole process in making a bottle here: making the glass, the cork, bottling, logistics of transportation... And furthermore, 60% of that is in making the bottle! So that's where the Posca project started. The farmer's market seemed like a perfect place to launch that. So we started with the [fiascos](#), as we wanted a container that could be re-used and could get banged around in your shopping basket without breaking.

The wine became so popular that local restaurants started asking me for it. They would put the fiascos on the table and refill them as the night went along. But this created a new problem: how do I send them the bulk wine? At the beginning I would go to the farmer's market with a small stainless steel container. My first thought was bag-in-box, but I was not comfortable because I didn't want to sell wine inside a plastic container. It was also a perception thing; most people, rightfully so, associate bag-in-box to shit wine.

I found no other solution, so I compromised and started making 20L boxes exclusively for restaurants. That eventually decreased to 10 liters, which I still use as it's easier for the restaurants to store in a fridge. But the plastic still bothered me, and so I started monitoring how the wine would change over time. This made me fill up boxes at a faster pace, sometimes multiple times a month, in smaller increments.

At a certain point, I finished most of the 2008 and just decided to fill the tank with some 2009. We still had some 2009 by the time the 2010 was ready, and I started blending again. By 2011 this became an intentional pattern and I became a fan of the results. I started looking into vino perpetuo, which turned out to be an ancient technique practiced by some contemporaries, for example Francesco Guccione in Sicily. Currently there are six vintages in the *Posca Bianca* tank and eight in the *Posca Rosso*.

The wines have become so good to me that about two and half years ago, we decided to start bottling it.

### **How do you keep track of the solera?**

I don't keep track. I like to bottle five to 10% of the Posca tank at a time, so that when I refill it, it will only be a marginal retraction/addition. And despite these small amounts, it completely changes the balance. It's like a mother yeast for bread: every time you refresh it, you are changing it. But that mother yeast is also absorbing the new additions, expressing itself differently.

### **So the wine is just aging in its vessel before being added to the tank?**

In fact, I have many different vessels, and this is what makes the Posca wines so interesting to me. I'll give you an example: I just added some 2016 in the *Posca Bianco* tank. It represented about 5% of the tank, and I decided to use a wine vinified in cement because it was tasting very fresh. It coincided with me feeling the *Posca Bianco* was feeling a bit tired, and I wanted to liven it up. So I added just 5% new wine, and after a week the tank transformed; it was crisper and sharper.

Another example: I'm currently considering adding some wine from anfora, Malvasia macerated two weeks on the skins. It was a little high in volatile last time I tried it, but I will try again soon and re-assess. It's really about what should be brought in and when.

### **So how many different vinifications are you making at this point? And are they all for the Posca?**

I've got wine fermented in big and small oak barrels, in cement, stainless steel and anfora. Some wines I make without maceration, others with short or long ones. So in the end, there are 10 different types of vinification. And yes, the wines go in different places. In 2015, for example, some of the *Vigna del Grotto*, which fermented in big oak barrels, went into the Posca.

**We've talked a lot about the Posca, whose origins come from the farmer's market you organize. The market seems quite popular. What happened with that?**

I'm one of the founders of the market. It is funded by the province of Bologna, Slow Food and the Cineteca di Bologna, where it takes place. It started about 9 years ago, with two markets a year, one in November and one in December. The next year it was twice a month, and after that first summer it became a weekly event. The market is every Saturday.

**How many vendors are there?**

There are around 35 year-round vendors, with some occasional participants.

**This leads me to another question! Tell us about those beautiful pigs of yours! You make the best mortadella I've ever tried!**

Being a biodynamic farmer means having animals. But I wanted to have another element to the estate, not just wine. So animals became part of it.

□The laws here for animals are very strict, which causes a lot of problems. It took a lot of time and effort to get everything in order, to let the pigs roam freely. I started with five pigs. I didn't even really have a plan for them, but after a month I decided to make a mortadella like the world had never seen!

It's obviously a very popular cold-cut around here, but most producers don't use great meat for it. I wanted to make something in contrast to the incredibly industrialized mortadella you can get anywhere. We do it just once a year, and production is around 50 to 60 mortadellas. We don't want to make more.

**I've been doing these interviews since 2010, and the following question still seems to yield interesting answers: How do you feel about the current state of the organic/biodynamic/natural wine movement?**

When a group of us decided to start [ViViT](#) within VinItaly, our goal was to get out of our underground niche. At most natural wine fairs, we see more or less the same people; it's great but I feel that we can certainly reach a broader audience.

With ViViT, people who didn't know anything about natural wine were given an opportunity to discover something new to them. We are a tiny part of VinItaly, but it's had some very positive effects. For example, it is because of ViViT that many of my neighbors decided to finally try my wines for the first time. They had payed for their VinItaly stand, were on premise and could see how much this little side-section of the fair was having. So they came to taste, to try and understand.

Not to say that I'm oblivious to the fact the movement has become increasingly popular. When this movement started, it was avant-garde. This happens in all types of fields: the arts, philosophy, literature... Even gastronomy! Nouvelle Cuisine's goal was basically to break all the rules. And there is always a faction of the avant-garde that wants to push things to its extremes.

In all of human history, new movements start in reaction to others. We should find a name for the late 90's, where winemakers reacted against modern winemaking's standardization. This meant shunning, for example, over concentrated, ultra-tannic reds. Today we drink the exact opposite! All this to say that with time, things become less fringe and more rational.

**What wines do you like to drink?**

I drink everything. It can be from anywhere. So much is at play with wine: what I'm drinking, who I'm with, the place... It depends on so many factors.

Of course, I prefer anything that doesn't give me a headache!