

Radikon

Interview

This interview with Saša Radikon took place in Los Angeles in March 2011.

Tell us about Radikon as an estate.

We are in Friuli, which is in the North-East of Italy. Our village is called Oslavia, and we live 300m away from the Slovenian border. My grandfather planted our first vineyards after the World War 2 and my father started bottling wine in 1979.

How did you personally get involved working at the winery?

I studied viticulture in high school and oenology in university. But I grew up around vines and in the cellar and that's where I really learned how to work. When you study something you learn how things happen, and this inspired me to confirm if what I'd learned was true when applied to my vineyards. And I appreciate having that knowledge, but for me wine isn't just chemical compounds; it's experience, it's our hearts, our hands.

Are you certified organic or biodynamic?

We don't have a certification because we don't feel that it proves anything and that nowadays it's too easy to get one. I work this way because I want to, not because some people want to drink organic or biodynamic wine.

We only applied for organic certification once. My father showed the inspectors the vineyards and they told him they looked fine. He then asked them to follow him to the cellar they told him that that wouldn't be necessary, that the cellar had nothing to do with certification. Stanko insisted that the bulk of the production was in the cellar and they should inspect his work there, but they still refused. He then asked them how often they'd pass by for controls and they replied that once you've gotten your certification, they didn't really need to check up on you anymore.

We want to work this way. Chemicals are not good for us. We know what we can and cannot do and a certification isn't going to help us make these decisions. The only thing you're tasting in our wines is grapes; it's that simple.

What's the work like in the vines?

Our biggest work is in the vines. If you want to make wines with no sulfur and long skin contact you need excellent grapes. We don't use herbicides or pesticides. Everything is done manually. We've cut the vines so that we only get four bunches per vine, and these produce less than a kilo of fruit each year, so the yields are very low.

What about the cellar?

In 1995 we started making white wines with lengthy periods of skin contact. This was a technique that my grandfather used because he wanted to preserve his wine for a whole year. Before my father

started selling our wines, my grandfather would make wine for the whole family from our vines, but this was for personal consumption only and it had to last an entire year until the next vintage.

In 1995 it was a week of skin contact, and it was also around this time that we realized we could make wine without sulfur. Our first non sulfur bottling was in 1999. By 2002 we'd decided that all of our wines would be bottled unsulfured. This is rarely the case with white wine, and the only reason we are able to successfully make these wines sulfur free is because of the contact with the skins.

Over the years we've experimented with the length of the skin contact: 3 months, 6 months, even a year. At this point we've settled at three months. In the first month the alcoholic fermentation and malolactic fermentation occurs in Slovenian oak vats. They have a lid that we can open at our disposal because during fermentation and we crush the hat four times a day. They are rather large and can hold up to 3000 liters.

We then transfer the juice into 3000 liter barrels and leave the skins in there for another two months. The wines then stay in barrel for 3 1/2 years. We only rack twice a year, and we don't filter. We then bottle and hold the wine a year before releasing it.

We don't use wood for tannic structure: we've already gotten that from the skin contact. Instead we use it for micro-oxidation and aging. Wine is alive and in this type of wood it can breathe. For the red we use barriques but they are very old: the youngest is 50 years old, and we age the red for five years in these before release.

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

Natural wines are being made by good people. We've been making natural wine for many years; I was very young when my father decided not to use any chemicals in the vineyard or in the cellar. For me this is the normal way to make wine. Sometimes it makes life more difficult: you lose some of your production and you have to work manually because otherwise you're drinking herbicide.

I think that in the last few years people have invented a model for how natural wine should be made. But for me natural wine is not a model, it's a philosophy. If you speak of natural wine, you also have to live a natural life.

Can you explain the atypical size of your bottles?

We originally found a cork with a smaller diameter that was being grown on our hills where there is less humidity. It's also more compact, so it interacts less with everything outside of the bottle. Because we started using these corks we had to reduce the neck, which ultimately led to smaller bottles. The proportion of cork to wine to bottle is the same as a magnum. Magnums are the best bottle format for aging. Unfortunately, selling magnums of white wine is easier said than done. A smaller size is easier to sell and easier to drink, but our bottles permit the wine to age the way we want to. Those are our half liter bottles: it's not a half bottle, and the proportions are the same as a 750.

We then make liter bottles because again this is better for aging but also because we feel those extra 250 ml help carry you through a meal.

Your wines are very unique in flavor and structure so what would you recommend eating with your wines?

I think everyone agrees these wines are meant to accompany food. A local pork ragu instantly comes to mind, but any type of meat or fish works well with our whites. Because of the tannic structure you can drink them like a red wine but you also get the elegance of a white wine. Another example is raw fish: I think that with raw fish you need to be drinking champagne or wines like ours.

What do like to drink?

I like wines from my region. It's home! I like orange wines with extended skin contact and most importantly I like wines with very low quantities of sulfur! I wouldn't be making these wines if I didn't like them, right?