

Joy Kull/La Villana

Interview

This interview with Joy Kull took place at our New York offices in June, 2017.

This may be stating the obvious, but you are not Italian. Can you tell us how you ended up making wine in Lazio?

My parents are Swiss, but moved to US 30+ years ago. I was born and raised in Connecticut, and knew early on that I wanted to be part of wine world. I'd originally thought hotels, which I went to school for. Then it shifted to restaurants, then more specifically to wine. This shift happened after working a summer at my father's newly opened wine shop.

I was off for the summer and he needed an employee, so it worked out. Of course I had to learn about wine. My father's business partner also owned Central Cellars in New York City, so I went there to learn; it was all really basic info but I was immediately hooked. When I got back to Cornell, I changed my major to beverage management.

When I graduated, I thought I would work in restaurants, be a sommelier. I did this through college and a few years afterwards. I then moved back to help my father sell his shop, and started working for Gilt Taste, a now defunct part of the flash sale website Gilt. It was still in its start-up phase, but the concept was an online market to sell food and wine.

In the end, I worked in every possible aspect of the wine industry and still hadn't found what I was looking for. I'd hit a tipping point, and decided to do something completely different. The only thing I hadn't done at that point was make wine. So I quit and decided to move to Italy. I didn't really have a plan, but I knew I loved the country and its wines. I wanted to learn the raw basics and just get my hands dirty: no labs, no chemicals. I really saw myself like Lucille Ball foot-stomping grapes!

So you never wanted to go to school for viticulture or winemaking?

No. After all my schooling, I was over it. I had also been studying at the WSET, which I always felt was total bullshit. It's all bullshit. The only thing you need with wine is experience and to follow your palate. Just taste a lot of things, and at the end of the day drink what you enjoy. Why are we philosophizing wine so intensely, all the time?

I think my move to Italy was also a response to my rejection of the intellectual approach I was taking with wine. I just wanted to work in the vineyards and go from there. I wanted it to be as primitive as possible.

When did you move?

2013.

So why Lazio?

While working at Gilt Taste, I got to know Joe Campanale, who wrote regularly for the website. One night I drank Litrozzo from Le Coste at one of his restaurants. I had already decided I was heading to Rome, and Joe pointed out that they were in the outskirts of the city.

My original plan was to spend time in Rome, write to wineries and go from there. When Joe told me Le Coste was "just outside of Rome", I thought it would be great, that I could take the bus to the city on the weekends... Well, it's two hours away, so that idea quickly faded!

But I still emailed Le Coste and they said I was totally welcome to come intern for them. I ended up working there for 15 months, and knew almost immediately that this is what I wanted to do: the way they make their wines, the energy they put into it, being outside...

How did you transition from working at Le Coste to starting La Villana?

I'd flirted with the idea of returning to the US to start something up, because starting a winery in Italy seemed impossible. The Northwest seemed tempting, because this is an area still discovering itself in so many ways, so there are less expectations.

But simultaneously, I was falling completely in love with the Lago di Bolsena. I couldn't imagine leaving. It's so unknown and feels like uncharted waters. Tuscany is just 10 kilometers away, but everything is super high-end there. Lazio is relatively untouched.

So what pushed you to start your own winery?

I never thought I would jump into my own project so quickly, but circumstances forced my hand.

Did you think you were ready?

Absolutely not! I had two harvests under my belt, a year of Italian... So no, I did not feel ready at all.

What happened?

With the money I had saved, I had planned to buy a hectare of land and just start there. A friend of mine, who is half-Italian and knew about my plans, pitched this idea of partnering on this project together. She would be an investor, but not in a traditional sense. She was planning to buy a house in Italy, but didn't want it to be sitting in the middle of nowhere, with no one in it, no one taking care of it.

So she proposed building a farm on a property that she would buy and invest in. And that made my dream go from 0 to 100 in a second. Everything sped up really fast: I was able to buy more land, buy equipment with my saved money and actually make wine overnight.

That was in August 2015. From that harvest I made wines rogue-style, pretty much in a cave. Nothing was up to code and it was rather unhygienic! But I got everything in place by 2016, which is the first official vintage.

Tell us about the estate.

Before we even bought the property, I had already found a few hectares from retired farmers who didn't want to see their land go abandoned. My husband Simone was helpful in finding these; it's a small town and words travel fast. A lot of them actually reached out directly to propose the vines to

me. The largest of these is about 75 ares. I now have six small, individual parcels, totaling 2.5 hectares. Some are very old and barely producing, others are really young and more vigorous.

We also bought a farmhouse and all the land around it. We've recently planted about 1.4 hectares above the house, on a beautiful amphitheater about 600 meters elevation. We're going to graft everything here with local white grapes: Procanico, Malvasia, Roscetto, Petino. All of these are almost extinct. Everything will be trained in albarello. There is also another hectare that will be planted in red grapes next year.

What are the wines you made in your first vintage?

I made four wines in 2016, and it will probably remain this way with the old vines. The first is a white consisting mostly of Procanico with a little bit of Malvasia, crushed by foot and direct-pressed. Then there are two reds. The first is made from Grechetto, our clone of Sangiovese, along with random grapes like Montepulciano, Cilegiolo and Canaiolo. That was hand de-stemmed, then fermented whole-berry in a semi-carbonic style, with light pump-overs and no punchdowns. The other red is 100% Aleatico, a grape that's native to Gradoli. It's typically made to make passito wines, but I made it dry, carbonic style with whole-cluster fermentation.

The last wine is a rosato, 1/3 Aleatico and 2/3rds Sangiovese. It was actually supposed to be two different roses, but neither was doing it for me so I decided to blend them.

What are your plans for the younger vines? Is it too soon to tell?

I'd eventually like to do a single vineyard wine with the new plantings; my current vines are all 450 meters elevation and below, while the amphitheater by my house is almost 600 meters! It's completely different, and a serious micro-climate. It's incredibly exposed, and the soils are really particular.

Lazio is not a really known region. What can you tell us about it?

The soils are very much volcanic; if you walk along the lake you see black sand and lava rock formations. You can actually see petrified lava from millions of years ago everywhere. This adds a ton of minerality to the wines. Because the soils are so sandy, they drain very quickly.

Being on the lake creates an insane micro-climate. You will have bright sun on one side of the lake and rain on the other. It's 40 kilometers in circumference, so it's not tiny but not huge either; these drastic changes are significant. And because we are at such high elevation, it gets very cool here, particularly at night. Even in July, you want to put a sweater on. It's also quite arid and open, and you can feel the Southern winds constantly.

You have a lot of animals on the farm. Are they your husband's?

He and his brother have 400 sheep on a separate farm. As far as our home, all the animals have a purpose. Except for the horse, who just stands there and looks pretty! We have goats for meat and milk, pigs for meat, guard dogs, cats..

With the somewhat unplanned nature of your trajectory, how do you feel about your first two vintages, 2015 and 2016?

2015 was really an experiment and I was not happy with any of it. I was in an old cellar and the

fermentations stopped really early. I had to bottle them that way, unfinished. The locals actually all love it, because that is how the wines they make at home taste: semi-sweet, unfinished.

2016 I was actually really happy with. I got lucky in the sense that with it actually being my first "real" vintage, I didn't have any insane, serious problems. For example, I thought the rosato was going to be an issue, with one being very volatile and the other extremely reductive. I don't even know what compelled me to blend them, but it turned out great.

With the white wine I'll definitely do a little skin contact moving forward, which was not the case in 2016. I think it will give the wine more personality.

Speaking of personality, we have to talk about your labels. They are quite beautiful and eye-catching.

With these wines, and in general with everything in this phase of my life, I'm trying to keep things light hearted. I don't want these wines to be specimens to ponder over. I want everyone to be able to enjoy them, and I think that is reflected in the labels.

The labels are hand-drawn by a great friend of mine, the children's book author/illustrator Jamison Odone. I threw some ideas at him, but the gist was to make labels that were light-hearted and that would make you chuckle. I also wanted them to stand-out so that the average person would do a double-take.

I'd also mentioned that having a sheep involved would be nice, since my husband is a shepherd. Traditionally, shepherds and peasants didn't really get along, because the shepherds were pretty aggressive with bringing the sheep through others' land, grazing on other people's property like it was their right. It's still an issue in some places like Sicily!

Is it always the same sheep, or are they all different?

It's just one sheep. He does everything.

□Does he have a name?

He does not have a name at the moment. If you pay attention, there is also a little red bird that helps him out.

I feel like there is eventually going to be a children's book about this.

That would be amazing!

What is the significance of the name of your estate, *La Villana*?

It's the feminine of Il Villano, which is a slang expression shepherds use for farmers. Most farmers were also caretakers for the villas on the land, which is where the villa part of the name originates. Because they often were poor they came off as rude, raw and uneducated so the term villano has a negative connotation.

On the other hand, farmers called shepherds "Pecoraio". So I just thought it was funny there was this ongoing rivalry between the two, yet ended up marrying one. It annuls all tension: Simone's sheep will obviously be grazing in the vineyards in winter.