

Very early on, Mother Nature tested our resolve to farm Biodynamically by giving us a tough vintage – the 2005; it was challenging for us as well as for most Italian winemaking regions. Towards the end of the season it rained frequently, and as we approached harvest, I often woke each time a storm rolled in, worrying what it might bring – disease or perhaps destruction from hail?

Fortunately, despite the challenges of 2005, the wines turned out to be delicious and the vintage brought with it a valuable lesson; I learned that organic farming done well results in better-balanced canopies and healthier vines, which in themselves are more resistant to disease and pests. In the end, we did have disease (mold), like everyone else, but in our case it started later and was less severe, which meant we lost less crop and were able to pick later - a big advantage in a year like 2005.

The wines we produced in 2005 convinced me that farming Biodynamically was the right course, and helped instill a healthy attitude: the weather is not in our control; we can only strive to make the best wine possible, according to the vintage.

A tale of two vintages – combined vintage report 2011/ 2012

THE 2011 VINTAGE

The 2011 vintage was Monte Bernardi's twentieth vintage as a producer of estate-bottled wines. It was also the first anxiety-inducing vintage since our eye-opening 2005 experience. 2011 followed a vintage of drastically low production: in 2010 we had 30% less fruit in the young vineyards, and 50% less fruit in the older vineyards. So in 2011, when the vines burst their buds several weeks early, the thought that a frost could yet again reduce our yields was nerve-racking. Abundant winter rain followed by warm temperatures tricked the vines into thinking spring had arrived, and thus enticed them to an early start. With the delicate young leaves fully exposed, the fear was the weather would return to near freezing temperatures, damaging the tender new growth, and potentially destroying the first shoots. Had this happened, the auxiliary buds would have grown new shoots, which are always less fruitful than the primary ones. Fortunately the frost-risk temperatures did not return and the danger passed - I was once again able to sleep peacefully.

The season continued on its early course all the way through harvest, with some extreme heat in the hotter months of July and August. It was so hot that the oak trees growing on the Chianti hillsides showed burning on their leaves, giving the impression that autumn had arrived early.

Like much of Europe, we started picking some of our vineyards as early as the last week of August, and continued picking until we finished on September 19th - three weeks earlier than what would be considered typical for our area, and certainly earlier than ever recorded over Monte Bernardi's twenty years. In 2011, the last five weeks

of bunch ripening occurred during much hotter mean temperatures, than if the ripening would have occurred later on, as in a normal season. As a result, the wines have riper aromas and less freshness, and express less of the aromatics and elegance, which we think are unique to Panzano - our part of Chianti Classico. Instead, to the taster, it may seem as if our vineyards were plucked out of our beautiful hillside and momentarily dropped in a warmer region for a one-time vacation. I hope it will be a rare voyage.

THE 2012 VINTAGE

To the outsider, the 2012 vintage was just as hot, maybe even hotter than the 2011. July and most of August were certainly very hot and dry, but the absence of rainfall over the winter and during the growing season may have actually saved the vintage, and, in the end, allowed us to produce wonderfully aromatic, fresh wines, with the lowest alcohol levels since 2004. The utter lack of winter and spring rain created a stress, which delayed veraison by several weeks. We had bunches in which just a few berries changed color; further ripening did not occur until several weeks later. When the much-needed rain finally came at the end of August, the vines were able to complete veraison and ripen during a cooler September through to early October, with harvest concluding on October 16th. In the end, what seemed to many to be a season that concluded unseasonably hot had a wonderful outcome.

IN THE VINEYARD

Over the last few years, I've come to the conclusion that one of the biggest contributions to our wines elegantly tannic quality and their relatively lower alcohol levels is a result of sticking to an old practice that has been virtually abandoned, even in organic vineyards.

When the shoots of the vine surpass the top wire and start hanging into the rows they risk being pulled down and broken by our passing track-laying tractor. This is when most producers would come through and use a rotating saw to hedge-trim the shoots to a nice uniform-height above the top wire. I have always resisted this practice because it causes the lateral shoots to grow, increasing shading and humidity, and as a result augmenting the risk of disease and pest pressure.

When the shoots start hanging into the rows we, instead, manually wrap them along the top wire, evenly distributing them from right to left of the trunk.

In addition to maintaining a better-balanced canopy, I realized this practice brought another important advantage. In "tipping" the shoot tip, you remove the shoot's hormonal driver, at a time when the vine is about to change its focus from producing vegetation to ripening the grape bunch. The vine now has to expend more energy to produce new vegetation before it can change its focus to ripening the tannins in the

grape. The resultant delay will mean sugar levels will continue to increase, as the bunch requires more time on the vine to ripen.

Later in the season, when we see the shoot tips are gone and tannin ripening is well underway, we can and sometimes do trim excess vegetation above the top wire; this however is something we do mainly for aesthetics.

Warm growing areas with more fertile soils will inevitably have to tip their shoots, as the vegetation growth is too great to wrap along the top wire. Unfortunately, the end result will likely be greener tannins and/or higher alcohols.

GRAN SELEZIONE (or Grande Confusione)

The Conzorzio of Chianti Classico ratified the introduction of a new, third tier in the Chianti Classico hierarchy – Gran Selezione. This tier, a Grande Riserva of sorts, would be placed above the Riserva category, and would be restricted to wines coming from 100% estate grown fruit, something which you would think is what a Riserva is supposed to be: a selection of an estate's best fruit. Clearly if embraced, the Selezione will likely render the Riserva category null and void.

Rather than improving the image of the region as a whole, this move seems to be a tool to aid individual producers – who, maybe, felt they were hitting a price ceiling with the Riserva category, or wanted to find a new "home" for wines of the fallen Super Tuscan category?

If Italian producers want their customers to know a wine is made from fruit which is 100% estate grown, produced, and bottled, the "disciplinario" (guidelines) already exists: to label it as "Integralmente prodotto e imbottigliato" - a designation which means just that – estate grown, produced and bottled. (*Image of our back label*)

We believe a better way for the Consorzio to strengthen the denomination would have been to work on prominently distinguishing the differences between the Chianti Classico sub-zones*, as David Berry Green, of Berry Brothers and Rudd has brought to attention following the latest Anteprima tasting. Of course, certain sub-regions may be reluctant worrying their region would be estimated inferior to another. This may happen, but it would be better for the whole; in all likelihood, it would stimulate interest in learning and appreciating the differences among particular sub-regions, as in Burgundy or in the Communes of Barolo and Barbaresco. There would be more debate, and more meaningful research into what makes each region particular, and perhaps individual producers would be inspired to move toward a wine style which supports the strengths of their individual sub-region. Shouldn't this, in the end, be our goal?

We see our work at Monte Bernardi as doing just this. It took a while to become evident in our wines; in the beginning we had acquired a number of new botti grandi (large oak casks), which, in the first few vintages of their use, impacted the wines significantly. However our goal, from day one, was to emphasize the elegance and freshness we saw unique to Panzano. At the time, it seemed like we were working counter current, but it certainly has paid off in the long run.

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

Last year we embarked on a new journey: we created an organic white, and red wine in Tetra Pak for the US market. As a small producer, we needed more financial security to buffer against year-to-year fluctuations (low-production years like 2010 require the same costs to produce as "normal" years.)

We could have increased our security by growing our existing range, but this would have required a compromise in quality we were unwilling to make. Instead we decided to enter the emerging market of alternative packaging, which we believe is becoming an important segment for wine.

In the US, over 90% of wine is consumed within 24 hours of purchase. Why do we need such a weighty package*, which requires more fuel to transport, for a product that is consumed faster than most families consume a liter of milk?

Compared to wine in glass, a liter of delicious organic wine in Tetra Pak costs 75% less in packaging, and 50% less to transport. These savings allow us to offer a wine that retails at 35% less, while giving our customers 33% more wine (*1 liter versus 750mL*).

Will wine consumers force the wine industry to follow the same path the auto industry did with fuel consumption - choosing a lighter bottle, which reduces package weights only by a nominal amount? *Fun Fact: the weight saved in choosing lighter glass (10%), is equal to the total weight of our one-liter Tetra Pak!*

We researched packaging alternatives for nearly two years prior to putting our first wine in Tetra Pak; and it has been almost a year since the wines hit the shelves - the response has been outstanding.

"In the past we've sold one other tetrapak wine but when we tasted the Fuoristrada wines we knew immediately that we'd finally found a tetrapak of the same high quality as the best bottled wines we sell. As we've introduced the wines to our customers we get the same surprised reaction: no one's ever tasted such good wine from tetrapak. The fact that the tetrapaks have ecological advantages has helped to make Fuori Strada one of our best-selling wines, but their success here really results

from the wines being great values, and just plain delicious." - Jamie Wolff, Chambers Street Wines

We are proud to put our name on our Fuoristrada Tetra Pak wines. We only wish our European friends were ready!

** a standard glass bottle weighs 410gr, a tetra pak 40gr; tetra pak is 80% paper*

The Cantina – It gives us great pleasure to use the words of others to describe the way they saw our wines at the particular moment that they tasted the current releases.

2010 Retromarcia - Quite deep ruby with orange-tinged rim. Fine, sweet fruit nose with the merest hint of cigar box. Very elegant and fresh palate, with loads of crunchy red fruits. Very easy to like and drink. Walter Speller for Jancis Robinson

2009 Monte Bernardi Riserva – A most beguiling nose with oriental spice rubbing shoulders with blackcurrant, floral notes and an earthy wholesomeness.

This estate always gives a solid performance and there was no exception in this tasting. The Panzano property is delightful and this wine reflects the low yields, sensitive use of oak , and allegiance to traditional varieties. Michael Palij MW for the Decanter