

Highlight Portrait

Sicily according to Mario Ronco. Interview by Daniel Thomases

di: Daniel Thomases

18 april 2017



Mario Ronco, born in the Piedmont city of Asti, could be said to have been born to the trade – his father had a négociant business in the area to the north of the city known as Monferrato-Asti. After graduating from the Oenological School of Alba in 1987, he worked from 1987 to 1995 at Enosis, the oenological studio of renowned consulting winemaker Donato Lanati, where, in addition, he met his future wife, Silvia Giannotti, a colleague with a double degree from the University of Turin in both chemistry and Pharmaceutical Sciences. An expert analyst of wines and their chemistry, she later worked in the laboratory of important firms including the well known name of Martini & Rossi, the vermouth and sparkling wine house. A well matched team which now, since 1995, when Ronco began his own career as a consultant, has created a sizeable clientele for itself to the north of Asti. But not merely there: the couple now works as well in Barolo, in Ghemme, in the area near Turin known as the Canavese, Carema, Ligura, and the Valle d'Aosta. And, more recently, in Tuscany as well, where Ronco consults in the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano production zone. And in Sicily, where his collaboration with Cusumano goes back to the beginning of the new millennium and has enabled him to visit and work in the many different parts of the island in which this important house operates.

T. Sicily, in the past, has known various professional winemakers from Piedmont – Franco Giacosa at Duca di Salaparuta, Gianfranco Torrenza at the Settesoli cooperative, and Carlo Corino at Planeta. – but more recently you have been overtaken by what seems an army of Tuscan consultants. In your particular case, how did your connection to Cusumano come about.

R. Diego Cusumano and I had a friend in common, at the time – we are talking about the beginning of the new millennium – the Cusumano firm worked a large volume of wine but a good part of it was bulk wine. It owned some vineyard land near their cellars, but many of the grapes were purchased. The idea, at the time, was to significantly upgrade the quality level of the production, to move seriously into the field of bottled wine, and to achieve this goal it was obvious that a major factor would have to be proprietary vineyards planned for and capable of growing the grapes which would be needed to produce the type of wines which could achieve this goal. The firm now owns 1300 acres (520 hectares) of vineyards in a series of different locations on the island, therefore we are talking about a program which was very ambitious, costly, and stretching over time – all of this land clearly could not be acquired without serious study and long reflection. All based on the development of the line, the reaction of the market, what would be learned while working, and the tastes and evolution in the markets in which the house would be working.

T. Let's talk, therefore, about this program of growth and development, zone by zone and phase by phase.

R. With pleasure, the headquarters of the firm are in Partinico, between Palermo and Trapani, and the first acquisition, consequently, were in the western part of Sicily, at Ficuzza in the township of Monreale, for a total of 375 acres (150 hectares), where we found 30 acres of Chardonnay and some other acreage unfortunately planted to expansive overhead training systems which we took out. There we planted, in addition to white grapes, Syrah, Pinot Noir, and Syrah,. The area is on hillsides and the altitude reaches as high as 2300 feet (700 meters) above sea level and there are highly useful temperature swings from daytime heat to evening and nighttime coolness. The red grapes have a southern exposure and, now that we know how to work these parcels and the climate of the new millennium has become warmer, the grapes do not suffer from these altitudes. The vineyards themselves are somewhat unusual for the island, they are trained and pruned to a Guyot system, something not particularly common in Sicily but, more importantly, the rows, instead of running up and down the slopes, follow horizontally the curves of the hillside. I am from Piedmont, this is our tradition – Guyot and horizontal rows – and I consider this a choice with distinct advantages. In this way, it is possible to harvest an entire row at the same time, the uniformity of altitude normally means a reasonable uniformity of ripening where, when the rows themselves are long, and there is a certain difference of altitude between one part and another, it is necessary to pick the grapes at two different moments, a waste of time which is also accompanied by the logistical problem of bringing the grapes to the cellar. And, when it rains, the lower parts of the rows, where normally the soil is heavier, create significant problems of maneuvering when the harvest is to be carried out by mechanical means. No, I am Piedmontese and shall remain Piedmontese, on this point I am totally convinced and don't intend to change.

T. In the meantime, the larger volumes of production must have forced the firm to carry out major changes in the cellars as well, no?

R. Of course, the cellars were originally organized for a different type of work and have been reorganized in a quite fundamental way. The fermenting tanks – now 361 in number – are much smaller so that we can ferment the individual vineyard parcels separately and keep the various lots separate as well for future blends or selections afterwards. The tanks are all in stainless steel and, logically, we have a large refrigeration unit to keep temperatures constantly under control, after all we are in Sicily, not on the Rhine. The pumps are peristaltic, not piston-driven, there is a notable difference in price but a difference in quality which is equally significant. Partinico is close to the Mediterranean, there is a problem of sea breezes and their salt, keeping everything clean and free of salt deposits requires constant attention and a certain investment of time, but we have no choice. As far as the aging cellar is concerned, we have two principal wines which are aged in casks, the Inzolia Cubia and the Sagana Nero d'Avola, the casks are 2000-2500 liters (520-650 gallons) in capacity and are quite similar to the classic casks used in Piedmont for wines such as Barolo and Barbaresco; I am quite familiar with their use. There is a long tradition of use of casks for the aging of wine in Italy, something which deserves to be respected and given its proper attention and worth, and a region such as Sicily, with the millennia-old tradition which it has, must keep this properly in mind. For our Chardonnay, Jalé, and our Noà, a blend of Nero d'Avola, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon, instead, we use smaller formats, puncheons and sixty gallon barrels, but by now we use a percentage of new oak which is very carefully calibrated, I personally have never had a heavy hand with oak, wines which would seem to have been made in a carpentry shop have never been part of my style as a consultant.

T. A complete and thorough explanation, let's go back to the new properties and vineyards.

R. A rather significant investment was made at Butera in the southeastern part of the island, another 350 acres in an area which historically has produced high level Nero d'Avola, the grape which dominates, in fact, our vineyards, situated at 1475 feet about sea level. There's daytime warmth and there is coolness as well in the nights and evening, unquestionably the key to the quality which we manage to obtain; we have planted a bit of Syrah as well. These are the Nero d'Avola grapes we use for our Tenuta San Giacomo Saganà. The soil is white and calcareous, another factor which undoubtedly adds to the elegance we look for in the wines made from this variety. We need to use our professionalism, the experience we have gained from decades of work, but at the end we also need to remember that a good part of our work consists of the contribution of the soil and climate, it's up to us to understand what it can give, its potential and possibilities.

T. We've moved a good distance from Partinico, have you remained in your home territory with some of the new projects and investments?

R. Certainly, we are quite present at Camporeale, where we have another 375 acres of vineyards at 1150-1300 feet above sea level. The territory is principally clay-based, and on these soils we have planted Nero d'Avola and Syrah, whose structure benefit from this type of terrain. We have Grillo as well, but for this variety we have chosen the looser-textured, sandier soils of Montepetroso in the same area; we consider them superior for this grape, the berries are smaller compared to those of grapes grown on more fertile soils as is sometimes the case in the Marsala production zone.

To return to Partinico itself: it is there that we cultivate the three hectares which supply the grapes for our sweet wine; the sub-zone, which is close to the sea, is called Zucco and accordingly we have called the wine Moscato dello Zucco. The name itself tells you that we are dealing with a Muscat-based offering. It is not the classic type of Moscato which I grew up with in Piedmont, we call the grape Moscato Bianco, white Muscat, the French call it "Muscat Blanc a petits grains" for its small berries. The berries of our grapes, instead, are larger even though we are not talking about Muscat d'Alexandrie which, in Sicily, is cultivated near the city of Siracusa and on the island of Pantelleria. It is a dried-grape wine, and the crop is dried both on the vine and in special drying rooms which are equipped with fans and dehumidifiers. The grapes themselves are placed in small and low packing cases which have frequent spaces in them to allow air to circulate and prevent the growth of mould. Our Moscato dello Zucco is decidedly sweet, we are convinced that a wine served at the end of a meal should be made in this style, the residual sugar is around 200 grams per liter. This category of wine does not have a large market at the present moment at time, there is not exactly a huge demand, but we produce 8,000 half bottles and succeed in selling them, a sign that the market recognizes that it is a quality offering. Which, it should be said, is part of a long tradition – the history of Muscat wines in Sicily goes way back in time and we are obviously happy to have added a chapter to this story.

T. Speaking of lengthy traditions, have you ever had the possibility of working with the classic Sicilian bush vines ?

R. Yes indeed, at Pachino, one of the areas which has always had this type of vine. We own 50 acres there, some with this type of training and pruning system. Up until now, I have not noticed major differences of quality and character between the grapes from these vines and other grown in vineyards which are trained to more modern – or less traditional if you wish to use this phrase – systems. The soil instead, is different, a bit acid in terms of its pH even if the zone normally is not. But this is only one of the differences which one finds in this part of the island and, just as always, to trace to one sole factor certain differences is not easy and perhaps is not even worth the trouble, it is sufficient to be aware of them and adjust the work to the differences which are perceived.

T. You have cited, just briefly, the Marsala area, given that Partinico is not very far from this very historic production zone, has it not inspired a certain interest on the part of Cusumano?

R. It has and how, we have 100 acres of proprietary vineyards in the Castelluzzo area of the township of Catalafimi, and there we cultivate Nero d'Avola and Cabernet, the site is a high one, between 1640 and 1970 feet above sea level, the air is very healthy and we are able to practice an organic viticulture. These are excellent grapes, the owner of the vineyards previously supplied the grapes to us, we had the good fortune to be able to purchase the vineyards at the end of 2016 and we are obviously very happy, it is not always possible to purchase vineyards which you know well and whose grapes have constantly demonstrated their high quality over the years.

T. I see that, like many others, Cusumano has joined the race to produce on Mount Etna, but I believe that the project is rather recent, no?

R. Very true indeed, we now own 35 acres of vineyards at Verzella in the township of Castiglione della Sicilia, but the first wines to be produced were marketed only very recently and were from the 2013 vintage; in 2014 we added a selection of Etna Rosso called Guardiola, another place name in the same township. We are obviously dealing with a mountainside viticulture, we are over 1700 feet above sea level at Vezzali and 2000 feet at Solicchiata, the part of the township in which Guardiola is located. Close to 18 acres of these acres are old bush vines, the others are Guyot. We have constructed and equipped a lovely cellar in which we can work exactly as we wish, there are almost 50 fermentation tanks; the wines are aged principally in oak casks, with the occasional addition of a puncheon from Partinico. I love the aromas and flavors of these wines which, at times, remind me of a classy and elegant Gattinara: a somewhat tenuous garnet red in color, much fragrance with notes of red berry fruit, liquorice, and mint, light tannins which, when we manage to work well, are silky, polished, and savory. The wine tends to resemble a fine Nebbiolo and perhaps for this reason I feel right at home here – according to Plato all knowledge is but a recalling of what we previously knew even if I don't believe that I lived amidst these vineyards in a previous existence or landing in Vezzali was part of my karma. But I could not be happier about the fact that I, along with many others, have been able to participate in the rebirth of the zone and in creation of a new prestige for the wines, which were already famous and much appreciated in the early 20th century. Oceans of ink have been spilled to describe the fascination of this volcano and its vineyards, according I shall not add any more.

T. Seven years are a considerable time span, you must have and heard a bit of everything

R. That's true, but it has been an experience of fundamental importance for me, in Piedmont, my professional base as a consultant, I have worked principally with small and medium-size producers, whereas at Cusumano I have had to learn to deal with and manage volumes of an entirely different order of size: we make 3000,000 bottles of Agimbè, a blend of Inzolia and Chardonnay, and the same number of bottles of Benuà, Nero d'Avola and Syrah. Not to speak of the 400,000 bottles of our Inzolia Terre Siciliane and the 600,000 of Nero d'Avola Terre Sicilane. Volumes which, in addition arrive from a whole series of different sources cultivated with different viticultural techniques and practices, a real challenge for a winemaker. A period of growth and learning for me, therefore, a professional experience without equals. And, except for Chardonnay, with which I had a certain familiarity from my work in Piedmont and elsewhere, I found myself at grips with a series of grape varieties which I knew absolutely nothing about and forced me to learn about on the run, there was no time whatsoever for pauses or night time or summer courses. The greatest satisfaction, however, was the possibility, working with Alberto and Diego Cusumano, to experience, step by step, the transformation of a firm which previously supplied bulk wine into a producer of bottled wine which was, and is, present, and with a solid credibility, in national and International markets for fine wine, well thought of in the guides and in the wine press, a name which competes with the best known bottles of the island. We, like Sicily itself, have come a long way and, looking back, we can say that we rolled up our sleeves and went at it, the results show that Sicilian wine now has a new image compared to the past, that our efforts, together with those of many colleagues, have made their mark.

by Daniel Thomases