

Uncategorized

# An Interview with Riccardo Cotarella

di: Daniel Thomases

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Despite the fact that he is the classic “man who needs no introduction”, Riccardo Cotarella will, nonetheless, will receive one here: president of the Association of the Italian Oenologists and co-president of the International Union of Oenologists, he graduated from the Oenological School of Conegliano near Venice, one of Italy’s two most prestigious institutions for the training of young winemakers, in 1968, the year of student rebellions in Italy. He, however, did not rebel against anything in particular except his father; he did not want to study oenology. But a few days under a blazing summer sun with a hoe in his hand were enough to convince him to depart for the north. His first job was with the Conte Vassali winery near Orvieto, a house of a certain size, but his work did not limit itself to the white grapes of that appellation; those with a long memory will remember the fine Cabernet produced by Vassali in the late 1980’s and the in the 1990’s. He became a consulting professional in 1981, and since then his career has been a series of successes, at times triumphal ones, often in areas and with grape varieties which were little known, or even totally unknown, as well. For over fifteen years his contacts with Sicily have been rich in recognition and prize-winning wines.

**A professional whose career spans almost four decades of time has obviously seen radical changes and transformations in Italian wine and viticulture. What did Sicily represent during the early years of your work and what did you know about the island's viticulture and wine?**

I don't believe that it necessary to say that very little Sicilian wine was bottled in the 1970's and 1980'a and, at that time, I had no working relationships with the island's wineries. The local production aimed principally at blending material for markets which wanted and needed wines of this sort, a production which left the island for a variety of different destinations (not necessarily Italian, France was also a very important market). The quantities involved were very impressive indeed, not merely tanker trucks but entire shiploads as well.

**Did these wines gives some type of information about the characteristics of the grape varieties and the various production zones of origin?**

To tell the truth, no one was thinking in these terms at the time, what was involved were classic wines to be utilized to "help" other "weaker" wines, accordingly there were three basic criteria they needed to satisfy: color, alcohol, and tannins. In the case of wines produced from the Nero d'Avola grape, unquestionably the largest part of what was available on the market, there was the additional advantage of a good acidity, something not always present in other southern Italian blending wines, quite to the contrary.

**When was there a different approach, i.e. an active collaboration with a producer in which the planning and the production of the wines was under your direct supervision?**

In 1996, when I was contacted by the Morgante winery in the town of Grotte, even though the first vintage during which I followed the fermentation, aging, and bottling was the 1998. I was not familiar with Nero d'Avola as a variety and, like everyone else, I need time to know how to handle the grapes and to understand the characteristics of the soil and micro-climate of the single estates I work with. In this specific case, Morgante cultivated and fermented exclusively Nero d'Avola and continues to do so.

**What did you learn about the variety, one which is so important for Sicily (and not only for this island)?**

At that time, in Italy – and not merely here – there was a search for power and structure, at times in an excessive way, but I learned immediately, using as well the chemical analysis of the wines which we produced, that forcing the issue would not work, Nero d'Avola, as a grape, is not rich in polyphenols, and a good part of what it has consists of coloring material, anthocyanins, and not tannins. In the Morgante line, therefore, we are able to make a structured and important wine but it is a selection which utilizes the grapes of a single vineyard. Accordingly, it isn't and cannot be a general model for the winery, one which can be extended to the entire range. To the contrary, pushing extraction during the fermentation can risk an odor of vanish which at times characterizes the wine and, when excessive, can become unpleasant.

**What is the role of oak in the aging of Nero d'Avola-based wines?**

Same story, you need to be very careful, it is not necessarily the case that the use of oak during the aging process gives better results. It may very well, with this grape variety, lessen the fruitiness and drinking pleasure of the wines, their principal positive characteristics.

**Did you have the possibility to work with Nero d'Avola in other locations in Sicily during the initial phase of your professional on the island?**

Yes, I collaborated early on with the Forace winery in Mazara del Vallo, a geographical situation which was totally different from the preceding one, the vineyards were in the southwestern-most part of the Island, an area whose micro-climate and soils had nothing in common with those of the province of Agrigento where Morgante is located. The altitude was low as well, unlike Morgante, and the Nero d'Avola which we produced there was, one might say, more immediate in personality, fruitier, unquestionably with a lesser body and structure, a fine wine to drink young but without – fortunately, I will add here – excessive pretences. The zone, historically, has always cultivated white grapes and continues to do so today, the province of Trapani where Forace is situated was, for decades in the post-war era, the most densely planted to grape vines in all of Italy, an importance inherited from the status which Marsala once enjoyed as a wine.

**At that time, and even during the first decade of the new millennium, many producers were convinced of the central role which the so-called "international varieties" should play, and vineyards with these grapes were planted all over Sicily in the most disparate zones and areas imaginable, high, low, on hillsides or in the plain, on every different type of soil, in spots with every possible and conceivable type of micro-climate. Did you have the opportunity to work with these grapes in Sicily, varieties with which you obviously couldn't have been more familiar with but not in these latitudes?**

Certainly, and often with results which not only met expectations but were indeed quite convincing and encouraging. I had a very positive collaboration with a house which was a bit out of the way, or at least well outside the better known and most heavily planted zones of Sicily, the Abbazia di Santa Anastasia in Castelbuono. The estate is located more or less halfway between Palermo and Messina, not far from Cefalù in the easternmost part of the province of Palermo. If we wish to talk about zones, we are in the Madonie mountain chain, but there is not a lot of viticulture practiced in the area and the work was programmed when there was a widely shared interest in international varieties and much confidence in the ability to achieve major results on the island with these grapes. There were native varieties as well at the Abbazia di Santa Anastasia, and with current market trends much attention is being given to grapes such as Nero d'Avola and Grillo, but I was quite satisfied with the Chardonnay and Cabernet we managed to produce. For me, oenology is, and must necessarily be, applied science, you don't get very far with theory and ideology, it is our exact role to understand the specific conditions in which we operate and attempt to get the most from the possibilities which are available. In addition to being an estate of great natural beauty in terms of its landscape, the Abbazia di Santa Anastasia enjoys a very favorable geographical position, on hillsides with a significant altitude and a nearby presence of the sea, two factors which assure significant temperature swings from daytime heat to evening and nighttime coolness and consequently the possibility of lengthening the growing season and harvesting late in the season without excessive accumulation of sugar or overripe aromas. A potential for elegance and fragrance, in short. At that particular time, Australian and California wines were quite fashionable, and many thought that these models were to be the future of Sicily. But the island has never practiced a viticulture with irrigation, and the variety of terrain, micro-climates, altitudes, and soil are very different indeed compared to California and Australia. The alcohol and oak bombs of certain "New World" wines have, in the long run, proven to be, if not a dead end, at least a style to avoid. I was told that an important group of French producers and winemakers, in Sicily on a tour sponsored as a prize by a major cooper to whom they had given a great deal of work, tasted and very much appreciated the Chardonnay and Cabernet we had produced at the Abbazia di Santa Anastasia and this obviously, was very satisfying to learn.

**At the end, however, your more recent professional work has seen a return to the classic zones and, above all, to native grape varieties, demonstrating a new potential for high quality coupled with a distinctive personality in these new wines.**

Undoubtedly, also because the market, at the present moment, is looking for wines with a strong link to their territory of origin, obviously an impossible goal without much hard work with the grape varieties which have always characterized the various regions of Italy. And also because Italian grapes have, up until now, given truly expressive wines only in Italy, the attempts to transplant the country's major varieties to other parts of the world have, though we cannot speak of failures, not yet given anything particularly important, interesting, or of a notable quality level. And those who plant and cultivate the usual "international" grapes find themselves facing competition – often ferocious and at prices which impossible and unthinkable for an industrialized country with its costs of production – from the entire world. An uphill struggle from the commercial point of view. I must say, however, that in one of the most recent projects, one situated in the eastern part of the province of Agrigento, I am rather happy with the Syrah we have managed to produce. Our principal efforts, however, are clearly dedicated to Nero d'Avola and Grillo, which are, and must necessarily be, the top of the line wines of the estate. When a native grape variety finds an ideal habitat for its cultivation and when a careful and scrupulous viticulture is practiced, you succeed in producing wines which can only be the maximum expression of a territory. I was not surprised by the potential I found in the province of Agrigento, but I must confess that the wines produced from Grillo – those, yes – gave me unexpected and highly convincing results, a discovery which was a true pleasure

### **What surprised you in this case?**

I am rather certain that it was not only I but a good many colleagues as well who remained, if not speechless, highly satisfied by these new wines because, up until a short time ago, the best known Sicilian white wines were made either from Inzolia or Catarratto, while Grillo was cultivated mainly in the province of Trapani but intended almost exclusively for the production of Marsala. There was very little bottled Grillo to try, it was not a wine which the various producers gave a great importance to and, without valid examples produced on the island, clear conclusions about the character of the grape and the places where it could give its best results were quite difficult to come to. But, I shall repeat, planted in the right spots, cultivated, fermented, and aged properly, this is a variety which can give wines of real elegance and with much body and substance as well, bottles with a range of ample and complex aromas in addition. We are just at the beginning here, but if the variety, at the moment, is being increasingly and widely planted, there obviously must be a reason.

### **Conclusions about the results achieved thus far with this new project?**

Well, a series of factors are always involved when you obtain certain results in our field. As far as this winery, **Baglio di Cristo di Campobello**, is concerned, we are dealing with a warm area but one with a certain altitude, therefore positive temperature swings from day to night, soils which are quite suitable for a quality viticulture (calcareous and chalky, undoubtedly of real importance for a white grape such as Grillo), and the close by Mediterranean Sea and the breezes which constantly blow through the vineyards. With these objective advantages, it is up to us to work as well as possible in the vineyard and cellar to best take advantage of what nature has given us.

### **Along with other colleagues with an important reputation, you have been working for a few years on Mount Etna. Even if it is a bit early, what are your thoughts about the wines and grapes which are worked in the zone?**

I am more and more convinced that Etna is an island within the island, a place which is entirely different from the rest of Sicily. This we know as well from the local viticultural history: the wines produced on this mountain were regularly bottled in a period when this was an unusual phenomenon and there were, as well, houses with a certain continuity with the past, equally unusual in Sicily with the exception of producers of aperitifs, dessert wines, and fortified wines, a separate reality both as a category and geographically as well. The soil, formed as it was by a series of volcanic eruptions, is obviously quite different from the rest of Sicily, not to speak of other parts of Italy and the rest of the world as well. And a large part of Etna's most prestigious red wines are produced on north-facing slopes, in vineyards and parcels which reach altitudes as high as 2300, 2600, or even 2900 feet above sea level. Different is the least we can say!

### **Up until now, there have been only a few vintages produced, what have you learned about the fermentation and aging of these grapes?**

I should use the singular in this case, until now I have only worked with Nerello Mascalese, which I consider the great grape variety of the zone, a choice the house and I shared, and accordingly I would prefer to avoid judgments about the other varieties cultivated in the Etna vineyards. I came to the area without the slightest experience either with the zone or with the grape, and so I will have to express my conclusions on the basis of these first few vintages, but I saw right off the bat that this is anything but a simple grape, that ripeness levels must be pushed as far as possible before picking in order to achieve successful wines, Fortunately, the risks of over-ripeness are small in an area like this given the coolness of the climate at these altitudes in mid-October when Nerello Mascalese ripens. I also saw that the contact with the skins during fermentation is of critical importance, the risk of rough tannins is constantly lurking. The principal qualities of the wine I am trying to make on Etna are ample and complex aromas and an elegant texture from the firm but polished tannins of the variety. Forceful extraction techniques could compromise our efforts to obtain these qualities, therefore the maximum attention is essential. I might point out that those who have a mental image of Sicilian red wine as something which is warm, richly alcoholic, and deep in color will certainly not choose a red wine from Etna, which is distinguished by a noble austerity which characterizes many of the world's great wines. But these are wines for connoisseurs, not for those looking for a wine with a powerful impact, wines which are looking to immediately impress.

### **A few overall conclusions?**

Nothing at the moment, but given the progress of the last couple of decades, I think that we can be quite proud of the results achieved and the objectives which have already been reached.

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