

TWO VIEWS OF ITALY

The talented Cotarella brothers have helped shape Italy's wines. Michèle Shah hears their philosophies.



Renzo and Ricardo Cotarella. The two brothers have helped shape Italy's wine fortunes.

Ranking among Italy's top winemakers, brothers Riccardo and Renzo Cotarella have contributed to globally enhancing the quality and branding the diversity of Italian wine.

Born in the small rural village of Monterubiaglio, in the province of Terni, the brothers were greatly influenced by their father, who owned 20 ha of vineyards in Orvieto Classico, and who produced and sold wine in bulk to larger wineries, including Marchesi Antinori.

Marchesi Antinori has played a key role in the careers of the brothers, particularly that of Renzo Cotarella. After he graduated in industrial chemistry and agronomy, Renzo worked as director of the Consorzio of Orvieto, where he met Piero Antinori. Then, 38 years later, Renzo joined the Antinori estate some 38 years ago as winemaker, before steadily climbing his way to production manager and then managing director of one of Italy's most acclaimed Italian family wineries.

Renzo's older brother Riccardo graduated from the prestigious School of Oenology in Conegliano and set up his own consultancy

company. In 1979, the brothers established their own family winery, Falesco, situated in Montefiascone in Lazio, central Italy. Today it's a highly acclaimed estate run by the new generation - their three daughters and respective sons-in-law.

As president of the national and international association of Italy's Oenologists and professor of the department of oenology at Tuscia University in Viterbo, Riccardo Cotarella is considered one of Italy's most influential winemakers. Today he heads the successful company Wine Research Team, a team of 10 young technicians, researchers, and winemakers that include two sons-in-law, and a portfolio of over 80 Italian estates plus a handful of French, Israeli, Japanese, and US wineries.

A strong family tie has kept the brothers united, sharing values, the same profession, and even the same house in Umbria where their families live, yet their careers have been very different. In their separate business ventures both brothers have a keen sense of where Italian wines stand today, their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their future potential.

Italy's tangled bureaucracy

Both brothers admit there are many issues that hold Italy back, not least of which is its excessive bureaucracy. Its lack of effective promotion also seems to bring strong criticism from the international trade, who see the many regional consortiums as having little marketing knowledge. "The long and short is that Italy has no generic body such as Wines of Spain or Sopexa to promote Italian wine in the international market place," says Walter Speller, the Italian wine expert for JancisRobinson.com, who criticizes Italy's consortiums for generally favouring the interests of big players. "The sheer fact alone that the world's most important wine producer has no generic body to push its marketing interest in a continuous manner automatically makes it lose out."

This is not a simple matter, as Renzo explains, as the main function of Italy's consortiums is to ensure that the laws of production are applied. Only recently with EU funding have consortiums been endowed with the task of promotion, and they have had to develop skills without the necessary know-how. "Our problem is that we started late in generic promotion and we have a long way to catch up," says Renzo. "It is the smaller players in a consortium who outnumber the bigger ones that have more say, and this is why it is so difficult to find unanimous agreement that is advantageous to all players - larger ones with commercial interests and small niche producers - to the detriment of an efficient generic promotion."

Increasingly, both small and large estates resort to promoting themselves individually, which is done less and less though appellation branding but by promoting their brand together with their territory, such as 'Antinori in Chianti Classico', a promotion that highlights the terroir but also promotes the appellation brand. A stronger cohesion among producers is particularly encouraged by Riccardo and his Wine Research Team.

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Riccardo's company philosophy is to bring together wineries and offer consultancy through the varied experiences they have acquired. The team offer advice on viticulture, winemaking, labelling, closures, marketing, and all the commercial aspects of pricing and selling, as well as the optimum time to release the wines on the market. He urges his clients to travel and interact with winemakers in different regions and countries, organising tastings at international wine fairs for the trade and press, selecting a range of wineries from his portfolio that represent 'all Italy'. "This is a way of showing the trade the different facades of Italy, from small 'artisanal' wineries to the larger more commercial ones that are able to produce volume. Putting together a mix of diverse realities is a strength, and vital in marketing and supporting smaller wineries."

For example, Riccardo's latest promotional project - initiated by Antonio Donato, the managing director of Tenute del Cerro, which has a range of 52 hotels and restaurants across Italy - involves selecting a range of wines from wineries in the different territories which Riccardo consults to and for Tenute Del Cerro to list in their properties.

Italy evolves

At the start of his career, Riccardo made the choice to consult to regions that had no fame and that needed building up, such as the more southern regions of Italy where, back in the '70s, quality was not the focus of production. He achieved results by studying the regions and by experimenting and seeking out better areas and better vineyard management suited to the grape varieties of that region, which could improve the quality of the grapes.

"Today, Italy's viticulture is represented by 80% of new areas that have come to light only in the last 10 years with many more to be discovered," says Riccardo. "Many wineries that I follow come from areas that were not considered suitable for quality winemaking. It

was a misconception because the producers at that time were more interested in volume rather than quality."

According to Riccardo, it is difficult to get smaller wineries in Italy to change philosophically. One of the most common errors Riccardo finds is a lack of patience to achieve and attain success without allowing for the necessary time to develop a well-planned strategy, with the other being the reluctance to change their way of thinking. "Small producers often make the wrong commercial decisions which can be expensive to set right," says

Riccardo. "It takes time to convince them, as they are often set in traditional ways which are outdated and faulty, reluctant to adapt to new scientific and technological development."

However, in his role as president of the national and international association of Italy's oenologists,

Riccardo has seen that Italy has made leaps and bounds in the last 10 years, even if Italy can occasionally be 'mediaeval' in its winemaking compared to France. Riccardo

acknowledges that while tradition is important, winemaking needs to be integrated with technology and scientific research, which in his opinion are important for improving the quality of wine. "I have great respect for organic, biodynamic, or 'natural' winemaking, but this is only accomplished through scientific study. The more knowledge one attains on viticulture and oenology, the more one can actually be sustainable," says Riccardo.

The pinnacle

Renzo works with the very best that the wine world can produce, as he heads the entire operation of Marchesi Antinori's production, making decisions that are closely discussed with both Piero Antinori and his daughter Albiera, who now runs the company. According to Renzo, it is fundamental for the continuity of a family business that the new generations be fully aware of the decisions taken in production. Focus on quality

production is the key to success and to the continuity from generation to generation, while remaining true to family values.

"Future generations must have a clear perception of the identity of their wines. That is what I mean by 'value' and which give the necessary continuity to production without betraying its origins," says Renzo. "Changes are inevitable as one acquires a better knowledge of how to produce quality wines. Styles we privileged some 20 years ago evolve, just as one's palate changes and evolves."

Renzo is fully aware that to stand out and be a leader in the world of wine today is to know one's potential and limitations. Antinori's focus on individual estates in premium areas of production throughout Italy as well as estates outside Italy such as in Hungary and the US is, as he puts it, an 'inefficient' model of business, but has proved to be an 'effective' one, offering a variety of premium products through a single company.

"Antinori over the years has consciously renewed its style of wines and today has reached its optimum dimension," explains Renzo. That is, it has reached the size and volume that gives it scale, but also allows it to retain its artisanal philosophy, and produce "wines with a soul".

According to both brothers, there is an enormous lack of knowledge on the subject of wine production coming from the trade and press. "It is fine to produce wines that have small defects - it is a question of taste - but most consumers want a reliable, healthy product," says Riccardo.

Overall, however, Renzo says that Italy today is experiencing a renaissance in winemaking. "We started some forty years ago in the '70s with Giacomo Tachis," says Renzo. "Following in his footsteps we formed a second generation of winemakers. This new generation of winemakers has a greater advantage over us - that of the internet where all information is at your fingertips. All we had were a few textbooks on Burgundy and Bordeaux."

Riccardo's advice for future growth and success is to fine-tune this knowledge and integrate it with the right amount of technology and scientific research. He sees Italy, at its best, as a world leader in technology and winemaking with a wealth of talented winemakers. The time is ripe to showcase this diversity to the world. ■



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