

ITALY'S NATURAL PRODUCERS

Italy has some of the most important producers of natural wine.
Michèle Shah looks at the structure they work within.

The first official natural wine association established in Italy was ViniVeri. Although active since 1994, it was formally founded in 2003 by four members: Angiolino Maule from La Biancara, Gambarella; Stanko Radikon of Radikon, Friuli-Venezia Giulia; Fabrizio Niccolaini from Massa Vecchia, Maremma; and Giampiero Bea from Paolo Bea in Montefalco. Angiolino Maule branched out in 2006 to form his own natural wine association, VinNatur. Today, ViniVeri has 75 members and VinNatur has 170, with a third each coming from other European countries. Together they form the backbone of Italy's natural winemaking movement.

According to Maule, the fundamental difference is that VinNatur is the only association to carry out research, including monitoring the biodiversity of members' vineyards. Another project - Procedure guidelines for producing VinNatur wine - started in 2017 has been implemented through monitoring a plan of agreements with national certification bodies such as the CCPB. This year, 20 associate wineries have been selected by VinNatur to be monitored to ensure they meet the standards. "Good viticulture and oenology cannot exist without the scientific support that will allow us to produce healthy, quality wines," says Maule.

VinNatur's membership is growing by around 10% each year, with 28 new members in 2016. "VinNatur is the only association that systematically analyses member's wines for levels of sulphur," says Franco Giacosa, former chief winemaker of Zonin1821, who explains that sulphur to 50 mg per litre is allowed, but there must be no herbicides or pesticides present. "Systematic tests are carried out by one of Verona's most important labs, and if the slightest trace is detected the producer is expelled from the association."

The growing popularity of natural wines and the misuse of the term for purely commercial reasons worries Giampiero Bea, president of ViniVeri. "It is positive that there



Angiolino Maule, founder, VinNatur

is a definite increase in awareness of natural wines, and the interest in joining these associations is high," he says. "However, today the problem is defining what 'natural' wine is." He says that ViniVeri is rigorous with new member applications, taking only five to six new members a year. Compliance with environmental guidelines are important, as is the winemaker's philosophy. "And, of course, the organoleptic quality of the wine must be appealing."

Avid audience

Both VinNatur and ViniVeri organise an annual showcasing. VinNatur's Villa Favorita takes place near Verona around the same time as Vinitaly, attracting some 4,500 visitors. Vini Secondo Natura, ViniVeri's annual event, which also runs near Verona at the same time as Vinitaly, was attended this year by some 3,000 visitors. "Certainly associations like ours have increased interest both in Italy and abroad, otherwise we could not justify the continued requests from wineries - especially Italian ones - to become affiliated to VinNatur," says Maule. "We are promoting abroad, for the moment focusing only on Europe - Zurich, Oslo, and Copenhagen - with smaller events aimed at attracting importers and journalists."

Marius Søybye, founder of Nebbiolo Wines in Oslo, says that both associations have a

great impact on the Norwegian importers. Søybye sources a number of natural wines from Italy. His benchmark of Italian natural producers includes Frank Cornelissen, who was associated with VinNatur until 2016, and Olek Bondonio, also associated with VinNatur. Søybye says that natural wine in Norway has been a small niche for many years. "I'm absolutely sure that 2017 will be a breakthrough for natural wines in Norway, as I experience both a growing demand from a younger generation of 20- to 35-year-old consumers asking for bio-certified and natural wines." He says he also fields requests from Vinmonopolet, the state monopoly, who are eager to cater to the latest trends.

Natural wines are, not surprisingly, relatively expensive, given their restrictive production rules and low yields. This, coupled with a lack of category awareness, can make them a tough sell. "The market for natural wine in Canada is certainly increasing, but it has not yet hit the mainstream consciousness," says Mark Jacoby, president and founder of Toronto-based importer Context Wines. He says that insipid Pinot Grigios for C\$9.00 (\$6.67) or generic C\$20.00 Chianti or Californian Cabernet Sauvignon still outsell even the best natural wines by a large margin. However, "as a whole, Italian natural wine is getting much better, and some of the benchmark natural wineries are Italian," says Jacoby. According to Jacoby, it's possible to find several natural wines on the monopoly store shelves in Quebec. In Ontario, however, the LCBO seems less interested. Jacoby suggests, however, that the increasing interest in organic wines could result in a foray into natural wine.

As natural wines gain interest in Poland, sommelier Kuba Janicki, responsible for the wine programme at Karakter, a Kraków bistro, focuses on rare varieties and small producers. "The Italian natural wine scene is booming," he says, adding that 70% of his wine list is natural wines with a third coming from Italy. "We are constantly looking to add more." ■

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