



Three wise men

No one has a better grasp of Italy's current wine scene than the professional winemakers who work the length and breadth of the country. For an insider's view, Carla Capalbo spoke to three of the best, also asking each to pick one wine they were particularly proud of

Stefano Ferrante

STEFANO FERRANTE WAS just 38 in 2011 when he was promoted by Gianni Zonin, president of Italy's largest private wine group, to technical director of the company, overseeing an annual output of nearly 60 million bottles.

A remarkable achievement for one so young, yet Ferrante still considers himself an 'accidental' winemaker. 'I'm from Milan – a city boy with no links to wine or the countryside,' he says. 'The only person in my family who even drank was my grandfather.' He studied classics and went to agricultural college with an idea of getting into fruit production. 'In those days agronomy was considered an 'alternative' subject and attracted kids with hippy tendencies. We'd eat rustic salami with Lambrusco. That's how I fell in love with wine.'

A chance encounter brought him into a circle of wine tasters and he was hooked. For his university thesis he spent three years in Tuscany with Professor Attilio Scienza, conducting zoning research at Bolgheri. Then he lucked into helping to harvest at Ornellaia.

'The Maremma was jumping in those years, and I stayed on at Ornellaia as winemaker Andrea Giovannini's assistant. I was beginning to be drawn to the oenological side of wine.' He befriended Daniel Schuster, the then consultant at Ornellaia, and followed him to New Zealand for six months.

Back in Italy, Ferrante worked in Basilicata with Aglianico and in Chianti Classico for American Kendall Jackson with French winemaker, Pierre Seillan. 'Seillan is very creative and taught me a lot about paying careful attention to detail in the vineyards and cellar,' he says.

But Ferrante wanted something rooted more in Italian culture. When Gianni Zonin proposed he become the director of a start-up estate in the

Maremma in 2003, Ferrante didn't hesitate. 'There was nothing there, no cellar, and 30 hectares of just-planted vines without trellises.' Over eight years, Ferrante oversaw the creation of Tenuta Rocca di Montemassi, one of 10 independent estates in the Zonin portfolio.

Does Zonin always pick young people for high-level jobs? 'The Zonin family love the energy and exuberance the young bring to a project, but it's a highly structured group and I was supported by their technical team,' Ferrante says.

Now at the helm of that team, Ferrante has a lot on his plate. The Zonin group is run by the family (Domenico Zonin recently replaced his father as CEO) and divided into two distinct parts: Casa Vinicola Zonin, at Gambellara in the Veneto, which makes around 45 million bottles; and the nine farm estates, from Friuli to Sicily, with one in the US.

'At Gambellara we act primarily like négociants, selecting and buying wines throughout Italy before blending and bottling them under Zonin's labels – including 16 million bottles of Prosecco. Ten years ago we sold 80% in Italy; now it's 80% abroad. The single estates use only home-grown grapes to express the diversities of their areas.' These include Piedmont's Asti, Chianti Classico and Puglia.

◀ 'Currently we work with 58 varieties on 2,000

Ferrante's choice

Il Solatio, Chianti Classico Gran Selezione, from Castello d'Albola, Tuscany

2010: £38-£40 Zonin UK

'Made from a single vineyard of Sangiovese at 600m in one of Chianti Classico's coolest areas, on a steeply sloped, rocky terrain surrounded by woods. It shows the grape's elegant side with lively acidity and depth, and will come of age after years of cellaring.'



'I believe in constantly experimenting, so each year we dedicate 10% of our production to different vinification methods'

Zonin-owned hectares throughout Italy,' he says. 'We follow company guidelines but each estate's resident oenologist also has some freedom. Zonin's external consultant is Denis Dubourdieu from Bordeaux. It's an honour to collaborate with him. He's helped Zonin find its style and raised the bar.'

'For the high-volume wines, we're after a drinkable, affordable, reliable style to accompany our daily lives, whereas the individual estates sit at the pyramid's pinnacle, producing more personal wines that reflect their origins. We're interested in showcasing their grape varieties and terroir, not in making overly forceful or opulent wines.'

Looking south

Which region does Ferrante feel is the most up-and-coming? 'Puglia has the most potential at the moment. Several big wine companies like ours have been investing heavily in its unique varieties – Negroamaro, Primitivo and Malvasia – and giving them the attention that had been lacking before,' he says. 'They're perfect for today's consumers: wines that are fruit-driven, richly coloured and naturally somewhat sweet, but without heavy tannins. That's

what the northern markets are after because they're perfect to drink outside of meal times.

'Beyond Puglia, I think Sicily has much more to give through its native grapes. It's moving away from being Italy's Australia, where it was being used to produce heavy wines from international varieties, to reclaiming its nobility. After all, this was one of the mythical areas of ancient Rome and Magna Grecia. Now, with a modern take on Grillo, Inzolia, Nero d'Avola and the other local varieties, we're seeing wines being made with elegance and finesse, which is a new way of looking at them.'

'The other grape variety I think still has a lot to give is Sangiovese, in Tuscany and beyond. Sangiovese is a symbol of *Italianità* (Italianness), but I feel that we've not yet seen its best.'

'I believe in constantly experimenting with new techniques, and so each year we dedicate 10% of our production to different vinification methods,' Ferrante explains. 'It keeps things interesting and stops us getting stuck. For a wine tourist like me, to make so many diverse wines in so many parts of Italy is a unique and exciting opportunity – even if it does mean spending my life in my car.' ➤

Above: Stefano Ferrante loves the elegance, depth and longevity the fruit from Castello d'Albola's steep vineyards gives to Il Solatio