

Zerbina - old-school precision viticulture

18 Oct 2010 by Walter Speller

On my arrival at the Fattoria Zerbina in Romagna, the first thing Cristina Geminiani showed me was a pair of maps of one of her vineyards, the Vigna Anfiteatro. This in itself is not unusual, and perhaps even less so when one realises that Geminiani's husband is the indefatigable [Alessandro Magnetti](#), the man who is so busy putting Italy's finest vineyards on the map. What is surprising is the fact that each single vine is depicted as a coloured dot. On the first map, there are dots in five varying colours of green indicating the 'vegetation details', from deep green for vigorous all the way down to pale green for 'very weak or stressed' and 'minimal production'. The second, correlating map shows the individual harvest date of each vine during the 2003 vintage, with yellow dots indicating vines harvested on 25 Aug, the blue ones on 20 Sep and the red ones on 28 Sep.

Does this mean she knows each single vine? 'Yes', says Geminiani. 'Between each post there are 10 vines planted, and all the posts are numbered'. How is that for precision viticulture? And all this is without any help of satellites, a method often preferred in the New World. This knowledge has literally been gathered by observing every individual vine for over 30 years of running Fattoria Zerbina, on some 27 hectares in total.

Fattoria Zerbina, near Faenza in Romagna, the south-eastern part of what is Emilia Romagna, hemmed in by the Adriatic coast to the east, and the Appenines to the west, was purchased as a farm by Vincenzo Geminiani in 1966. He decided to devote the farm to vineyards, and started estate bottling his wines at a time when most producers would sell their wines in bulk. The true turning point, from a quality point of view, came when his granddaughter Cristina, took over the estate in 1987 and decided to devote all her energy to upgrading the reputation of both Sangiovese di Romagna and the white Albana di Romagna. While the former had a hope of getting some kind of quality recognition on the international market, due to wines such as Brunello, the latter certainly couldn't. Although Albana di Romagna was Italy's first DOCG, the grape itself has never been widely celebrated. This, however, did not deter Geminiani.

Although she has a degree in agronomy, Geminiani told me that at first she didn't know anything about winemaking, something she compensated for by taking post-doctorate courses under Dubourdieu in Bordeaux. In addition to her oenology training, her time in Bordeaux made it abundantly clear that she needed high-density vineyards planted with low-vigour clones. And when she talks about high density, she means high density: some 10,000 plants per ha.

From the beginning, her grandfather had been advised by Remigio Bordini, an agronomist with an intimate knowledge of Sangiovese di Romagna. In 1989, two years after she had taken over the estate, and had come to the conclusion that she needed to replant with better plant material, she went into the vineyard with him, and it was there that he suggested she should plant any new vines *ad alberello*, or bushvines, if she wanted to produce something great. It has sometimes seemed of late that the more esoteric-minded of the new generation of Italian wine producers

have fallen under the spell of *alberello* but in this case Bordini referred to the traditional planting method of Sangiovese in the comune of Predappio. This village is considered the cradle of a specific Romagna clone and as such plays a crucial role in the rise of Sangiovese di Romagna's reputation. Bordini knew of an old vineyard planted with a density of 20,000 plants per ha *ad alberello* on stakes, similar to the preferred training method of the northern Rhône, and that still existed. The Sangiovese planted here is Sangiovese Grosso, but has elliptical, small berries instead of larger round ones. Geminiani decided to plant a range of different subvarieties: Sangiovese Peccioli, M42 Montalcino, F9, and several from Romagna, RL Bosche (with the elliptical berries), R24 and a massal selection from Fattoria Zerbina's own old vines. It appeared that the Romagna clones performed better, whereas the Sangiovese clones from Tuscany seem to do best in very dry years (of which there have been more and more recently).

Incidentally, it was Bordini who isolated the RL Bosche clone, which has also been disseminated in Tuscany because of his consultancies there. This was the clone that gave the best results in the Chianti 2000 project, a long-term investigation into high-quality Sangiovese clones started by the consortium of Chianti Classico at the beginning of the 1980s.

The idea of mapping the vines and recording their growing pattern was born after several vintages when Geminiani started to notice differences in vigour and growth in the vineyard. The actual mapping of the vigour is based on the different soil structure, and by micro-vinifying the separate pickings. The information obtained, in combination with soil analysis and altitude, helped her to identify each of the 22 individual vineyard plots of the estate. For example, the lower-lying vineyards have richer, clay-based soils, and it is here that the white Albana is planted. On the higher, hillier sites the soil has a higher limestone content, ideal for Sangiovese, resulting in smaller plants, with reduced vigour and smaller but thicker-skinned berries, which allow for long maceration. In plots where there is a high content of blue clay, which creates a microclimate too cool for Sangiovese to ripen, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and the indigenous Ancellotta are planted. The last variety, Geminiani calls her 'Petit Verdot'. It is grown on an old plot of vines giving very little yield of very small berries with lots of polyphenols and high acidity. In the past, Ancellotta was mainly used to 'correct' Sangiovese's colour. She always tastes the Ancellotta blind to judge whether it would add something to the blend or not. The vineyard mapping is complemented by photographs taken each vintage of the bunches of each plot, as well as of each rootstock type, to create a 'photographic clone archive'. This is done in order to enable - over time - a visual comparison between the bunches of the same zone and same clone in different vintages or of the same clone in different plots.

Geminiani told me that she first became aware of climate change in 1997 when sugar levels started systematically to escalate. Initially her answer was to harvest slightly earlier, and vinify all top plots in single barrels in 225-hl or 500-hl old French oak (three to four years old), but since then harvest dates have focused more and more on each individual vine. This has entailed several separate passages through the vineyard. She uses this Sauternes-like technique for the white Albana, from which she produces Scaccomatto, an impressive noble-rot wine style rarely seen in Italy, similar to Sauternes.

While the estate's top wine is the 100% Sangiovese di Romagna Superiore Riserva Pietramorra, the estate's second top wine is Marziano, a blend of Sangiovese (60-80%), Cabernet Sauvignon (10-20%), Syrah (up to 15%) and Ancellotta (up to 3%). This wine was created in the wake of similar experiments in Tuscany, and under the guidance of Vittorio Fiore, the estate's consultant at that time. Although Geminiani states that her vision was and is solely on the 100% Sangiovese Pietramora, it is understandable that Marziano became instrumental in the estate's rise to fame. Sangiovese di Romagna is still little known as a high-quality wine, and any estate run with such dedication as Zerbina needed a signpost pointing out its quality. Until a couple of years ago, an international audience of wine lovers was perhaps unwilling or too insecure to discover the greatness of Sangiovese, while Cabernet Sauvignon almost always managed to attract attention. Pietramorra is an extremely serious and complex wine, however, produced only in the very best years and Geminiani can look back on more than 16 vintages which never fail to prove her point in vertical tastings.

She is a tireless promoter of Sangiovese di Romagna in her role as one of the founding members of the [Convito di Romagna](#). The Convito's members are united in their aim of creating a Sangiovese which reflects the Romagnan terroir as distinct from Tuscany, Sangiovese's other and better-known stronghold. It is easy to see that someone of Geminiani's conviction and in-depth knowledge of the Romagnan varieties and the different terroirs is a driving force behind the initiative to put Romagna on the map. At the end of my visit she said she didn't want to be pretentious, but that one needs to accept a challenge, be willing to compare one's wines with the international competition, be open to criticism and do lots of tastings. Only in this way can you form an idea in your head of how you want to make a great wine. [I can certainly vouch for how open-minded and widely experienced a taster Cristina is - JR.]

See Walter's [tasting notes](#) on the Zerbina wines.

Tags: Italy, Romagna, Sangiovese