

From coffee to wine

Riccardo Illy tells Carla Capalbo why Brunello di Montalcino is the perfect addition to the other gourmet holdings in his family's global coffee empire

IN RECENT YEARS a diminutive coffee cup with a red and white logo has become an iconic symbol of what the Italians like to call 'il made in Italy'. Illy's *tazzina da caffè* is a curvy affair that was created in 1990 by the architect Matteo Thun. Its small, circular handle is designed to steady the pinched tips of thumb and forefinger for the few seconds it takes to down the coffee. That's part of the ritual: the searingly hot espresso is usually consumed in two or three short sips without the cup being returned to its saucer.

In Italy, the art of making coffee is not primarily domestic. Most Italians pop into their local bar several times a day to get their fix: a cappuccino for breakfast, a caffè mid-morning and after lunch, and another cup in the afternoon. Italian bars are defined by the coffee they sell in much the way that Britain's pubs are linked to single breweries. Illy supplies its Arabica coffee blends and know-how to 100,000 of the world's top bars, restaurants and hotels. At its 'Coffee University', it runs courses for baristas. Every day, more than six million cups of Illy coffee are drunk in 140 countries. Indeed, 59% of the company's business is now overseas.

So what makes Illy tick? Like everything Italian, *la famiglia*. 'My grandfather Francesco set up the business in 1933 selling coffee and chocolate,' says Riccardo Illy, 58, who, with his brothers, runs Gruppo Illy. 'My family comes from Trieste, in northeastern Italy, and in the 1930s the affluent city was a strategic port and gateway between the former Austro-Hungarian empire and Italy. It was known for its café society.' By the 1970s, Riccardo Illy and his siblings had taken over the business from their father, Ernesto.

The Tuscan connection

It was the Illy espresso cups that were a key piece in the jigsaw that led to the Tuscan wine investment. 'My brother Francesco knew Montalcino through his friendship with Sandro Chia, the artist who produces Brunello at the Castello Romitorio,' says Riccardo. (Chia was the first painter to create a series of limited-edition decorated coffee cups for what is now the Illy Collection, and the colourful cups have since been decorated by more than 70 international artists, including Daniel Buren, Pedro Almodóvar, Louise Bourgeois and Marina Abramovic.)

When, in 2006, the prestigious 90ha (hectare) Mastrojanni wine estate came up for sale,



'[Wine] is a return to our grandfather's farming roots. But it's also a way to extend our portfolio: wine makes more money than coffee' Riccardo Illy (above)

Photographs: Carla Capalbo



‘We started to upgrade the Mastrojanni cellars and vineyards without losing the character of Sangiovese in that unique terroir’ **Riccardo Illy**

Francesco was quick to act. His own house in Montalcino was next door to Mastrojanni at Castelnuovo dell’Abate and he was friends with Andrea Machetti who had effectively been making Mastrojanni’s wines since 1993. ‘Whenever we decide to buy a company, we look for quality raw materials and products, but also for the people who have created them,’ says Riccardo. ‘We knew we could work with Machetti, and started a project to upgrade the winery cellars and vineyards without losing the character of Sangiovese in that unique terroir.

‘For our family, it’s a return to our grandfather’s peasant farming roots. But it’s also a constructive way to extend our portfolio: worldwide, wine makes more money than coffee or tea. We were looking for a universal product with big potential in the expanding global markets. In Italy that meant going to one of only two places whose history was tied to a unique place: Piedmont for Barolo or Tuscany for Brunello.’

The investments are beginning to pay off, as the 2008 vintage – the first made with Illy – is now showing. The Mastrojanni Brunello is elegant, balanced and long, with the lively fruit yet slight austerity that the best Sangiovese has in its youth.

Innovation in the genes

The Illys have long been known for their commitment to innovation. As a scientist, Riccardo’s grandfather applied his imagination to coffee production in the 1930s: he designed the Illetta machine, a precursor of today’s professional espresso makers, and found new ways to pressure-pack coffee. The current generation is no less exigent or creative. In 1974 a revolutionary paper pod was made that packed a monodose of pre-tamped ground coffee for use in espresso machines: the perfect-every-time single shot was born.

Above: when the 90ha Mastrojanni wine estate in Montalcino came up for sale, the Illys were quick to act; it was a plus that one of the brothers lived next door

Below: the 2008 was the first to be made with Illy



An expert in modern business strategy, Riccardo gave a conference lecture in 2011 on stakeholder companies in which employees, suppliers and the local community are the focus of expansion and environmental sustainability. In Illy’s case, that goes well beyond Europe to the continents where they source their raw materials: coffee, tea and cocoa. ‘Unless our suppliers are happy to work with us, they’ll move on,’ he says. ‘We like to forge long-term relationships with our supply chains and the communities they operate in.’

Riccardo has been as good as his word. In 1993 he took what he describes as a ‘family decision’ to run for mayor of Trieste, and after eight years in the town hall he spent five more as president of the large and important Friuli Venezia-Giulia region, and several years as an independent left-wing member of the Italian parliament.

Despite his family’s impressive business holdings, Riccardo began his working life as a modest porter at the city’s docks before becoming a ski and sailing instructor. Now 58, he comes across as a reserved but clear-minded, determined man unwilling to compromise in the search for perfection. ‘I believe there’s no limit to qualitative improvement,’ he says.

The Illys have expanded from coffee to other gourmet products, applying that concept to them all while retaining each product’s own brand identity. Gruppo Illy now includes Dammann Frères, a traditional French tea company; Agrimontana, a Piedmont company making candied fruit and jam; Domori, a small but leading beans-to-bars chocolate producer near Turin; and, of course, Mastrojanni, one of the top Brunello di Montalcino producers. **D**

Carla Capalbo’s latest book Collio: Fine Wines and Foods from Italy’s North-East, won the André Simon award for Best Wine Book