



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

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what is essential
is invisible to the eye

(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry)



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PERSONALITIES

Emiliano Falsini

SINCE 2000 EMILIANO Falsini has belonged to one of Italy's most influential oenology groups, Gruppo Matura, which was founded in 1997 by fellow Tuscans, Attilio Pagli and Alberto Antonini.

'In Matura, we all work independently with our own clients but share information and sales opportunities. We're committed to making wine from lesser-known grape varieties whenever possible to help maintain Italy's extraordinary wealth of viticultural biodiversity,' he says. Falsini studied oenology in Florence and did a stint in California before setting up on his own. 'I worked for La Famiglia di Robert Mondavi at Oakville, where they grow several Italian varieties including Sangiovese, Barbera and Nebbiolo,' he says.

Now 41, he's made his name among Italian wine *passionati* (wine lovers) for championing what the Italians call *vignaioli* (vignerons in French): independent producers whose wines reflect the personalities of their grapes and terroirs.

Whether from the slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily, the hills of Montefalco in Umbria, or Barolo in Piedmont, Falsini's wines express the depth and character of unique grapes made in unique places.

'I'm crazy about Italy: it's never boring,' he says enthusiastically. 'It's a mosaic of situations and has still got so much to say and give, especially from its indigenous varieties which have been grown on landscapes that range from plateaus to volcanoes, seashores to high mountains.'

Relishing the challenge

'I work with over 20 different grape types and, if I had to explain the link between them, it would be that these native varieties are much trickier to grow than Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah,' Falsini says. 'Why do you think people gave up on them 20 years ago?'

'You can't get away with planting Sangiovese in the bottom of a valley – it will never ripen. These grapes have a symbiotic relationship with their traditional growing areas. That may be due to selections made over time, but it means they remain place-specific.'

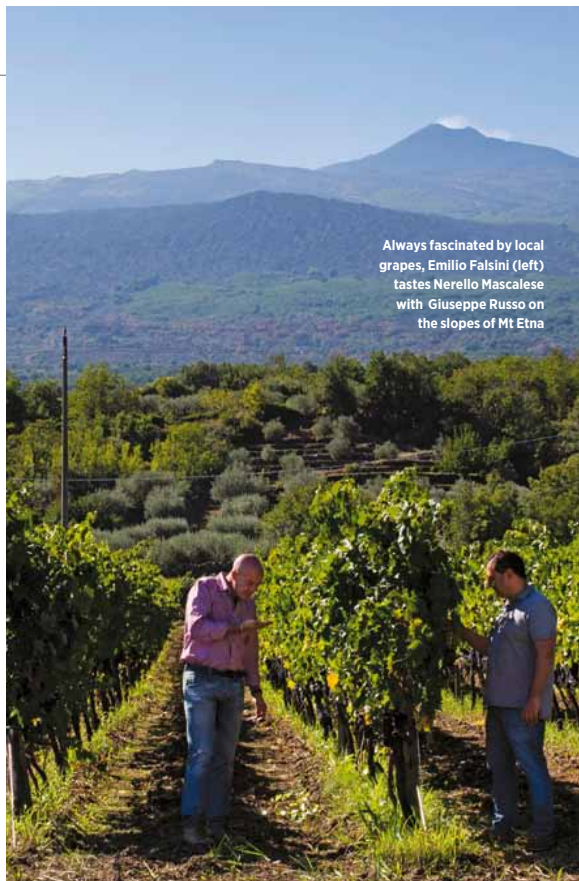
How does he see the international market for Italian wines? 'I think the world wants Italy, in every



Falsini's choice

San Lorenzo, Passopisciaro, Etna Rosso, Sicily, produced by Girolamo Russo
N/A UK www.girolamorosso.it

'This, for me, is the essence of a wine: it expresses the depth, balance and minerality of 90-year-old Nerello Mascalese vines growing at 700m, on the northern side of Mt Etna. I've worked with its producer, Giuseppe Russo, from the start. This was his first single-vineyard wine. Naturally grown, the grapes are picked very late, when they're perfectly mature. It has helped Passopisciaro become known internationally as the foremost Etna production area.'



Always fascinated by local grapes, Emilio Falsini (left) tastes Nerello Mascalese with Giuseppe Russo on the slopes of Mt Etna

'Native varieties are appreciated by critics and specialised consumers, but we need to educate the wider market'

way. It's a country with so much food, culture and beauty – and we haven't managed to ruin it all, yet,' he laughs. 'In the international market, our native varieties are appreciated by critics and specialised consumers, but we need to educate the wider market about them. The British, Americans and Chinese know mainly about Merlot, Cabernet and perhaps Malbec, so if you talk to them about Sangiovese it's already a stretch, not to mention other, less well-known varieties, like Sagrantino, Zibbibo, or Nocera.'

Falsini is fascinated by the different ways in which the same grape can be interpreted in an area. 'If one producer wants opulence and concentration in a wine that will need time to achieve its elegance, and his neighbour looks instead for something that will be ready to drink sooner, I'll help them both to make clean, drinkable wines. But I defy anyone to recognise my "handwriting" in either wine. I don't impose a style; I'm merely a tool to help them reach their goals.' >

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Lorenzo Landi lets the owner lead the way and loves to work with varieties that produce wines with the ability to age

'Mine is an absence of style: each area has its own wine, which will come out naturally if we let it'

Lorenzo Landi

HAVING WORKED FOR some of the country's most enterprising estates, Lorenzo Landi is a well-known figure in the Italian wine world.

'Studying agronomy came naturally in my family: it was the subject of choice for both my father and brother,' says Landi with his soft, Tuscan lilt. 'Wine came naturally for us too. There weren't many job opportunities for agronomists so I also studied viticulture and oenology.'

Landi, 50, grew up in Pescia, in northern Tuscany. After his masters he worked in a cellar in Burgundy. 'I learned how they vinify but also to respect – and protect – the grapes. In the end, there's not so much complication behind great wine.'

His first job was in Vinci, at the Cantine Leonardo da Vinci cooperative. After five years he moved to Saiagricola, the group of farms belonging to one of Italy's largest insurance companies. (Under Italian law, these companies must invest in property assets.) There he met Denis Dubourdieu, its consultant since 1995, and with whom he later also collaborated at Lungarotti in Umbria. 'Working with Denis has been a rare, formative experience that's covered every aspect of winemaking, from managing the vines and tasting, to handling climate change,' he says.

'For me, the direction an estate takes should come from its owners. I'm there to help them achieve the kind of wine they want to produce. But, at the same time, you can't go against the uniqueness of a place. So you could say that mine is an absence of style: each area has its own wine, which will come out naturally if we let it and don't impose a personal style that's the same wherever the wine is made.'

Nurturing potential

Landi consults for estates across Italy. 'I'm particularly interested in varieties that produce original, long-living wines, and that's true of many – but not all – of the indigenous types. I think Aglianico at Taurasi or in Basilicata, Etna's Nerello Mascalese, and even Puglia's Nero di Troia all have huge potential. As does Sardinian Cannonau. When I began to work with that, I thought its sweet, rosy tones were due to over-ripeness, but I now see that they're an integral, attractive, part of its character.'

Landi makes mineral whites from Pinot Bianco and Sauvignon Blanc in Friuli. 'I'm particularly excited by Verdicchio in Le Marche, and Pecorino in Abruzzo,' he says. He works with Sangiovese all over Tuscany but also near Rimini, in Romagna, in an area that's just as hot.

How does he feel about the future of Italian wine? 'We're in full growth now. After all, most quality Italian wines have only been made for 20 years. So we're like children, still developing. I worry that we've tended to follow market fashions, which is not great in wine: first with huge, over-concentrated wines, and now with subtler, more fruit-driven wines that also risk being too similar. In the top areas we need to focus more on wines that are pure and long-living, more territorial and distinctive. We should slow down and give them the time to develop. We've got amazing raw materials and soils, we just need to grow up a bit more.'

Carla Capalbo is an award-winning food, wine and travel writer and photographer



Landi's choice

Pecorino, Abruzzo, produced by Cataldi Madonna
£28.50 Astrum Wine Cellars

'This white grape is an ancient variety from areas between Abruzzo and Le Marche; it almost died out. It grows high in cool slopes of limestone in the Apennine Mountains where sheep also graze (*pecorino* means 'of sheep'), and balances power, richness and aromatic intensity. Luigi Cataldi Madonna was the first to believe in it again. This ages well, with notes of flowers, passion fruit and grapefruit, plus good acidity and minerality.'