

A Tuscan Winemaker Advocates for Women and Sustainability

By Denice Karamardian

Stepping Away from the Finger Lakes

Tuscany. I'd been there before. But this was my first time staying at a vineyard in the rural center of the region, far from the city architecture and art of Florence, or even Siena. A week's worth of walking amid olive groves and vineyards and enjoying meals with pairings at the winery's world class restaurant, Osteria di Donatella, was far more satisfying for me than all my European city visits. Near the village of Trequanda, Fattoria del Colle reminds me of the Finger Lakes (without the lakes) in the way the hills slope and undulate, etched with rows of grapevines. Add in the Cyprus trees lining the narrow roads. Any photograph or painting of Tuscany I've seen to date is exactly the way it looks and feels in person, even from my bedroom window. Breathtaking. But there is more than bathes the eye here. What stands out at Fattoria del Colle Trequanda is the tiny woman who runs it.

Women in Wine

It was mid-April. I sat down with Donatella Cinelli Colombini in her historic office, nestled in the farm's Tuscan villa that was built in 1592. One of her devoted staff interpreted and translated her comments for me although Donatella seemed to understand my questions and occasionally broke in with her own responses in English. By now I had gathered historical information about the farm and grape varieties from staff who shared their respect for the operation through tours and tastings (and share this further in the article). All of the staff vintners are women, as is the winemaker (Donatella). She was born into an established family of Brunello di Montalcino winemakers and has impacted the industry in her own right. With the opportunity to interview Donatella herself, I chose not to waste her time on details I could obtain from staff. I was keen to tap into whatever she was most passionate about. It took about 30 seconds. This leader in agro-tourism, organic farming, and winemaking immediately lit up and plunged into her favorite endeavor: *Donne Del Vino*.

Donne Del Vino, **Women in Wine**, is an international organization of 1,020 women worldwide. It is made up of regional organizations — of winemakers, winery owners, wine shops and restaurant owners, sommeliers, wine writers and experts. There are 88 such organizations in Tuscany. As Donatella continued, I grew intrigued at how much women were embedded in the wine industry there.

"Four years ago we tried to meet with all the countries." Eleven national organizations in the group include Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Chile, Peru, France, Germany,

Switzerland, Croatia, etc. Italy and Germany have the best and oldest organizations. (In the U.S., a similar organization called Women for WineSense was founded in 1990, with 13 chapters).

Their second international meeting, in November 2022, was motivating. Members signed a goal agreement to share activities together and to help members visit fellow wineries in other countries. For example, said Donatella,

“In Tuscany, we are looking to invite wine producer of other country to present wine presentation by sommelier association. Hope to receive invitation from another country.”

On March 8th, the group annually celebrates International Women’s Day. Each year they chose a symbol and every member posts pictures with the symbol and hashtags to promote worldwide connection. The theme chosen for 2023 was *Un Mundo Unido*. Far from being an inconsequential pet project, the group has made, and continues to make, an impact on the global wine industry. Donatella has certain credentials that accompany her leadership, from birth into a female winemaking family to her advocacy for women and for organic practices. Tuscany happens to be a leader in both.

“Historically wine was made by men producers, with women only 14% involved in winemaking. Women are stronger in the commercial department - more than 50%. In general, more than 80% women dominate in marketing, more than 70% in tourism. The wine world is an exception, which may explain why the gender pay gap is less in the wine industry than in other industries. Studies show that in the US, for example, for every dollar made by a man, a woman will earn just 90 cents. But in the wine industry, a woman earns 96 cents,” says Donatella. I was unable to verify these numbers, and my own search came up with an 87 cent number for women in the winemaker profession, so I am unclear if I understood correctly. The reason I include the info here, although vague, is to encourage further dialogue on the subject.

“In the beginning was not so amusing. I am very happy and proud for the work we made and increase in change to the industry.” Donatella has had her hand in this locally, as well.

In 1993, Donatella founded the “Movimento del Turismo del Vino.” She has advocated for tourism efforts ever since. *The Tuscany Association of Women in Wine* is currently pushing to introduce wine tourism into school curriculum. “Students that study in tourism institutes don’t get wine and food. They need history, fine art, history of geography, etc.....all this is true, but also the wine!”

The next activity they (the Tuscan Women in Wine group) are focused on is to push the use of light glass bottles for expensive premium wines. CO2 emissions are too high during the production of glass.

“The heavy bottle, and dimension of the bottle has a connection to the quality of wine. But we have to push for light glass because organic production is not enough,” says Donatella.

A third project they are working on they call *Etico* (ethic).

“We keep used cork inside and collect them – the amorin cork (world leader of cork production) pays for the collected used corks to wineries, restaurants, wine shops, recycles them to make furniture. Donne del Vino Toscana (the Association) diverts the profit to Centre Anti Violenza, to benefit abused women. I took note of an oversized jar full of corks situated by the front door of the restaurant, identical to one in Donatella’s office.

“We are a big association and can do big things. Like this amorin cork. Alone is impossible.” Says Donatella Cinelli Colombini, literally beaming with purpose and mission as she gestured to the giant jar of corks.

Fattoria del Colle and Montalcino

Fattoria del Colle spreads across rolling hills at Trequanda in central Tuscany. The farm was begun in 1500 and the owner’s villa built in 1592 for the Socini family who operated the farm for the entire century. It was a productive farm of mixed grapes, olives, and grains. At one point, mid-century, there were lots of brothers in the family. A division among them changed the course of the farm’s history.

Tuscany was a Catholic stronghold. But a small Protestant movement developed and, in approximately 1560, two members of the family, brothers Lelio and Fausto, joined the Protestant movement when it gained in popularity. Because the rest of the family was loyally Catholic and Protestantism was illegal in Tuscan kingdom, the brothers needed to escape. They went to Switzerland and Poland, where they founded their own church in each of those countries. The Socinian Church in those countries still follow that branch of Protestant, a very small community that is still alive in Europe. (A few years ago, some members of that church visited the Fattoria del Colle, seeking to learn where the founders were born.)

Meanwhile, at the Fattoria, the family remaining at home needed desperately to demonstrate their fealty to the Catholic Church. They built a chapel on the farm to prove their devotion and dedicated it to San Clemente, the current pope of the time. A local painter even painted the pope into his depiction of the Crucifixion that still is still hanging behind the chapel altar. (Sadly, my photo of this was deleted in the recent Google blitz). Though inaccurate, this was not uncommon in those times. For example, the painter Uffizi tended to insert living people with painting subjects Jesus and Mary as an honor or gift to the benefactor.

In spite of these efforts, the family was too tainted from the brothers’ defection to overcome the stain. Religion ruled everything. Other farmers burned the farm and the populace was no longer willing to work for the family. They were not trusted. The family held on for as long as possible, but in time, the Socini family, unable to operate the property for production, lost everything and sold the land that no longer provided a living. Historic chronology enters a 150 year gap here, until around 1700 when a new farmhouse was built to host the Tuscan King, the Grand Duke of Tuscany. The 16th century brothers disappeared from the record. But coincidences sometimes rule the day.

In 1918, Livio Socini, came across an incredible land deal that was too good to pass up. Completely unaware of its history, he purchased the land from previous owners who had not produced profit and sold it cheap. Only after he bought it, did he discover the farm to be that of his ancestors, when he opened up the chapel to discover his family's symbol – a lion holding a ball in the family shield. Livio Socini was Donatella's great grandfather.

Her mother, Francesca Colombini, was the owner of the Montalcino winery of Fattoria del Barbi and a renowned winemaker in her own right. When Francesca Colombini retired, she gave the main family winery in Montalcino to Donatella's brother. Donatella Cinelli Colombini inherited the new property, or rather the old (Socini) Fattoria. She founded the estate in 1998.

The 700 total acres include 40 hectares of vineyards, 12 acres of olive trees, and also forest land growing rare white truffles. Olives are crushed in the little village there. Grapes grown include Sangiovese, Merlot, and Sagrantino. They are also one of the few Italian wineries growing Traminer (their only white). Lastly, Donatella stands out as an advocate for the risky historic grape variety called Foglia Tonda.

The Foglia Tonda grape had been completely abandoned in the country. It was deemed too difficult to cultivate and work and produced too many leaves. Donatella discovered it through a university project working on abandoned grape varieties. She found it to be historically elegant and balanced and decided to try to bring it back. She had no tradition to work from and no guidance. She tested and varied the aging period, kinds of wood and size of barrels. The only constant was the blend, which remained 65% Sangiovese and 35% Foglia Tonda. This she believed in. The blend is called Cenerentola. I found it truly elegant. (I brought home a 2018 Cenerentola Orcia to break open at Christmas dinner).

The family's most known product is the well distributed Brunello wine that must be bottled in Montalcino, I was told. The Montalcino property, Casato Prime Donne, has 40 hectares of vineyards, of which 17 are Sangiovese plus a winery for production and aging of Rosso and Brunello di Montalcino wines. A system of wine regulation in Italy was explained. Three levels are: IGT (free territory of wine), DOC (more regulated) and DOCG (most restrictive). I asked Donatella for clarification about the production of Brunello. The winemaking may interchange between the family wineries, but Brunello is required by law to be bottled physically in Montalcino. It's an Italian thing, wines associated with specific territory.

"It's the region where it is required to be produced," she shrugged, then chuckled "too many laws" in her deep accent, pronouncing the word as "*lows*."

Organic Practices in Tuscany

Donatella's decision to go organic is to protect the environment. She feels other growers in Italy should also, and tirelessly promotes the organic practices that she uses:

1. A product she most employs is seaweed product. Harvested and imported, it is very expensive. This, sadly, is a deterrent for other vineyards to get into organic growing.
2. She uses propolis (produced by bees) for natural resistance against parasites, postharvest preservation and plant growth.
3. She also uses predatory insects that will eat other insects like spider mites, and plants those into the vineyards. Rather than spraying chemical products into the vineyard, insects are living there.
4. Fertility process: Uses pole beans growing between vines and clovers. This fixes nitrogen into the soil. Plow that under once a year and reseed it.

Commercial growers tend to decline such practices. The amount of organic growing in Tuscany is currently is 40%. (In Italy as a whole it is 25%). The cost of establishing a vineyard in Tuscany is 50,000 euros for a hectare (or 2.47 acres) of vines. This tiny winemaker, Donatella Cinelli Colombini, encourages and shares more of her practices and recommendations to anyone wishing to begin or transition to organic grape growing: establish the right site and soil balance; choose right slope, facing in the right direction, with well-balanced soil mixture of clay and sand with stones mixed in; need to trench out low areas so you can drain them out; make channels for water to drain away from wet areas.

Donatella believes in using agronomists who specialize in soil nutrition of agriculture for soil work and site preparations. They dig up to one meter with a special plow to break up soil, then either dig holes by hand and plant by hand (preferred because each plant has better chance of survival) or use a machine. Plus they add wet sand around each vine hole to increase survival and establish young roots. Trellising posts and wiring is done in the second or third year and, of course, proper fencing around vineyard to keep out wild boar and deer. (Wild boar can destroy 50% of a vineyard In Tuscany.)

As for products, one material used at the Fattoria is Zeolite, a coating spread on young leaves for frost protection. And they use sulfur for disease control. This is limited to a certain amount over a 3 year period by government. Sulfur is a natural mineral, but hard on the environment so caution is best.

My biggest takeaway from the dynamo president of *Donne Del Vino* is to make use of organizations and groups in the industry, learn from others, and support your colleagues. (She constantly travels in service to the industry and fellow winemakers). Speaking with her, witnessing her passionate desire to talk about her goals for collaboration within the industry, reminded me of home. This is something that, like Tuscany, is already embedded in Finger Lakes industry practices. Finger Lakes winemakers and grape growers, also craft brewers, represent one of the most inclusive and supportive industry groups found anywhere in the world. This is one more similarity, beyond some grape varieties and gentle, sloping landscapes, between our home turf and Tuscan wineries. But I'd say it's a pretty good one.