

The Zonin family, a new vision of the Italian wine style

Italian wines are usually associated with Tuscany, Pinot Grigio and Prosecco. Italy is both a red and white wine producer even though its global reputation is generally based on red wines. However, just behind them, top Italian whites can impress. The wide array of local white grapes grown all over Italy provides significant diversity of white wines in terms of style and provenance. Pinot Grigio, produced in large quantities between Veneto and Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, is still Italy's most competitive market mainly driven by the US and the UK. Meantime, the 2011 harvest produced 1.5 million hectolitres or 200 million bottles of Prosecco. So, no, Italy is not only home to red wines but also superlative whites, both still and sparkling.

BY DELPHINE VEISSIÈRE

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Most of these wines are produced and distributed under international brands produced by cooperatives (Cantine Riunite with Bolla, Cavicchioli, Nino Negri and Fontana Candida) or famous wine families such as Antinori (with Castello della Sala, Tignanello, Guado al Tasso and Pian delle vigne) and Zonin, ranked amongst the “10 big Italian estates”. F.lli Martini belongs to the huge Bacardi Group Limited whilst Campari is the major Italian listed public company in the wine industry. Most of them have funded large external growth investments over the last 10 years (circa 259 million euros in 2011), buying estates in Italy and abroad. The Zonin family is one of the most important families on the Italian landscape with major territorial presence all over Italy (1,820 hectares of vineyards and 9 estates from the North to the South of Italy), compared with Marchesi Antinori, who has remained a “Tuscan” story.

ZONIN: A NEW RENDITION OF THE ITALIAN WINE STYLE

Over the last 10 years, Italian cooperatives (Cantine Riunite & CIV, the first with total sales of 500 million euros in 2011), Fratelli Martini (total sales of 150 million euros) and the major family estates such as Antinori (total sales of 141 million euros) and Zonin (total sales

of 116 million euros) have strongly invested throughout the “Bel Paese” to capitalise on the new trend in exports. In the same vein as major French and Spanish estates, they have invested abroad, especially in America, like the Zonin family in Virginia with Barboursville. It is a good opportunity for consumers to discover the Italian wine style through Zonin’s labels. As Francesco Zonin said: “the extension of vineyards is a real guarantee of quality for the consumer”.

Furthermore, consumer behaviour changed after the 2008 recession and most consumers (like in the US) switched over to non-premium wines. Consequently, cost structure and investments became less maintainable for the big players in the wine industry. Also, technological innovation has replaced human know-how and expertise, both in the vineyard and the cellar guaranteeing international quality standards for the consumer and eliminating production of “atypical” wines. Does this mean that wine-making techniques and style have superseded sense of place in wine produced abroad? Does the emergence of big players in the wine industry (excluding some groups such as F.lli Martini focused on outsourcing low-quality wine procurement to produce Vermouth) make it easier to produce a standardised wine style? In the 18th century, Thomas Jefferson was



THE ZONIN FAMILY OWNS 4,446 ACRES (17.99 KM²) OF VINEYARDS, DIVIDED AMONG 11 ESTATES IN SEVEN OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST HIGHLY-REGARDED WINEMAKING REGIONS



proud to say to his friends that: “we could in the United States, make as great a variety of wines as are made in Europe, not exactly of the same kind but doubtless as good”. To provide some proper answers to these questions, we visited different wine estates in Virginia and had the opportunity to compare wines made by the Zonin family in Italy with those from the Barboursville estate.

ZONIN: A FAMILY WINE SIGNATURE PROMOTING ITS ROOTS, TRADITION AND PASSION ABROAD

The tastings highlighted two obvious facts: Zonin’s style focuses on making wines from healthy and not over-ripe grapes; and the Virginia area is a great place to produce red wines and Bordeaux blends such as Meritage, which is also the name of an association of American producers created in 1988 to identify handcrafted wines blended from the traditional “noble” Bordeaux varietals. A red Meritage is a blend of two or more ‘noble’ red Bordeaux varieties - Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Merlot, Petit Verdot and the rarer St. Macaire, Gros Verdot and Carmenère. If the blend includes any other grape variety, it is, by definition, not a Meritage. Also, to qualify as a Meritage, no single grape variety can make up



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**LUCA PASCHINA,
BARBOURSVILLE ESTATE’S WINE MAKER**



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**SILVANA AND GIANNI ZONIN WITH SONS
FRANCESCO, MICHELE AND DOMENICO**

more than 90% of the blend. The wines are smooth, silky-textured and complex with a robust structure.

While the Marchesi Antinori estate has shaped its signature by vinting mainly red wines from Sangiovese, the Zonin family originated from north-eastern Italy and initially forged its reputation as a Prosecco producer. Italian wine styles are myriad and varied, often to the same degree as the number of local grapes planted regionally. More significant than the difference between red and white, the real diversity in Italian wine styles lies here. The Zonin family has been making wine since 1821 and currently operates Italy’s largest privately-owned vineyard and winemaking complex with a large range of labels. The house produces 25 million bottles and exports its wines to 69 countries. The company’s headquarters are located in Gambellara in the province of Vicenza in north-eastern Italy. The Zonin family owns 4,446 acres (17.99 km²) of vineyards, divided among 11 estates in seven of the country’s most highly-regarded winemaking regions: Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli, Tuscany, Apulia and Sicily. It also owns the Barboursville Vineyards winery in Barboursville, Virginia. The house produces a wide range of wines, many of them from varieties native to the regions in which the grapes are grown.



**CHATAM VINEYARDS' OWNER,
JONATHAN H WEHNER**

Since 1980 Virginia has increased its wine production substantially. Grapes have been planted there since the early settlers (comprising a sizeable French community) came to Jamestown in 1607, making the first wine in the new world. It is to Thomas Jefferson, however, that credit is given for importing fine French wines (mainly from Bordeaux) to his estate in Monticello and for attempting, unsuccessfully, to grow and vint *Vitis Vinifera* varieties. They now outnumber hybrids and, apart from the most interesting Bordeaux red blends, it is not unusual to taste some Touriga Nacional, Tannat, Petit Verdot, Viognier, Petit Manseng but also native Italian varieties such as Vermentino and Nebbiolo. Unfortunately, climate doesn't help and expression of *terroir* predominates over varietal characteristics in the wines.

The growing season is warm and humid so producers have to manage outbreaks of fungal disease by careful site and varietal selection, an accurate canopy management system and spraying regimes. But Virginian wines cannot be considered as a pastime for dilettantes. When Mazzei arrived in Virginia to make wines at the

beginning of the 19th century he selected this area for a variety of favourable aspects: the South-East facing hillsides and more specifically the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains and the abundance of poor spots of stony red soil, without sand.

Consequently, from 1979 to date the total number of wineries has increased from 6 to over 200, also attracting wine-makers from the Rhone, Burgundy and Italy, including Luca Paschina, wine-maker at Barbourville estate. Virginia currently ranks fifth for the number of wineries and generated total sales of 5.5 million bottles in 2011.

LUCA PASCHINA, AN ITALIAN SIGNATURE HIGHLIGHTED BY A VITICULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

Virginia's climate actually provides plenty of opportunity for grapes to ripen naturally, thanks to generally warm growing conditions, but retaining freshness and tannins (for the reds) is more difficult. It is actually not easy to give an Italian touch to Virginian wines. In addition to the Zonin signature, Luca Paschina may attempt to give a lively and elegant style to the wines by picking earlier, running the risk of producing thin wines and, compared with richer style wines, over-done and prone to evolve quickly, though with some ageing potential, even if water management through irrigation (also authorized with restrictions in certain Italian regions) could also help regulate the ripening period.

Wine styles here are very different from the standard often chosen by the new world winemakers striving for extreme Brix and alcohol levels. Barbourville's wines demonstrate more confidence with old world tradition. Vineyard management could help to cope with inhospitable climate conditions but it is very important to bear in mind that the average planting density selection may bring too much varietal character to the wine, imparting more concentration and full-bodiedness compared with freshness and tannins. Humidity doesn't help either.

On Barbourville estate, Luca Paschina was duty bound to be a trailblazer, following in the footsteps of Philip Mazzei and Thomas Jefferson. Zonin techniques in the vineyards had to be adapted with meticulous planting of different grape varieties suited to the local microclimates. Each passing year has widened Luca's knowledge of *terroir* while narrowing the scope of compatible clones, root stocks and trellising systems (in particular for Nebbiolo, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc). Viticultural thinking has evolved, and now focuses more on production of grapes per acre rather than weight per acre. By planting vines closely together and training them to ripen fewer grape clusters, yields per vine have been optimized and higher-quality wines crafted, preserving the bouquet of aromas and flavours.

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OUR BEST PICKS AMONGST ZONIN WINES

ESTATE	APPELLATION	LABEL	SCORES
Tenuta Ca' Bolani	Colli Orientali del Friuli DOC	Aquilis 2010	88/100
Castello d'Albola	Toscana I.G.T	Aciaiolo 2007	89/100
Masseria di Altemura	Primitivo di Manduria DOC	2010	91/100
Feudo Principi di Butera	Sicilia IGT	Deliella 2008	89/100

With five clones of Cabernet Franc currently planted, individual performance has been tracked over the years. The whites at Barboursville also have a European style which is closer to the freshness and mineral style produced for example with Chardonnay.

Luca Paschina has always believed that "Chardonnay shines without oak barrels". As he said: "we didn't invent this style, it's how Italy's been drinking for decades. Instead of giving into fashion, we stuck to tradition".



ZONIN'S PROPERTIES IN ITALY AND ABROAD

Moreover and like the top Bordeaux chateaux Pétrus and Cheval Blanc, Barboursville's top cuvée, Octagon, is produced exclusively from Merlot, regardless of trends or movies showcasing the fashionable Pinot Noir which gained huge exposure through the hit wine-themed movie, Sideways. We tasted both whites (such as Barboursville Vermentino 2011) and reds (Cabernet Franc 2002, Nebbiolo Reserve 2007 and 2002, Octagon 2007) and we preferred the genuine varietal Nebbiolo and Cabernet Franc to Octagon, more suited to American than to European palates. Luca Paschina's wines are elegant and austere with expressive fruit ending in a mineral (sometimes slightly bitter) aftertaste. We were also very impressed by some Virginian peer estates such as Reynard Florence estate with its Petit Manseng 2011, Shinson Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc 2010, fresh and well-balanced, Chatam vineyards with its gorgeous vibrant Chardonnay vinted exclusively in steel tanks like some of the Chablis growths (the best we tasted) and the King family's Meritage 2010 (blended from Merlot, Petit Verdot and Malbec). Style there is excellent and close to a Northern Italian wine-making style whilst prices are very high/too high compared with similar high-quality Italian wines.

At Barboursville, the 2012 vintage may surpass the quality of the wet 2011 vintage and could be compared to the 2007, much more concentrated and balanced than the 2002 (especially for Nebbiolo). Does this mean that it'll be more of a vintage for reds, rather than whites? We actually think that Virginia has an outstanding *terroir* for reds and is less suited to whites apart from some exceptions such as Chatam Vineyards whose whites develop a fresh, crisp tone due to vines planted near the sea, especially Chardonnay.