

# v i t a e

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## **Fiorano, memories and pinwheels**

Armando Castagno

The history of Tenuta di Fiorano, a 200-hectare rectangle off to the side of the Appian Way in the Rome metropolitan area, could read like a Thomas Mann novel. I have always had a visceral love for this place, even if I have rarely written about it. For me it is something changing and metaphoric, a place with a faded, encrusted beauty, a threshold, a melting pot where much has taken place and then turned to dust. When I returned from the darkness of that dust, in an attempt to give a form in my mind to these words, I saw something. Driving to the heart of the estate I was surrounded by fields spotted with maritime pines, thistles, prickly pears. The clover and summer daisies had wilted and all that remained was the chromatic duel between the yellow dandelions and the blue veronica flowers. At the entrance to a stone building next to the estate's chapel, I leaned with both hands on a shutter and called out if anyone was there. All I heard was the echo of my own voice. Looking inside, after my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, I saw it was used as a storage barn packed with tools, old road signs, leftover bricks, strange carpentry tools, old troughs, used beehives and two old tractors. There was a puff from an august breeze and something reflected in the corner of my eye. To my right, almost two meters above the ground, the something that I had not seen before began turning again. Tied to the top of a grate with a little red tube was a pinwheel which had silver-color curls that were worn at the edges but still shiny. When and why it was put there was a mystery and I just stood there and watched it. The pinwheel was still turning when I drove off to continue my tour of the estate.

## **The beginning**

The year was 1946: 60-year-old Prince Francesco Boncompagni Ludovisi, a member of one of Italy's oldest noble families which counted 18 titles and two popes, with blood ties to nine others, a former Kingdom of Italy MP and senator, had decided to retire to private life after the end of the Second World War and the creation of the Italian Republic. He had seen many of his ideals vanish and even if he had distinguished himself as the governor or mayor of Rome (1929-1935) and was not in fact old, he was tired. Alberico was the second of his eight children and at the time was 28-years-old, having been born in 1918. Francesco decided to 'refute' or give up one of his titles, Prince of Venosa, in his son's favor. Alberico had been married since

1941 to the Countess Laetitia Pecci Blunt and they had one daughter, Francesca, who would later marry the Marquis Piero Antinori of Florence.

With the title, Alberico inherited the family estate (tenuta) in Fioranello which was already producing wine. In 2001, Alberico wrote: "they began making wine in Fiorano around 1930 but only using local grapes. In 1946, when I was given the Fiorano estate by my father, I found the wine produced there to be unsatisfactory and so I consulted with the enologist Giuseppe Palieri. He suggested grafting on to the existing vines equal amounts of Cabernet and Merlot and, separately, Malvasia di Candia and Sémillon grapes to make white wine. I did so right away and kept Palieri as my consultant as long as he lived". Palieri's fame may be forgotten today but in the 1930s this agronomist-enologist-researcher was highly and unconditionally respected. He had worked for Barone Ricasoli and had published fundamental texts, some quite prophetic, on the production of table grapes, the use of - and above all the possibility of not using - fungicides against downy mildew, the history of agrarian law, wine preservation and on 'iron casse'. He also made wine himself at the Maccarese farm complex by the sea north of Rome. There Palieri was in charge of creating new vineyards on 'virgin' land that had been reclaimed through a massive draining project of swamplands during the Fascist Era. The project was forced through after the owners of the land opposed it for 170 years in order to keep the swampland and maintain the centuries-old traditional of raising water buffalo there.

## **Development**

The ideas Palieri developed in the early 1930s found fertile ground at Fiorano and the Prince instinctively adopted his 'non-interventionist' approach to the vineyard. "The use of industrial chemical substances in the soil has never convinced me, starting when I was 16 or in 1934" he would later write. The terroir at the estate is excellent because the land is in the northwest corner of the Lazio Alban volcanic area and while the altitude is not particularly high (125m above sea level) it is well-ventilated and the plains enjoy ample sun exposure. The soil, while arid, is filled with volcanic minerals: phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, magnesium, copper and molybdenum. The volcanic dirt-ash has a nice color between purple and pink with bright reflections. The soil is fertilized with local manure from herds of cattle and sheep in accordance with the practice of 'closed circuit' farming, which is similar to the theories Steiner developed 22 years earlier. The estate went on to produce three different types of wine with no more than 2,500 bottles made in all. Fiorano Rosso was an equal blend of Cabernet and Merlot of which around a 1,000 bottles were produced; Fiorano Bianco was a white wine made only from Malvasia di Candia grapes while only Sémillon grapes were used to make Fiorano Sémillon, with only a few hundred bottles made of each. The wines aged in barrels of various origins and sizes, all around 10 hectoliters and all numbered. The contents were almost always bottled separately with the red wine having a sticker on it indicating the number of the bottle and the number of bottles produced. When Palieri died in the mid-1950s, Alberico brought in Tancredi Biondi Santi to be his enologist-consultant and he remained at Fiorano until his death (1970) and was never replaced. Almost ten years after the turnover, in March 1966, Alberico tasted Tancredi's Brunello di Montalcino and as he said in a letter, the original of which is kept at Greppo, he had obviously made his choice "on trust".

Elio Mariani, the restaurateur of the historic 'Checchino dal 1887' Testaccio restaurant who was among the first to believe in Fiorano and to sell it, recalled that "this wine never had a real commercial success. It was more like a secret shared among a choice few who knew". There were at least two factors that contributed to limiting Fiorano's success: the first was the scarce production and the second was how long it held on to its intense its youthful austerity. Alberico's reds and whites, in fact, only truly reveal their formidable nature after six or seven years and, furthermore, they were never sold until three years after they were made. "The Bianco," Elio Mariani said, "was so salty when young that there was little aroma and it is was so brackish that, in a blind tasting, it was more like a wine from the island of Giglio". A glance at the wine guides of the time is revealing. In the 1970 Bolaffi guide, Veronelli gave three stars for 'prestige' to both the red and the whites and only one for 'popularity'. In his splendidly written review, he said the Bianco had an aroma, when young, of 'flint'; that at the end of 1969 the vintage of both wines was 1966; that the price of both Fiorano Bianco and Rosso was 600 lire, the same as a Trebbiano d'Abruzzo from Camillo Valentini, the Torgiano Bianco of Giorgio Lungarotti and the Gavi of Vittorio Soldati. The 'Guide to the Bottles of Italy', edited by Flavio Colutta, looked at the region of Lazio and its inhabitants as if they were from old print but it did have one merit: photographs of the bottles. In one section is a photograph of a Fiorano Bianco 1996 where you can see a sticker had been added which showed how the wine was ahead of its time. It read: "Made from grapes that were not chemically treated".

## Enigmas

The distribution of Fiorano wines outside the Rome area was handed by the Milan company Quirici. In Rome they could be acquired in only a few places like Mariani's restaurant or Marco Trimani's wine shop. Buying the wine wholesale was almost a surreal experience. First you placed your order by phone. Mrs. Vittoria, who had been with Prince Alberico from the start, would then call you back to inform you of the total cost. Those who bought the wine this way knew they had to bring the exact amount in cash, not a penny more, not a penny less, no checks accepted and no change given. When you entered the estate's main building you paid up and were then locked inside a room on the ground floor to the right of the entrance. And you had to wait there, sitting at a pink marble table, until you were released and found your order stacked outside the door, which you had to load yourself. The waiting room was something else. There were volumes of books and folders packed in old, wooden bookcases. On the walls were the citations the Tenuta had won for the excellence of its agricultural products, everything except for the wines. Fiorano won prizes in France, Germany, the United States and, obviously, Italy for its fruit, its breeding cows and its wheat. The Prince's passion for farming and its connection with the outside world was only on view there in that room. However, it was evident within the estate with an amazing collection of tractors, some of which are still there, covered in rust, spider webs and vines, a shadow of their past glory but still beaming with meaning.

Aside from the unusual buying ritual described above, the real enigma of Fiorano is the flavor its wines have decades after they were made. It is as if these liquids were immortal, or something very close to it. Together with the reds we tasted, which will be reviewed in the latter part of this article, we were also able to taste no less than 50 Fiorano Bianco and Sémillon, vintages from 1962 to 1994. At most three or four had oxidized and none were from before 1990. And this is another mystery considering the conditions under which these wines were made. It is almost as if

back then they left the fate of these wines to destiny. They were made in rooms filled with lichens, in barrels that were never cleaned thoroughly or only on the outside for almost 60 years. The use of sulfur was practically just for show, a disk of sulfur attached to a wire, which had been sterilized by fire, hanging into the barrels as if it was an infusion. The wines were placed in bottles of very thin glass that were a clear, green color and the 35mm corks. We know now how 90% of the time these corks broke two-thirds down when being opened. The capsules were stuck to the top of the bottle in a wrinkled and imperfect way. The old Fiorano Bianco today seems a bit rustic and is impressively intact, with a subtle and sweet aroma, while the Fiorano Sémillon from between 1962 and 1989, tasted in the strictest way possible, is one of the greatest whites Italy has ever produced. This is above all true for the diabolic 1971 vintage, which still today has jade-green reflections and an aroma dominated by notes of grapefruit, resin, herbs and bicarbonate. Other memorable vintages of this masterpiece-wine are: 1962, 1968, 1970, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1988 and 1989. There is also a veil of mystery surrounding the cellar where the wines are stored and which have always been closed to almost everybody. We have always imagined it as a dark, cold catacomb carved out of tuff stone. The last mystery concerns the person to whom the little church is dedicated, Santa Fresca, a church build in 1734. It was a strange choice for a family that between direct-ancestors and blood relatives had 11 popes. Santa Fresca appears to be little more than a phantom, considering there is no trace of her in Church annals. There are theories about who the name may refer to. The first is that 'Fresca' derives from Francesca, however there are no precedents for this. The other is that it is a euphemism of peasant origin, with 'fresca' having a clear sexual reference to the female genitalia, of which there are other examples. Thus the second seems the less improbable, a semi-blasphemous play on words in a family portrait which for centuries has been too austere.

## Sunset

In 1998, after he had turned 80 and after 46 consecutive harvests, Alberico Boncompagni Ludovisi ordered his workers to uproot and destroy all the vineyards in Fiorano with the exception of eight rows of Cabernet situated across the street from the estate's main buildings. Having already retired to Rome, in 2001 he refused to meet with Luigi Veronelli who had written him an imploring letter, later made public, and to which he gave written and evasive response to only a few questions. From then on Fiorano produced only some 200 bottles of Rosso in 2001 and 2002 and only a few more in 2003. However, they were uncertain and fragile wines that had definitively lost the secret flame that had inspired the previous vintages. Alberico died in Rome in 2005 without any direct male heirs, leaving an inheritance that was unusually complex.

## Dawn

Half of the estate and the historic winery went to the female side of the family, that of Alberico's only daughter Francesca, and is now run by the daughter she had with her husband Piero Antinori, Alessia, who replanted vines in her part of the estate. This area became independent from the original Tenuta and was renamed 'Fattoria di Fiorano', farm as opposed to estate. The Tenuta di Fiorano brand and label went, along with the title of prince, as is the custom, to the closest male relative, Alberico's cousin Paolo Francesco Boncompagni Ludovisi, who had taken care of the ailing

Alberico in his final years. When Paolo Francesco died in 2007 the title and estate went to his son, Alessandrojacopo Boncompagni Ludovisi, who had already assumed responsibility for running the estate when Alberico was still alive. Following Alberico's advice, Alessandrojacopo began replanting the vineyards and he is to thank for recreating the estate's legendary wine (starting with vintage 2006). Alessandrojacopo took this great responsibility to heart and brought in a young and talented enologist, Lorenzo Costantini, to follow every phase of winemaking, from the vineyard to the bottle, just the as Giuseppe Palieri did 60 years earlier. In accordance with Alberico's wishes, they replaced Sémillon and Malvasia di Candia with Viognier and Grechetto to make Fiorano Bianco, while the grapes for the red wine remained the original ones. The estate now produces four wines; Fiorano Rosso, Fiorano Bianco and two Bordeaux-style 'second vins' called 'Fioranello'. The winemaking methods are simple and respect the convictions of the men who had made Fiorano a legend: Alberico, Giuseppe Palieri and Tancredi Biondi Santi.

Gianni Valenti, the estate's giant foreman who worked for Alberico beginning in the 1960s, stayed on and if you are lucky you can see him in the early morning riding his tractor or lovingly pruning a hedge. He is the one who got the pinwheel of time running again when it seemed impossible, and thanks to this old yet energetic man its colors seem to have regained their splendor. If this were a film, the closing shot would be on his face as he rides the tractor, his eyes half-closed and the hint of a smile on his face as he drives off across a plowed field with the Alban Hills in the background.

### **Vertical tasting Fiorano Rosso 2008-1958**

The tasting

#### **2008**

A ruby color of medium-intensity with brown reflections. The aroma has a strong citrus streak and is intact considering the wood used for aging. Laurel and even some sorrel and lemon leaf highlight the herbal component which has a particular freshness. There is also a floral hint and a scent of tar. Overall the bouquet has an agile and interesting profile and is certainly not out to please. Citrus also dominates the flavor and the intricacy of the mouthfeel recalls a Graves of Bordeaux. The finish is acutely mineral with a discreet length and very clean.

#### **2007**

A distinct ruby color that is not impenetrable. The aroma is very complex and generous with an 'old fashion' scent of graphite dominating the bouquet which has scents of black cherry and cinchona, damp wood, moss, licorice, salt and juniper. With breathing a nuance of fur arises similar to that of a Lambic beer. The mouthfeel is much more gentle and gradual and comes across fluid with a bold acidic backbone. The mineral component confirms the severe, domineering and dark flavor which has an intriguing echo of ash and black powder. This came out after the 2008 because it took so long to mature and, in fact, it still has a way to go. Time will decide its true worth but for sure it already consistent with the glorious Fiorano of the past.

#### **1998**

This bottle had no additional labels and was the last vintage before the vines were uprooted and production practically halted. It is a different Fiorano from the others and seems almost as if its soul had been 'drained'. The wine has little color and the reflections are old. The fruit and floral components appear to have been disappeared and the flavor is very acidic, crude, metallic and tannic and what taste there is seems to vanish with no aromatic 'comeback' except for a note of damp fur. Perhaps our memories of what it once was made this seem melancholy and dark. There was one good bottle of the four we opened, the other three were muddy and bitter.

### **1994 Barrel 30**

This kicked off a series of Prince Alberico's true Fiorano wines. The year was extremely hot in the region of Lazio and this made it impossible to make a red of extreme finesse. The color is transparent and warm and the first reflections are those of a tempered garnet. The aroma is extroverted and opens with a note of volatile acidity before the bouquet unveils scents of leather and a hint of 'brett' (plaster and medicinal herbs). The mouthfeel is pleasing and classic and sticks closely to the old Bordeaux style: medium weight, rough even if minute tannins, energetic acidity, bruised fruit and 'organic' notes with a feral minerality in the aftertaste. Sold six years after harvest and after it had aged three years in the barrels and three in the bottle.

### **1991 Barrel 38**

Because the harvest was small, following an irregular summer with little sunshine, many prominent wines in the area were not produced. A recent analysis found this wine to have an alcoholic content of just 11.85% and an acidity of 5.60g/l. The aroma is that of a low-key red: rust and mercurochrome, pollen, damp wood, rue, earth and even some crusty salt. Due to the low alcoholic content, the few extracts and bold volatile acidity, this 1991 has a mouthfeel that seems ephelic and lithe which make it very drinkable, with tiny tannins and in the aftertaste are traces of tea leaf and tobacco and a brackish note.

### **1990 Barrel 29**

Only one of the three bottles opened did not have any problems (the first was corked and the cork of the second disintegrated). Nevertheless, we were wise to insist. The color is spectral, an intense ruby with a bright garnet edge while the aroma still has notes of cherry and crunchy wild berries. What seems lacking is the usual 'lateral' complexity and there only seem to be hints of licorice and lily. The mouthfeel is more tannic and intense, perhaps the least acidic, with a tasty and vigorous finish which is acceptably persistent. On the downside, they experimented with the amount of sulfur used (140) which was twice that of any other wine in the tasting.

### **1989 Barrel 23**

This was the first masterpiece of the vertical descending tasting. It was a difficult year for central Italy, especially in the east, and not very interesting for neighboring regions (Tuscany, Umbria and Campania). And yet Fiorano Rosso 1989 created an elegant treasure with Merlot and Cabernet. The floral bouquet also has iodine and medicinal notes, an almost grainy fragrance (rye bread and hops) and a nuance of wild greens

which is classic for this wine in cool years. The mouthfeel is fine and fresh, continuous and flowing, taut due to the acidity while the tannins are delicate, overall a mix between sweet and wild to the point of recalling chutney and arbutus honey.

### **1988 Barrel 30**

A national monument. This was especially true for the wine from barrels 30 and 35 which were hands down the best Bordeaux-style blends ever produced in Italy. The alcoholic content was exactly 12% and the acidity was a tad above 6g/l. This was also an exceptional year for at least two other Lazio reds: Torre Ercolana and Cigna del Vassallo. The color was dark yet intact and the aroma was priceless: together with the scents of black cherry and graphite were whiffs of licorice, herbs for making amaro, chinotto and truffle. The mouthfeel is vital and charismatic with fine tannins and everything is in a virtuoso balance and the finish is irradiant and complex with a return of bitter notes of gentian and rhubarb before becoming salty.

### **1987 Barrel 15**

It was a strange harvest with the weather turning bad right after the early grapes, like Merlot, were picked. And it is this grape that leaves its imprint on the wine, giving the impression that there was a higher percentage of it in the blend than usual. The aroma confirms this because it is sinuous and soft, almost sweet, embellished with light vegetal nuances (wild fennel and anise), damp underbrush and toasted corn, dark hints of pencil lead and hydrocarbons, creosote and ash and with a final touch that was slightly like a plaster. The mouthfeel is polished with tannins that almost seem pulverized and everything appears to be in a state of grace thanks to a synergy between the acidity and salinity. Even if we tasted it after the 1988, a hard act to follow, this has a lot of the grace and variety that make a wine great.

### **1986 Barrel 15**

This is a 'minor' Fiorano, as was Barrel 37 which we also tasted. Minor because it seems too 'green'. Minor because the pepper tones of the Bordeaux grape here have never settled with aging and remain up front, giving the impression that this red is incomplete and raw. The mouthfeel confirms all of this with a little too much acidity and tannins that are too drying and thus take away from the wine's elegance. The finish is rustic and undefined.

### **1982 Barrel 23**

The color is a nice garnet which still has a lively light to it. The impact of the aroma is warm and seasoned with some hints of fermented fruit alongside scents of truffle, licorice, green coffee and roots. The mineral component has some unusual nuances of sulfur and methane which do not improve with breathing and that release scents of volatile acidity. In both bottles tasted this made it a bit vinegary. The mouthfeel was nicely dynamic which brought all the components into tune. All together there was no lack of authoritative even if the complexity was limited. The acidity worsened towards the finish.

### **1980 Barrel 36**

An eccentric if not bizarre bottle (even if it was excellently conserved). The aroma was raw and segmented, between the bitterness from the wood and 'brett' scents, with notes of naphthalene, rain water and hide. The mouthfeel was diluted and the tannins rigid with flavors of resin and algae and a crude and bellicose acidity towards the finish which has green and pungent after aromas. All in all a marginal version, as was vintage as a whole due to the icy cold weather in Lazio from mid-September to the end of November.

### **1977**

An outstanding year for the best terroir of central-southern Italy and those places where they dared to make wine (Bolgheri, Castelli Romani, Irpinia and, above all, Abruzzo). This has a garnet color and an aroma that is substantially different before and after breathing. The bouquet is initially sensual and tender, with notes of chestnut honey, Kentucky tobacco and cooked fruit. It then becomes a whirlwind with breathing, with almost hostile scents of smoke and tar, thyme and bark, tires and metal. The mouthfeel is angry, tannic and broad and its martial temperament holds the wine together and actually improves the flavor. Four hours of breathing could not harness the aromatic profile from coming into focus.

### **1971 Barrel 29**

The garnet color becomes lucent on the edge and the lovely bouquet is both floral and mineral. There are scents of lilies and iron, caramel and burned tobacco, ash and wild berries. As was the case with the Tenuta's sublime whites of 1971, there is an impressive, very fresh citrus note of pink grapefruit or perhaps the 'white' of the lemon peel. The mouthfeel is the product of an impeccable phenolic aging (with only 11.6% alcohol!) which has kept all the aromas intact and it is so vibrant and energetic, as well as very long, that it seems as if seltzer had been added. A heroic bottle, extraordinary, one of the best years for that region in the second half of the 20th century.

### **1970 Barrel 22**

Not bad considering how much had evaporated, an indication that it could be even better if conserved under proper conditions. The color is a warm and mature garnet while the bouquet is full of wild floral sensations (dog rose and even chamomile), eucalyptus and mint, with some hints of leather, while some vegetal and herbal nuances linger at the bottom making the wine greenish. The mouthfeel is docile and settled, the tannins have ripened and become sweet, while the acidity is composed but not infiltrating. There is an unusual trace of alcohol and the first hints of vinyl in the after aroma giving it an evolved and autumnal nuance.

### **1968**

The level of wine in the bottle had fallen by some 6cm and the label indicating the barrel it came from and the number of bottle produced had worn off. Nevertheless, what



was inside the bottle was a luxurious treat. The wine had a distinct yet transparent and luminous orange color and the bouquet was a wonderful assortment of scents including wilted flowers, pencil lead, henna, carob, fern and kaki pulp. The flavor is dense with regally fine tannins and embellished with freshness. The finish is sober and measured with a sylvan after aroma of damp underbrush (truffle, fern, humus and damp wood).

## **1958**

A transparent orange color with brown reflection. The hot and rich growing season is still identifiable even after 56 years with its scents of bitter orange marmalade and compact earth. The bouquet also has mineral tones that are quite murky with hints of dark tobacco and brine, tanned leather and acetone. The mouthfeel is still lively not due to the acidity and tannins, which are quite settled, as much as the saltiness, which lines the inside of the mouth and maintains the persistence through a true 'dilation' of the flavor.