

## The quest for quality

Italian wine producers are working hard to improve quality and presentation, finds Humphrey Serjeantson

**While the volume of** still light wine consumed in Italy continues its long-term decline, the quality of much of it has improved significantly in recent years. As lifestyles change and wine gradually becomes less of an everyday fixture in Italian life, consumption per capita is estimated (by trade body Assoenologi) to have fallen in 2013 below 40 litres per person per year, down from 45 in 2007 and 110 in the 1970s. But while quantity may be falling, there is little doubt among leading producers that the quality of wine produced in Italy has improved in recent years. *The IWSR Magazine* spoke to several leading producers to find out what steps they are taking to improve their wines.

### Improvements to quality

For José Rallo, who heads marketing for Donnafugata in Sicily, the emphasis has been on "reduction and monitoring of the yield per plant and a focus on the vegetative development to allow the bunch to ripen in the best conditions".

For Tuscany's Banfi, according to sales and marketing director Rodolfo Maralli, the strategy has been threefold, including zoning of territory in Montalcino and a search for sites with the best potential for growing the most important grapes; identification of the most suitable grape clones for the terroir; and the development of steel/wood fermenters for the top-end reds.

At Casa Vinicola Sartori, according to president Andrea Sartori, improvements in vinification and bottling techniques have played a part, but other factors have been the renewal of the vineyards and "a change to the regulations permitting the use of grape types which bring a greater quality to the blends."

At Cantina Tollo in Abruzzo, according to Ivano d'Alicandro, sales manager (export department), improvements have been brought about by a staff of oenologists creating a production protocol to be followed by every single co-operative member.

Investments in the vines were the first measure taken at Badia a Coltibuono, a leading producer of Chianti Classico in Tuscany, but another crucial step, says co-owner Emanuela Stucchi Prinetti, was "the construction of a cellar in 1997, where we can work in optimal conditions – using gravity, for example."

Meanwhile, Cantine Settesoli, a Sicilian cooperative which manages 6,000 hectares of vines and has 2,000 members, has invested €63m in the past 20 years in their vineyards, according to Roberta Urso, PR and communications manager.

While the bulk of the work in improving quality



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### Vineyards in Italy's Cinque Terre (Liguria)

has come from producers themselves, the role of consortia should not be overlooked. Aldo Lorenzoni, director of the Soave Consorzio near Verona, says that recent years have been very important for this white wine – not just because of key research projects, but also as a result of changes to the regulations governing production.

The improvements in the quality of Italian wine overall have been seen not just in Italy itself but also in exports: statistics from the Italian government body Istat for 2013 show a continued decline in the value of exports of wine in containers over 2L in volume, but a 7% increase in value of wine in containers under 2L – that is, bottled wine.

### More discerning consumers

These improvements have been driven by an increasingly discerning consumer base, not only in export markets but in Italy as well. According to Sartori, the increasing knowledge on the part

of consumers is partly "thanks to winemaking legislation which has demanded greater clarity on labels and so producers give out more complete and comprehensible messages, leading to an increased awareness among consumers of what they are drinking".

Maralli at Banfi agrees: "For several years now we have been seeing a gradual growth [in knowledge] on the part of Italian and international consumers, [who are becoming] increasingly demanding, competent and well-informed." For Maralli this feeds back to the producers once again: "This is certainly a stimulus for the producers who respond with improved quality at even more competitive prices."

For Rallo at Donnafugata, the culture of wine is growing and, alongside this, consumers are becoming more selective. "There is attention towards indigenous grape types – of which there are so many in Italy; they stimulate curiosity. There is also more attention on

smaller producers and smaller islands, such as Pantelleria." In addition, producers themselves have learnt to connect with consumers through trade fairs, tastings "and above all, cellar tours".

For d'Alicandro at Tollo there is an element of doubt on this front. "Italian producers are reacting to changes in styles of consumption with a lot of confusion. On the one hand, there is a new offering of natural and biological wines and, on the other hand, there are companies that are lowering prices in order to sell more."

For Soave, according to Lorenzoni, "Producers are learning that making a great wine today may not be enough... Soave producers are enriching their production stories with new distinctive elements."

### Improved packaging...

What goes into the bottle is just one part of the story, of course. Packaging has become a key selling point for Italian wines and, in general, producers are paying much more attention to it than was the case 10 years ago. "Today the challenge is won with form as well as content," says Lorenzoni, and in this context, the use of screw-caps for DOC Soave has been a key element.

Urso at Settesoli highlights a potential problem – and a solution – for Italian (and especially Sicilian) wine on the shelves: "Unfortunately, the image of Italian wine these days is still tied to the crest, the noble family, but it is presented in an austere and old-fashioned way. With an eye on the New World, whose producers are the real competitors for Sicilian wines, we have given our wine a modern, fresh, light image, which brings out the brand, the vine, but it also gives an immediate association of territory and uniqueness to the product." Settesoli has recently restyled its Mandrarossa brand and introduced QR codes to some bottles, allowing smartphone users to get straight to their website to find out more.

Donnafugata's labels also stand out on shelves because of their distinctive artwork. "Packaging is very important," says Rallo. "The label must give information on the contents," – not just by means of the text but also through the graphics. "Donnafugata has always believed in the strength of the images on the labels, real works of art, able to communicate the sun of Sicily, the flavours and the style of the wine."

For Maralli at Banfi, successful packaging, besides being distinctive and appealing, has to be "able to be traced back immediately to a territory and a winning brand. It has to be... in line with the message about production and quality that the company wants to transmit."

### ...and branding

Packaging itself is just one element of the wider question of branding. While still light wine has generally been less successful at creating lasting brands which can really gain traction with consumers than has sparkling wine, and particularly Champagne, Italian producers are increasingly thinking of their wines as brands.

For Sartori the difficulty of building a strong brand in Italian wine has two main sources: firstly because "a brand is often identified with a type of wine rather than a producer", and secondly because "Italian [wine] companies tend to be small and so have limited budgets for marketing, branding and advertising". D'Alicandro agrees that building a brand in the domestic market is very difficult, given the declining consumption and the multiplicity of new brands. "In export markets it is easier, but you have to have the right knowledge and the right experience."

For d'Alicandro, the issue of a brand becomes important only at a certain quality level. "If you sell at a low price, the most important thing is to keep the costs of production down as much as possible. If you are aiming for quality you absolutely have to think of wine as a brand."

For those producers looking to target export sales, as well as the domestic market, creating a brand has to work along two very different lines, according to Rallo of Donnafugata. It is much simpler to communicate effectively on the domestic market, where investments are less expensive and less risky, and where Italian producers are more aware of the particularities of the market. "Export", however, "is not one market but many: and this is the first, major, problem: what works in the US may not work in China. You need to develop a communication

base that can be shared across all markets (Donnafugata exports to 60 countries), but also deepen the marketing strategies on certain markets so as not to waste resources."

For Banfi, building a brand in the domestic market is "anything but easy", according to Maralli, "especially in these years of crisis and reduction of the market. The domestic market has a preference for brands linked to territory", strong expressions of their type and with a coherent company history. "Unfortunately, in recent years it has become more and more difficult to develop and market new brands and new concepts. Difficult but not impossible." In export markets for Maralli there is a clear distinction between mature markets, which are more similar to Italy and "emerging markets which are more in line with new strategies of marketing".

For Badia a Coltibuono you build a brand by "having a certain size and investing time and money: having a position which is very distinct, personal and well-communicated". Soave exports 80% of production, and here the challenge at brand level is slightly different. "The historic collective brands," says Lorenzoni, "now have to compete not only with varietal wines which have a much simpler communication dynamic, but also with some large company brands which – due to their economic presence and their commercial efficiency – can take away space and value from brands based on a territory."

Italy may be a few years behind its Old World rivals, France and Spain, in creating global still light wine brands, but for many producers the effort to build a strong brand and to maintain and improve quality can clearly go hand in hand. ■



Vineyard in Pompeii, with an amphitheatre in the background

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