

Italy taps its ancient roots to try to give wine a new edge

By Elisabetta Povoledo

The winemaker Piergiorgio Castellani is on a quest to find the roots of his grapes. Quite literally.

With the help of a team of scientists, agronomists and enologists from the University of Pisa, as well as local farmers, breeders and wine experts, Castellani has planted an experimental vineyard at his family's Poggio al Casone estate where he is saving indigenous local grape varieties from extinction.

"We decided to dig into the roots of the vines and bring to light what we risk losing," he said.

And because he's looking for an edge to distinguish Castellani wines from the Cabernet-Merlot-Chardonnay-dependent products that dominate the global wine market, he's also hoping that these varieties will be distinctive enough to cultivate on a large scale.

"This is how the old world can defend itself from the aggression of the new," said Castellani.

France, Italy and Spain account for more than 50 percent of global wine production. But now that even China and India have begun producing Cabernets and Merlots, the challenge facing winemakers, he added, is to preserve "an identity in the face of globalization."

Castellani is one of a growing number of Italian winemakers who are looking to wines made with indigenous local varieties as the best weapon to compete in an increasingly homologized global wine market (valued at €71.5 billion, according to the British-based International Wine and Spirit Record).

Hence the explosion on Italian supermarket shelves of regionally designated wines, like Nero d'Avola from Sicily, Primitivo from Puglia, Cannonau from Sardinia, or Teroldego from Trentino, to name just a few.

The return to indigenous grapes should give Italy a competitive edge, because "it's completely unique to Italy," said Monica Larner, the Italian editor at Wine Enthusiast, an American wine monthly. "The future of the Italian wine industry lies in these grapes."

Over the past five years, Castellani has planted nine local varieties at Poggio al Casone, an estate near Pisa, focusing on black grapes. Some, like Abrusco, are a relatively common variety in Tuscany, but others, like Oliva, Uva Vecchia, or Giacomino, are far less known.

"We're risking losing a patrimony without even knowing what we're los-



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Piergiorgio Castellani has planted an experimental vineyard at his estate.

ing," said Giancarlo Scalabrelli, a professor of viticulture and enology at the University of Pisa and leader of the Castellani project here.

For nearly 20 years now, Scalabrelli has been scouring the countryside in search of indigenous grape varieties. For climatic, geographical and historic reasons (Greeks, Phoenicians and Arabs all brought grapes to the peninsula), since ancient times Italy served as a sort of open-air nursery for Mediterranean grape varieties.

But the lion's share of the varieties were killed off by the phylloxera louse that swept through Europe's vineyards in the 19th century. When Italian producers and farmers replanted, they mostly opted for the hardiest, most productive grape varieties, including French grapes like Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, and many local vines were lost for good.

Agronomists agree that there are at least 2,000 (some say 3,000) indigenous grape varieties in Italy, and about 360 are used to make commercial wines. Currently around 130 different grapes have been identified in Tuscany and registered into the regional gene bank.

"Our first objective is to keep alive varieties that otherwise would have disappeared, and see if some of them can be grown again," Scalabrelli said. Another is to improve Tuscan wine, predominantly dependent on the Sangiovese grapes, which give rise to wines like Chianti.

The experimental vineyard on the Castellani estate is a crossroads where the two objectives are meeting. And so far, it seems to be bearing good fruit.

On a sunny morning this autumn, Giuseppe Ferroni, an agronomist from the University of Pisa who works with Scalabrelli, led a blind tasting of nine wines produced from the 2005 harvest of grapes grown on the experimental vineyard. The vinification process was very basic to better establish the potential of one grape over the other.

"Some of these are complementary grapes, so they could help correct principal wines, but others have the personal dignity of purity," said Ferroni, after the tasting, praising one wine made of Santo Stefano grapes, and another made with Oliva grapes. Both varieties had been "bordering on extinction," he said.

Meanwhile, two new trade fairs tailored to indigenous grape producers are helping to showcase the niche products to foreign buyers.

"If we make a great wine with an indigenous grape like Nero d'Avola, we're 10 times as happy than if we make a great wine with a Merlot or a Cabernet grape," said Antonio Rallo, of the family that owns Donnafugata, one of Sicily's major wine makers.

Rallo, too, is sponsoring research into Sicilian varieties, including the Zibibbo grape brought to the island of Pantelleria by the Arabs 1,000 years ago. "It's all slow-going because research depends on private initiatives," he said during a telephone interview. "It will take time to develop great new wines."

The challenge, Larner of the Wine Enthusiast said, was to develop an interest in local wines outside of Italy. "The American consumer doesn't understand that Nero d'Avola comes from Sicily or Aglianico is from Campania. You have to create an association that will make it marketable," said Larner, citing two wines that have become extremely popular on the domestic market. "If you push that model with other indigenous grapes, then I think Italy has an ace up its sleeve."

As one of Tuscany's oldest (it was founded in 1903) and largest wine producers ("we produce 13,000 bottles an hour for 8 hours a day for 200 days a year" from grapes grown on several estates in Tuscany as well as other regions), Castellani said his family had both a "duty and a passion" to research the origins of local vines, in part to offset genetic erosion, in part out of "fear of losing our soul and our cultural roots."

And Castellani also has a dream. "If one day I'll be able to produce a great wine with a grape that was born and developed here, that will be the epitome of exclusivity," he said.