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Weekly Interview: Giorgio Rivetti

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Each week, as regular readers know, we pose a series of questions to a winemaker. This week, we're featuring Giorgio Rivetti, the owner and winemaker of [La Spinetta](#), one of Italy's most acclaimed wineries.

At an early age, Giorgio knew that he had a passion for wine. At 16, he began studying viticulture and enology at the Scuola Enologica di Alba — one of Italy's oldest wine schools — and soon thereafter apprenticed in both Burgundy and Bordeaux.



Giorgio Rivetti of La Spinetta

When he returned to his family's home in Piedmont, he began working alongside his father, Giuseppe, who had launched La Spinetta in 1977 and quickly gained a reputation for his Moscato d'Asti.

The family introduced red wines in 1985, when Giorgio made a Barbera d'Asti. Many other reds quickly followed, as did international acclaim. By 2000, La Spinetta's line-up included about 15 single-vineyard wines from Piedmont — and the family wanted to continue growing. So they expanded to Tuscany, where they acquired 65 hectares of vineyards to make three different Sangioveses. Last year, La Spinetta acquired Italy's oldest Champagne-Method producer, [Contratto in Canelli](#).

Robert Parker has described Giorgio's winemaking as "masterful," and the Wine Spectator has called him "one of the leading forces in Piedmont."

Enormous thanks to [VinConnect](#) — the new company that enables U.S. consumers to order wines directly from overseas producers like La Spinetta — for facilitating this interview. As regular readers know, [we wrote a feature on VinConnect back in February](#).

Check out our interview with Giorgio below the fold.

If asked to define your general winemaking philosophy, what would you say?

It's difficult for me to define a winemaking philosophy, because I consider myself more of a farmer than a winemaker. I suppose, however, my overall philosophy and the most important factor for me is the idea that 90 percent% of a wine is made in the vineyard, from the grapes. What happens after in the cellar is much less relevant.

What wine did you drink with dinner last night?

I had a Valeirano Barbaresco 2008.



Is there a winemaker, or wine, that has particularly influenced you?

No particular winemaker — for the same reason I explained in my answer to the first question. There was certainly a wine that stood out for me though. About 25 years ago, I had the opportunity to taste a 1901 Comte de Vogüé Chambolle-Musigny. The wine left me speechless — it was still full of fresh fruit and great strength with very little oxidation.

That wine really proved that if you make a great wine from a great variety, then you can have wines that last 100 years. The variety is essential; if you work with indigenous varieties (in the

case of Piedmont, Nebbiolo) it is possible to achieve this kind of greatness in wine.

What new wines or winemaking styles interest you most, and why?

I consider myself a traditionalist, so I guess I'm too conservative to be interested in concepts like style and new. I think it would be more interesting if somebody would talk to me about how wine was made 50 or a 100 years ago, which varieties were used, what they did in the vineyard, etc. I suppose I'm more interested in the history rather than the future. I also believe that one can only make great wine from old vines, so the concept of following trends, is opposing the idea to use old vines...

When you have some precious free time, how do you like to spend it?

It's true — I have very little free time. When I am home (I usually travel 150-200 days per year), I'm busy in the vineyard or at one of our four wineries. Any free moment I have, I like to spend with my family — I have two beautiful daughters, Lidia (almost 5), and Giorgia (20 months). I also enjoy horseback riding and like to take the girls out with the horse carriage. We have two workhorses for the vineyards, which are incredibly slow, but great for pulling the carriage.

What is the most memorable wine you have ever tasted?

Besides the 1901 Comte de Vogüé Chambolle-Musigny, I'd have to add a 1952 Barolo Borgogno. This wine gave me the same sensations — it was still fruity and young, with many more years ahead of it. I believe great wines are always great, from the beginning, when they have just been released, but also after many years of aging.

Do you keep a personal cellar? What do you have in it?

The personal family cellar is managed by my son Andrea, which is probably a good thing. He's very responsible and makes sure that there is always a consistent inventory — if I had to take care of it, there would never be any bottles left. (We have tried that). I tend to want to share my wine and am always bringing bottles to restaurants to share with my customers and friends. The cellar includes wines from all over the world, but the quantities depend according to my favorite regions. My favorite is Burgundy followed by Champagne and Bordeaux. I also have some top wines from Germany, Spain, the U.S. and obviously Italy (particularly Piedmont and Tuscany).

What wine would you choose for your last meal on earth?

Though I don't really like to think about that, I think I would want a great bottle of bubbles — to celebrate life.

What's your biggest challenge as a winemaker?

I'd say what to do in a bad vintage. More specifically, to know how to address the work in the vineyards according to the weather and still be able to make a great wine. In 2002 — an infamously bad vintage in Piedmont — we still decided to produce a Barbaresco. The quantity was incredibly reduced and we made a blend of all 3 vineyards. The weather in 2002 was very wet and cold so the tannins were less ripe. However, I've recently tasted, and had customers confirm, that the 2002 Barbaresco has developed wonderfully. The green tannins that were present early on due to the climate of the vintage have softened, and the wine is incredibly enjoyable.

Other than your own, what other wine region in the world do you find particularly interesting.

Pretty much a reflection of what's in my cellar: Burgundy, Champagne, Bordeaux, Tuscany. I'm interested in regions where indigenous varieties fully express their character only in that particular region. Like Nebbiolo in Piedmont, Pinot Noir in Burgundy...

I'm fascinated with areas with a long history. A good producer knows that an old vineyard is very precious.

What is the most interesting vintage of your lifetime and why?

I'd have to say 2008. I have never before seen a vintage with so much balance. This vintage is clear evidence of why Nebbiolo is so special and, I think, the best in the world — it is able to express elegance and power at the same time. 2008 is a vintage with fantastic aging potential.

What would people be surprised to know about you? What's the biggest misconception about La Spinetta or your wines?

I'm actually quite shy. People might also be surprised to know that I really like to walk and work in the vineyards.

The biggest misconception regarding La Spinetta is the word "modern" that often gets attached to our wines. I don't consider myself a modern winemaker; I have great respect for the past and what farmers before me have done. I need old vineyards, old varieties, and respect for the vineyards. By this I mean no herbicides or other chemicals — and I work in the vineyards like before these chemicals were even invented to make great wines.

For me, the use of barriques or roto-fermenters is simply a way to maintain the quality of the juice from the grapes at harvest, not a method for making modern wine. I think many people have the idea that winemaking is how you age the wine without understanding how much work takes place in the vineyard to produce excellent quality fruit!

If you hadn't become a winemaker, what would you have done instead?

I started attending enology school at 16 — I never had any thought to do anything other than what I'm doing now.

What do you strive for as a winemaker?

I think that's pretty obvious: to make great wine, that other people think is great too! It means a lot when I have wine lovers tell me how much they enjoy and love La Spinetta wines.

What is your favorite time of year as a winemaker?

Harvest, obviously. It's the moment where you finally know what potential the fruit will have. When you taste the grapes and chew on the stems and seeds, you can already have an idea of what the end product will be like. I have a pretty good memory for taste, so it's fascinating to taste the fruit and be able to compare to the vintages before.

The harvest is a busy and exciting time at the winery, when the most is going on — from the first fermentations, the development of colors, and perfumes, especially for aromatic varieties like Moscato).

What do you read? Is there a particular book that has influenced you?

The Italian newspaper La Repubblica is like my Bible. Even when I am traveling, I try to find a copy. Otherwise, I read it online (all except the Sports section). I generally only read books on the plane.