

PROFILE

Cantina Ribelà, Bringing Grace to the Disgraced

Frascati is the most famous of the Castelli Romani, the clutch of villa-dotted towns semicircling Rome. It is also the home to some of the more uninspiring, plonk-like whites in Italy and so there was no reason to visit. But then Cantina Ribelà came along.

On the Sunday before I left Rome I spent the afternoon at the Vignaioli Artigiani Naturali tasting and tried to muscle my way through the throng surrounding a couple as photogenic as supermodel-ish Eduard and Stephanie Tscheppe-Eselbock of Austria's Gut Oggau. It's not just the way Daniele Presutti and his wife Chiara Bianchi look. Their Ribelà wines, the focus of that crowded table, were applause-worthy examples of brilliant work squeezed out of a pathetic region. Eventually I gave up on muscling through. I was going to visit the lovely couple the very next day.



Part of the Frascati truth or fiction is that the wines were favorites of either Queen Mary or Queen Victoria. If that's true, according to ex-patriot **Sarah Grunwald** (great protector of animals, champion of her home region Lazio, and fellow Georgian enthusiast), the white wines would have been skin contact field blends, far from the "straw" colored, yeasted, lifeless crap in the market today. Reds would have been an option as well.

During Queen Vic's reign, the wines were so popular that the train from Rome to the town of Frascati was dubbed 'The Train of Drunkenness.' When I boarded the choo-choo in 2019, however, the trip was sober. It was also cheap and quick; a mere 2 euro to take a 30-minute ride from city center. As I stepped off the train, down the platform and on to the street, I wondered how the mighty came so low. Really, when is the last time I ever drank a DOC wine from the region? Other wines from Lazio, sure. But a wine from this Roman bedroom community? I think never.

I scanned the cars. There was Sarah waving at me and soon we were headed on the road towards Cantina Ribelà. When I thanked her

profusely, she brushed off her generosity and said, "That's okay, I'm in love with Pepe, their cat."

Sarah lives in Lazio and spends hours canvassing the old-timers of the area, "They all wax poetic about Frascati and the Castelli Romani territory. With its volcanic soils, low disease pressure, long sunny days, breezes from the sea, it's perfect for great winemaking. But as you and I both know, terroir isn't just a sense of place, it is the efforts of the people making the wine as well."

Like straw basket Chianti, Frascati devolved into a cliché, first as the wine of the La Dolce Vita generation and then as a placeless, generic white. Unlike chianti it had no resurrection. It's sinful, because understanding the region's geology, on an extinct volcano, its hilly surroundings and climate, there could be greatness.



Sarah took a right off of the road and we were on a bucolic lane cutting through the nasty vines. And everything changed. The four-acre property of Cantina Ribelà was completely unlike its neighbors. The peach, plum, apricot, cherry and olive trees were in various stages of bud and blossom. The vines were trained into a myriad of trellising styles, including the old-fashioned and outlawed pergola. No matter how the vines were being farmed, they all seemed seconds away from its seasonal rebirth.

We parked in front of the new winery. Still quite photogenic, Daniele looked like he was recovering from a fun night after the previous day's tasting. As we walked into the misty day and the vines, he told their story.

Both from Rome, Chiara studied philosophy, Daniele was an architect. (As are so many Italian winemakers: Giampiero Bea (Bea), Giusto Occhipinti (COS), Gabrio Bini (Bini), to name a few.) A visit to Dario Prinčič in Friuli changed the couple's life. They found land in Frascati and even though they were close enough to pop in to Rome for dinner, they swore off city life. They went to work with farming master **Danilo Marcucci** in Umbria and became believers in non-dogmatic biodynamics and sensitive keepers of the vine.

I had to ask, how did such a once-grand region come to such an end? All fingers pointed to the very laws that were supposed to elevate its wine but instead were its downfall. “Forty years ago this zone was destroyed,” Daniele said. “When this became a DOC in 1966 there was no return.”

At that time Frascati became part of a new region, Castelli Romani, assigned to white grapes. Chemicals and decline came in. Daniele rattled off some statistics, such as production. In 1990 there were 194,000 liters of wine. By 1995 it had dropped to a mere 20,000.



Besides declaring Frascati a white wine region, the 1966 DOC rules banned the pergola training system so often associated with high yields. The irony? Those rules allow an astoundingly high yield of 140k per hectare for the DOC and 110k for the DOCG. Pergola doesn't have to be a guarantee of enormous yield and in addition, it could be a boon in the age of climate change. Savvy farmers are becoming fans of this overhead farming system where the grape bunches hang pendant-like beneath the shady foliage. “Take 2017,” Daniele said. “There wasn't any rain for four months but under the pergola, the berries stayed fresh, and so did we.”

Marcucci still comes around to give his farming wisdom and here the viticulture has evolved into a blend of biodynamic treatments

and sensibility combined with permaculture. They only plow when they plant and the soil, so alive and healthy, has high levels of sodium and potassium. The vines represented are malvasia, trebbiano, bombino bianco, and bellone for the whites and for the reds, there are aleatico, montepulciano and cesanese.



Basalt of the land.

That cesanese is a cause célèbre. If you're lucky enough to pick up some of Ribelà's you'll see why. Beaus. This is a grape that loves basaltic soils. Daniele told me that the writer Camillo Mancini covered Lazio in the late 1800s and wrote that the principal grape for the Castelli was cesanese, one of the best in Italy. “We don't hesitate to call it our pinot. And instead,” Daniele says with frustration, “they plant pinot!” Despite the grape's historical reputation, it was outlawed in 1966. Attempts to reintroduce it thirty years later did not meet with much enthusiasm. But Daniele's are delicious. To show how much he believes in the grape, he grafted over some malvasia to it.

Chiara was kind enough to make lunch. And after Sarah had her fill of communing with Pepe, the cat, we went in to inspect the new gleaming cantina Daniele designed and christened by the 2018 vintage.

While they take advice on their vines, their winemaking is their own thing. Fermentation and élevage goes on in a variety of vessels: glass, fiberglass, plastic, concrete, stainless, oak, chestnut and cherry. It's a petite space, perhaps designed to ensure they never grow to more than 18,000 bottles—that's the right size for them to maintain control over the whole process.

The wines overall have a beautiful restrained quality. I was particularly struck by the lack of leesy reduction that has become so commonplace among natural wines, so I asked why. Daniele wondered if it was because they stopped using sulfur in the vineyard—something that if done too close to harvest can give that smokey, gun-flinty quality. Also of note is the lack of anything officially called Frascati. They do make one wine that could qualify for the DOC, their Sattiole, a blend of malvasia and trebbiano. But Daniele stopped asking for the official classification in 2017 which is a good thing because why should these wines of beauty have a stamp that is so tarnished?



photo credit: Sarah Grunwald



In the more famous parts of Lazio, especially around Gradoli, there's a thriving cluster of naturalistas like Le Coste and Joy Kull. But they are almost two hours north. In this corner of Lazio, Daniele and Chiara have some organic comrades in the vineyard, but not in the winery. It doesn't help that vines are competing with commuters for land. It certainly takes more than one fantastic cantina to change a region around, but is there hope?

Sarah thinks so. "Older people remember the traditions and the complexity of the wines, and luckily there are still a number of the old guys making beautiful wine without any intervention." She knows an agronomist working with a number of producers and asked where is the best place in the Castelli for making wine. "He straight up told me, 'Everywhere in the Castelli is perfect for wine production.' It is something I think of often when I walk my dogs around my neighborhood past dozens of small, abandoned vineyards that nobody tends to."

It's unlikely the 'Train of Drunkenness' will ever make a comeback, but if a few more vines and winemakers do, Rome might once again have a local wine worthy of royals.