

# HOLIDAY AT

## *La Spinetta*



Giorgio Rivetti is a serious equestrian and amateur chef who also happens to be one of Italy's best winemakers. At a gathering at the Rivetti homestead, LA SPINETTA, he

shows off two of his three talents.

Twenty years ago there were more than a handful of world class wine producers in Piedmont. Today the number is closer to one hundred, according to Giorgio Rivetti, scion of LA SPINETTA, one of the most acclaimed wineries in Piedmont, if not in all of Italy.

Rivetti, 45, wears his dark hair long and combed back behind his ears, which makes him look as if he's walking into the wind. He is one of those enviable men who manage to succeed in everything they attempt: He's a creative amateur chef and a master equestrian, whose team of jumpers have won gold medals in international competitions. He is as comfortable rinsing out casks in the cellar as he is dining at La Tour d'Argent in Paris (where the sommeliers have been known to whisper, "that's the guy who makes Starder Barbaresco!").



Giorgio preparing an appetizer

Rivetti is also the head winemaker at La Spinetta (named Winery of the year in 2001 by Gambero Rosso, Italy's leading wine guide), where he works side by side with his two equally talented brothers: Bruno and Giancarlo. The three work together through every phase of the winemaking process--pruning, cultivating, thinning and, of course, harvesting. "Never lose contact with the vineyard" was his parents' advice, Giorgio says. It's clear the brothers took it to heart.

The Rivetti family story begins in the 1890s, when Giovanni Rivetti, Giorgio's grandfather, left Piedmont for Argentina. Like many Italians of the time, he dreamed of returning a rich and powerful man, perhaps even able to make a great wine in his homeland. Sadly, he never did, though his son, Giuseppe, nicknamed Pin, did. In 1929, Pin bought a property in the mist-softened hills of Annunziata and began making Barbaresco and Barbera d'Alba. It was simple stuff, sold in bulk.



In 1946, Pin married Lidia and the two went to live in Serralunga d'Alba, where they attempted to produce a first-rate Barolo. "Those were great days for my parents," Giorgio says, though it wasn't such a great time for Italian wine." In fact, from 1966 to 1985, while the rest of the world was taking a giant leap forward in quality and innovation, Italy was mired in the past, in dank cellars full of old chestnut vats and rising mold. But Pin and Lidia were determined, and what they lacked in technical skills they made up for in intuition.

"Back in the 1960s, my parents were talking about the importance of thinning," Giorgio says. "To them, it seemed like common sense to lighten a vine's load, but to everyone else, it seemed like madness. Our neighbors would gather up the severed bunches from our vineyards and bring them into town to show people what lunatics we were.



When Giorgio entered the Scuola Enologica di Alba, one of the oldest wine institutes in Italy, the family had taken up residence at La Spinetta ("the top of the hill") in Castagnole Lanze: It was the heart of the Moscato d'Asti country, home to a

rather light, simple and unexciting sparkling dessert wine. But Giorgio believed Moscato had the potential for greatness and set out to prove it. From a well positioned section of their vineyard, which he tended and rigorously thinned, Giorgio made 300 bottles, cold fermenting the grapes outdoors, in stainless steel vats, in the full October

chill. “You can imagine how crazy they all thought I was,” Giorgio laughs. Although outdoor fermentation is now quite popular, hardly anyone was doing it back then.

La Spinetta’s Moscato d’Asti surprised even its creator with its remarkable freshness and brilliant fruit flavors. Giorgio’s winemaking skills had something to do with it, certainly, but the real difference was in the vineyard; the raw material was a grower’s dream – ripe, flawless grapes. Giorgio’s new wine proved a turning point, not just for his family, but for the local wine industry as well. In fact, the name La Spinetta became virtually synonymous with the wine Moscato d’Asti.



Giorgio pouring wine to his family

But Giorgio’s vision was even grander. Just across the valley from La Spinetta was a small vineyard, Ca’ di Pian, owned by Giorgio’s father-in-law, who had tended its old vines for most of his life. One afternoon in the late summer of

1985 ( a great Piedmont vintage), Giorgio noticed that the Barbera grapes from this vineyard were some of the ripest and blackest he’d ever seen. By the end of the day, he’d struck a deal. At harvest time, Giorgio carted his father-in-law’s grapes across town to La Spinetta, where he made the first red wine of his career, the 1985 Barbera Ca’ di Pian. It was also the first red wine from Piedmont to be fully aged in new French oak casks. ( Angelo Gaja had made a Chardonnay in barrique, but his approach to reds was still largely traditional at the time.) The 1985 Ca’ di Pian was fruit-driven, showy and stylish and it augured great things for the little-respected local grape Barbera, which had been used to make wines of little distinction.

Today, the lineup includes 13 mostly single-vineyard wines, including Barolo, Barbaresco and Barbera. The mentality of Piedmont winemaking has also changed since Giorgio founded, in 1977, the region’s first organization of small producers. Even long-established winemakers like Domenico Clerico and Paolo Scavino have adapted their methods to the tastes of an more international audience.

Of course, La Spinetta has its critics: The wines have been called “too modern” or “too oaky”, though Giorgio has a defense against the former charge: “I’m a modernist”, he says, “but that doesn’t mean I’m not a traditionalist, too. “He offers this example: “Suppose I was raising cattle: I tear down my ancient, filthy stables and replace them with new ones, using lots of stainless steel for efficiency and hygiene, a state-of – the- art ventilation system and good natural light. As for the rest, I haven’t changed a thing. My pastures are my pastures, my stock is my stock, my feed is my feed. I’m still raising the cattle I’ve always raised, I’m just doing it better”.

The enormous La Spinetta homestead and farm, following the deaths of Lidia and Pin the year before, now houses more Rivettis than ever, though their parents’ place



Bruno Rivetti

remains empty. It isn’t a glamorous dwelling; the words charming and romantic can’t have passed Pin’s lips as he outlined his requirements to the architect in the early ‘80s, when it was built. “A place where things happen,” he might have instructed.

Everyone who lives in this sprawling single-family community lends a hand, Giorgio’s sister, Giovanna manages the estate’s employees, while the brothers’ wives all pitch in on labeling days and



Giorgio talking to one of his nices

when there are orders to get out. Carlo’s son, Marco, works in the vineyard along-side his father; Giorgio’s son, Andrea, also an enologist, works in shorts and T-shirt in the cellars. He’s a bright boy who’s “got the passion” and holds the future in his

capable hands. It's a lucky family.....though blessed may be an even better word.



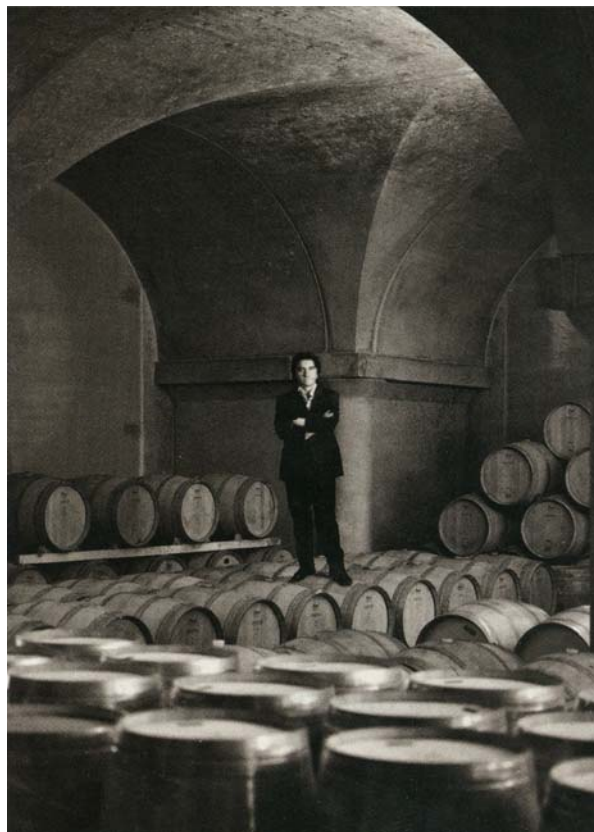
The holidays are a special time for the family, though the dinner venue is always changing; one year it's Bruno's, the next Carlo's. "In daily life, we're always running," Giorgio says. "We never have time to get together

and just talk. During the holiday season we rediscover the value of this great friendship we share. "It's also when they rediscover the extent of Giorgio's culinary talent, as he turns out family favorites like risotto with porcini mushrooms, paired with the Pin Monferrato Rosso, and a double-barreled main course of roasted stuffed capon and Barolo-braised veal, both accompanied by the extraordinary Vürsù Stardi Barbaresco.

Meanwhile, the Rivetti success story continues. Having changed the image of Piedmont to a younger, more worldly one, the Rivettis have expanded to Tuscany, where they make a Sangiovese-based wine, Sezzana.



But it's Piedmont that will always be home for the Rivettis – where they continue to be worthy custodians of a remarkable heritage.



Giorgio in the cellar in Castagnole Lanze



Giorgio enjoying his second hobby, horses