

GAMBERO ROSSO

Bruno, Carlo and Giorgio Three Kings in Langa

Although it began life making Spumante, the Rivetti brothers' winery, La Spinetta, after the success of their Moscato, started producing the great reds of the Langa zone: They began with Barbera and Barbaresco, and didn't have to wait long for recognition. This year, with four of their wines winning Tre Bicchieri status in Vini d'Italia 2001, we named them Winery of the Year. But Bruno, Carlo and Giorgio have already moved on to face new challenges, beginning with Barolo. "You know what they said at the bar in town? That we were crazy to throw away all those grapes. That they didn't understand, how we could make any money. When we bought the Gallina di Neive vineyard, our neighbors went into our vineyard to collect the bunches of green grapes we had pruned. They brought them to the bar to show just how nuts we were. How could we do such a thing, they said. That was July of 1995. And you know what they're all doing now? They're pruning their first row along the road. But inside, the vineyards are all nice and full. That's the mentality."

Giorgio Rivetti enjoys a big, meaty laugh, and with good reason. Everything is going splendidly for him, and he couldn't care less about his neighbors' mentality. It's not only because the brothers' firm has won the Winery of the Year title. Above all, he laughs because the demand for their wine is three times what they can produce (360,000 bottles divided among 10 labels, from 85 hectares of land). The whole family is involved: parents Giuseppe and Lidia, three

brothers and their wives (Bruno and Emiliana, Carlo and Franca, Giorgio and Clara)

And the younger generation coming up. But Giorgio is the one who meets journalist and greets the dozen of visitors that stop by every day.

The family lives together in one large, newish building on their property, a choice that shows how strong their ties are. Underneath is a mammoth cellar, 4500 square meters (over 40,000 square feet): The view is breathtaking : acres of vineyard, and the Alps on the horizon. The name of the region, Piedmont, comes from a phrase meaning "at the foot of the mountains".

The three brothers have been close since they began working together in the Castagnole Lanze vineyards after finishing technical school. The last time they had a big fight, Giorgio comments, was when they were boys.

He attributes this harmony to their father. Giuseppe is not the patriarchal figure so common here in Langa. In some families, if the son wants to make quality wine, he has to clip off the bunches at night and bury them. In gratitude for their father's trust in them, the sons have named one of their greatest wines Pin, Giuseppe's nickname. Their mother, Lidia, has given her name to a remarkable Chardonnay, a 94. Perhaps. Giorgio thinks, his father's character can be traced to childhood spent in Argentina where many Piedmontese farm workers emigrated at the beginning of the twentieth century. At thirteen, Giuseppe was back in Italy, but the open prairies of his South American birthplace seem to have left their mark. His passion for through bred horses, passed on to his sons, may date from that experience. But, Giorgio thinks, living somewhere simply changes one's perspective. If it's possible to

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switch continents, why not change wine?

The wine in the Langa was Moscato. The big local spumante industries – Cinzano, Gancia and Martini- bought all of Castagnole Lanze's grapes. Without industrial technology, the local farmers could only make still wine, or one with just a little sparkle- a natural Moscato, produced for their own use. La Spinetta Moscato appeared on the market in 1978 : 6,000 bottles. Almost immediately, the brothers divided it into four crus, Biancospino, Muscatel Vej, Lapasot and the legendary Bricco Quaglia : Another was added a bit later, San Rumu: They vinified the grapes for each vineyard separately, and released the wines at different times of year. Each cru developed its own aura, as did, one by one, all the Rivetti wines. The philosophy behind each is the same, whether a Barolo or a Moscato: If your grapes are worth 100, your wine can be a 90.

The brothers are all busy with vineyard work, but when the moment comes to thin out the bunches, Giorgio, who is responsible for the cellar, takes charge. "If you work in the cellar , you know what the wine should taste like in the glass. If you work in the vineyard, you don't prune drastically enough. You love the grapes too much: But you shouldn't leave more than a kilo of grapes per plant." Giorgio not only affected the way things were done on the family land. With his outgoing personality and gypsy-singer looks, he influenced other small grapegrowers to take pride in their grapes. Why unload them at rock-bottom price to middlemen? He remembers long wine soaked nights with neighboring producers, laughing and joking, but also talking seriously about why their wine wasn't selling

well. Freisa and Dolcetto were popular at the end of the seventies, but sales of Barolo and Barbaresco languished. In 1978, Giorgio became the leader of a small group of landowners, Piccoli Produttori Grandi Vini, which included names such as Bartolo Mascarello, Cigliuti, Sandrone, Oberto and Vezza. For the first time a group of winemakers worked together instead of individually. Later, in 1992, this movement became the association known as Langa In. The cast changed somewhat. The members included Clerico, Scavino, Altare, Conterno Fantino and many other great names in the zone.

"We used to put 100 wines from all over the world on the table. We'd taste them blind. And were realized that you could count on the fingers of one hand the number of Italian wines that measured up. "The group began to understand what needed changing: In any case, they went to fairs together, stated their positions together, presented a united front.

The headaches began. Barolo had to be made in one way; a long period on the skins, large barrels and lengthy aging to soften tannins that would otherwise be too aggressive. The Langa In group was accused of making non-traditional reds in small barrels and forgetting about typicity: But the idea of making reds in barriques began to creep into the Rivetti's cellars, too. "I tasted wine made in small barrels and I liked it. I tasted the others and they literally stank:"

The new Barolos and Barbaresco were rounder and less austere. They pleased the public, and their success carried along with them the old-style labels. The young Giorgio Rivetti could be impartial in his role as president of Langa In but also because he had none of this wine in his cellar. He had

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others, in particular, Pin, the Monferrato red named for his father. The 1990 version was revolutionary: It was a blend of Nebbiolo and Barbera with Cabernet (today the percentages are 50, 25, and 25).

The number of bottles per hectare of vineyard was very low: 3,000. Vinification took a week or so. The wine was aged for 18 months in small barrels. But experimenting with Nebbiolo and Barbera was blasphemous, because the ties to land and vineyard in Langa are very special. Here, unlike in Tuscany, the land has always belonged to the farmers themselves, and not to big estate-owners who turned it over to their factors to manage. People here are emotionally attached to their vines. Each farmer knew how to get the best out of his land, even if he sold his grapes. For the wine he drank himself, he chose the two or three rows that had the best exposure. Now many of these small farmers have learned to sell their own wine, but the Rivetti brothers were among the first. By 1995, Rivetti could no longer be simply classified as a Moscato firm. An essential move was the purchase of one of the best Barbaresco vineyards, Gallina di Neive, which also included 10 hectares of Barbera: Among the Barbera and Barbaresco labels the Rivettis released was Vigneto Staderi 96. Famous critic Robert Parker in his Wine Advocate newsletter pronounced it the greatest Nebbiolo he had ever tasted.

Giorgio doesn't fool around, at least in his cellar. He changes his barriques annually (600 this year). "A barrel can be big or small, but if you want a super result, the wood must be clean." Cleanliness is an obsession with him. He tasted from the barrels once a week. "As soon as you notice an odor, you have to rack the wine at the next

new moon." Tagging behind him in the cellar is his son, twenty-one year old Andrea. "He has promise. Since he grew up drinking great wine, he tastes anything wrong right away." Another key person at La Spinetta is Stephan Mazzetta, a 40-year-old Parisian engineer with an enormous passion and instinctive talent for wine. The most dramatic change came in 2000 with the purchase of eight hectares of vineyard in Grinzane Cavour, in the heart of Barolo: "A fabulous vineyard. Every time I go there, my heart leaps at the sight of those full, sweet grapes. It's another Cannubi, another Bussia." But it's as easy to make a great wine in Bussia as it is to be elegant dressed in an Armani outfit. The trick is to have a good eye and recognize a stylist on the way up. The Rivettis have that kind of eye for good slopes. "Wasn't it Altare who discovered the Arborina? Who knows how many Cannubi there are in Piedmont?" The Carzello vineyard cost them around three and half million dollars. Giorgio is confident. "We can have a good influence on Barolo's future: "His reasoning is clear: when Gaja bought in Bolgheri, prices went from 15 million lire a hectare to 70 (from \$7000 to \$35,000, approximately). The Rivetti name is now strong enough to raise the value of neighboring vineyards. The future, Giorgio believes, will be in pure Nebbiolo and Barbera, rather than Cabernet or Merlot. A public in search of il vino del territorio will be looking for indigenous grapes. "Today we have to believe in the value of our local varieties. We have to be convinced that they can compete internationally. We have to answer Merlot with Barbera because we have no competition with that grape. In Burgundy they believe in Pinot Noir. They don't plant Cabernet. Today, I would not make a wine like Pin." And Moscato? "It has already fully expressed itself."