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La Spinetta's Giorgio Rivetti on what it takes to make outstanding Italian wine

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Photos, courtesy, La Spinetta

Giorgio Rivetti makes some of Italy's top wines at La Spinetta.

Giorgio Rivetti has been drawn to wine since he was six years old, growing up in Piedmont in Northwestern Italy, often taking a nip of what was being poured. By the time he was a teenager he was enrolled in a formal wine program.

His father Giuseppe Rivetti had grown grapes and made small amounts of wine. That changed in 1977 when the Rivetti family — Giuseppe, Giorgio and his brothers Bruno and Carlo — began La Spinetta. They focused on Moscato d'Asti, a slightly bubbly, sweet dessert wine made from the Muscat grape.

In 1985 they started making their first red wine, Cà di Pian, from Barbera grapes. And the growth continued. In 1995 they purchased the Gallina vineyard and began producing Nebbiolo wines in Barbaresco. In 2000 they entered the prestigious region of Barolo, building a winery at the Campè vineyard.

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The winery expanded beyond Piedmont in 2001 when they began producing wines in Tuscany at the Casanova winery. A Methode Champenoise winery was added to the portfolio in 2011 with the purchase of Contratto, located back in Piedmont.

Despite the steady growth, the wines of La Spinetta have remained some of Italy's best. Rivetti, 57, is a passionate and focused winemaker with a strong belief in tradition. Organic practices, a stringent green harvest (removing grapes in mid-season so the remaining grapes can better ripen) and slow, methodical harvests are some of tools used at La Spinetta to deliver wines that often wow the critics.

I recently sat down and talked wine, farming and expansion with Rivetti during a stop in Calgary. Here are some highlights from our conversation:

On the importance of Nebbiolo, the red grape used to make the great Piedmont wines of Barolo and Barbaresco:



“Nebbiolo is a fantastic grape because, first of all, it is unique. It is doing a fantastic job in Piedmont. They try to work with Nebbiolo in so many different countries, but the region where Nebbiolo does the best is in Piedmont. This is very important. Another important thing about Nebbiolo is you must be a great farmer because it is not easy to manage Nebbiolo in the vineyard. It's very exuberant, it loves to produce a lot of fruit, so you have to do a green harvest, you have to do

everything organic. It's something different, but if you are able to manage Nebbiolo in the vineyard, you can produce fantastic wine.

“Nebbiolo is an aromatic grape, in the glass you can have a lot of aromas, a lot of fruit, herbs, flowers, and it's a very powerful wine, but it's never a heavy wine. It's always very elegant. That's important. It's not easy for everybody to understand Nebbiolo because it has a strong taste, especially if it's young, but for sure it's one of the most elegant wines in the world.”

Why farming and organic practices — which are followed at La Spinetta — are so vital in Piedmont:

“Producers have to understand, if they want to make great wine, they have to make great fruit. They have to understand that 90 per cent of the quality of the wine is made in the vineyard, not in the cellar. That's why I love to say we are farmers. Thank God in Piedmont, 99 per cent of the producers are great farmers. It's completely different than in Tuscany, or in Bordeaux. You can compare Piedmont with Burgundy. They are farmers. They are doing a beautiful job in the vineyard, they're doing everything organic in the vineyards the most important thing is they are great farmers.

“The key for me, to make great wine, is to do everything organic in the vineyard, but also it's so, so important, especially with our grapes, with indigenous grapes in Italy, whether it's Barbera,

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Nebbiolo or Sangiovese, because those grapes are so generous, it's very important to do a very strong green harvest. You can be organic, but if you produce a huge quantity of fruit, the wine is no good. You are losing all the concentration in the fruit. That's why the green harvest is so important."

On the importance of harvesting the grapes at the right time:

"You have to harvest when the tannin is ripe, not because you can make 14.5 per cent alcohol wine, that doesn't make any sense. You can have 14.5 per cent alcohol wine, but if the tannin is not ripe it tastes green for the rest of its life. For 30 or 40 years, it tastes green.

"The goal is to harvest when the fruit is 100 per cent ripe, not overripe, not underripe, but 100-per cent ripe."

Why they harvest their Barolo vineyards in up to five different passes, sometimes spread over weeks:

"My father said it doesn't make sense to do everything organic in the vineyard, to work with 55-, 65-, 75-year-old vines, to do a very strong green harvest and then to harvest everything at the same time."

On the importance of native grapes such as Colorino in Tuscany:

"Colorino was very important in old Chianti blends. It was very important, just 10 per cent, 15 per cent. But you know, they cut all the Colorino vines because it's tough to work in the vineyard with Colorino, so they started with international grapes. That's so bad, this stuff. It's Tuscany, you're talking about Tuscany, not Napa Valley. Tuscany is Sangiovese, Colorino, Prunolo, Canaiolo. Those are fantastic grapes."

Why La Spinetta purchased sparkling wine producer Contratto:

"Because I love bubbles. I love great bubbles. A great bottle of bubbles is fantastic for a number of reasons. First of all it's not high in alcohol, 12 per cent alcohol. If it's great Champagne, it's a fantastic food wine. It's a great food wine. A lot of people drink sparkling wine just as an aperitif because maybe the quality's not there. But if the quality's there, the wine's a fantastic food wine."

If there are any other projects he would like to pursue:

"I would like to do something in Burgundy. For me, Burgundy is one of the most important regions in the world for wine, especially for the whites, they're fantastic. A lot of people in the world are drinking 15.5 per cent, rich, sweet, oaky Chardonnay because they never had the real one. If you've had the real chardonnay, you can not drink wine like that. If you've had the real Burgundy, you can not drink something different because that's THE chardonnay. The other wines, they are something different, like liquor, like Port, really. Chardonnay is a fantastic wine with 13 per cent alcohol, when it has minerality, it has complexity and it has acidity. A beautiful food wine. You can enjoy it after three or four years or you can cellar it for 20 years."