

The energizer bunny abroad: Sam Bowman reports from Italy

When I'm not hurtling around the South Eastern Australian countryside as fast as legally possible, checking in on my clients and growers, I love travelling and exploring new regions. Back in August, I was lucky enough to travel to Italy and France and meet with some of Europe's best producers, viticulturists and nursery operators. Here is an overview of what I found happening among the vineyard of our European counterparts.

IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE, there is another viticulturist hurtling round the Italian countryside at a rapid rate. His name is Stefano Dini. Educated in Italy and trained under the likes of Bruce Chalmers and Alberto Antonini, Dini is now independently consulting the length of the country as well as abroad – in Chile, Hungary, Kosovo and Serbia.

If you said he had a fair idea of the direction of global viticulture it would be a massive understatement. I was lucky enough to spend two days nervously clutching at the safety handle of Stefanos Hyundai while we visited his many clients in the Tuscan countryside.

The industry in Italy is governed under the DOC (Controlled and Guaranteed Origin Denomination) which strictly governs how a producer can cultivate their vines, use irrigation, which varieties can be chosen to plant – and, in the prestigious DOCG, the eventual alcohol of the resultant wines.

While this has protected the authenticity and integrity of Italian exports, Dini believes it is quite limiting as it impacts the fluidity in which producers can shift with the ever changing wine industry. For example Dini believes zoning, along the lines of the Australian geographical indication (GI) system, is very important and should be reviewed as both markets and climates change around us.

In terms of management, we have many similarities. Pruning is a crucial part of the year and only performed by highly-trained crews. Guyot, arched cane and sylvoz methods are employed alongside unilateral spur which is common place in many high density vineyards.

As Dini explains, “each plant should be pruned in a specific way and the pruner with his choices imposes how to manage the number of shoots later”.

“This does not mean that the other operations lose importance but the number of buds, the length of the spurs, the shape and length of the fruitful cane, define a setting that hardly can be changed by the following operations.”

Shoot and bunch thinning are employed to regulate the tonnage on heavy cropping Italian varieties and leaf plucking

is also quite commonplace to achieve desired sugar levels. As irrigation is outlawed in many DOCG vineyards, the soil is managed accordingly. Building soil organics via mulch and cover crops, midrow tilling to reduce evaporation and capillary rising are used in place of supplementary irrigation but the initial preparation is key.

Selection of variety and rootstock are as vital as effective deep cross ripping when establishing vineyards without irrigation. The stock is planted in the winter with the scion field grafted on in the summer to ensure the effective root development.

PEST AND DISEASE

Looking at viticultural issues in the region the largest issues are Esca (trunk disease), mildews (Powdery and Downy) and in terms of pests believe it or not... wild boar! Many vineyards employ the use of electric perimeter fences to keep the beasts at bay. With my Australian experience in the fight against trunk diseases (commonly *Eutypa Lata* and *Botryospheria*) I was interested to learn more about how Dini is dealing with Esca from a management perspective. The disease is caused predominantly by the fungus *Phaeomoniella chlamydospora* and is the most economically devastating trunk disease in Europe. He explained: “The first step is to understand if it is really Esca or a different wood disease. The scientific world is going to aid with enzymatic testing and in vitro growth tests. The other important aspect is a good knowledge of symptoms on leaves and wood. You have to know that it is impossible to eradicate this complex of fungi, you have just to find the best way so that vine and Esca can coexist.”

To reduce the risk of spreading, it is important:

- Plant healthy (certificated) vines;
- Train the vines without making big cuts during growing season and pruning;
- If you make big cuts, remember to cover them with natural glue containing copper; and
- If you detect a vine that for two seasons shows Esca symptoms, pull out the vine and replace it with a healthy one.

Vines were about three weeks out from harvest while we were looking through the vineyards and it had been a rough season in terms of disease management. Some vineyards had conducted up to 20 cover sprays which, even for our high-input risk regions, is substantial.

SUSTAINABILITY

I queried Stefano on the efforts of growers moving towards more sustainable management systems. “I believe that the number of sprays should be reduced for both environmental problems and production cost, but without putting at risk the production,” he said.

“New technologies, for example weather stations with mathematical forecasting models for main pest and disease are increasingly modern and accurate, can aid but the knowledge of



Rootstock planted ready to be field grafted.



Esca infected vine.



Stefano Dini and Sam Bowman inspecting a Tuscan vineyard.

the single vineyard and variety and understanding molecules to be used and their application methods, is essential.

“Only through a good combination of all these elements you can reduce the number of treatments.” Many of Dini’s clients are moving towards organics with the split roughly 60% organic, 10% Biodynamic and the remaining 30% using some form of integrated pest management (IPM) system.

TALKING ABOUT VARIETIES

As a Tuscan himself, Dini can’t go past Sangiovese – in fact, he sees it as the most versatile and interesting to grow. But in truth, it’s probably got as much to do with the romantic Italian in him suggests “ones’ first love can never be forgotten”.

To give some context to Australia, grape prices for Sangiovese range between .25 euro/kg (\$360 AUD/tonne) for easy drinking IGT Sangiovese to 4 euro/kg (\$5720/tonne) for Brunello Riserva DOCG. Syrah also holds a special place for Dini, most likely he thinks because of the time spent working in the old Chalmers vineyard at Euston NSW with industry legend, Italian variety champion, Bruce Chalmers.

As he states “when I have tried to plant this variety in Italy and abroad, always I got good results”.

I asked Dini what Australian growers could learn from the Italians? It seems no matter where you are in the world; sustainability in agriculture is the way forward especially when

it comes to the infrastructure in our vineyards:

He believes Australian growers “could improve the use of different material in the trellis system, in particular by using hot galvanized and corten-weathering steel posts and giving importance to the stake”.

The battle against Copper Chrome Arsenate (CCA) stills runs hot in Australia, but it’s great to see many companies developing sustainable steel options for our vineyards. Looking at the price difference in Italy of wood vs steel the comparison is around 1 euro and freight is usually very cost effective, this shows the limiting factor and resistance to the uptake of steel in Australia, is price.

WRAPPING UP

No matter where I travel to look at vineyards I am always surprised with what I find. The process of growing grapes, no matter where you are in the world, how much you have studied or how long you have been doing it is always fascinating and there is always something to learn. That is the reason this field attracts likeminded passionate people, and it’s also the reason I love what I do.

Editor’s note: Quick shout out to let people know Bowman got married to Tennille Chalmers in November. Congratulations! And Bruce Chalmers gave a great ‘father-of-the-bride’ speech.



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