

The Fattoria Montecchio shines a light on terracotta

‘From Terra(cotta) To Wine’ is the title of Emanuele Vescovo’s book and also of the relative conference: both concerning the case history of the wine farm that has, successfully, re-discovered the antique method of vinification and ageing in terracotta amphorae. The Antica Fornace Montecchio, which is on the estate of the Fattoria Montecchio, is where the terracotta amphorae and jars are made and in which their new wine is produced.

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Emanuele Vescovo’s book, ‘From Terra(cotta) to Wine’, is the first of a series that you will find at the website www.lepaginedelvino.it, and was presented at the convention for its premier at the Fattoria Montecchio. It tells of the recent history of this well-known wine farm in San Donato in Poggio (Tavarnelle Val di Pesa), in the heart of the Chianti Classico area. In the grounds of the Montecchio estate is an antique terracotta furnace, the Antica Fornace Montecchio, where for centuries expert craftsmen in the tradition of hand made terracotta objects still work. Among the ornamental pieces for gardens and houses, all in the local galestro clay, you will find their vases, jars and amphorae.

It is here that four years ago the Fattoria Montecchio decided to try to revive the tradition of vinification and ageing in terracotta amphorae along side the traditional wines they have always made in barrels and barriques. The resulting wine, called Priscus, made of only Sangiovese grapes is of intense colour and structure, with a persisting tannin flavour. Hardly surprising they chose to call it Priscus after the famous Roman gladiator.

“The project aimed to experiment the possibilities of reviving the antique wine-making method using terracotta for vinification,” explains the owner of Fattoria Montecchio. Riccardo Nuti, “Seeing as we have a terracotta furnace, that began working in the nineteenth century and was re-opened by my father, Ivo, at the beginning of the nineteen nineties, we thought it would be interesting to combine the know-how of the terracotta craftsmen with the experience of our wine-making experts. Thanks to the collaboration with Professor Ricci, we managed to make jars, vases and amphorae well suited to wine making.”

“We have no intention of turning this into an industrial programme; our products must be very carefully hand made and have a certain ‘individuality’. Thanks to this focus on each object we have obtained jars and amphorae that can adapt to each of the several stages of wine making.”

An interesting story indeed, is that of the Fattoria Montecchio. So much so that the journalist and sommelier, Emanuele Vescovo, was literally fascinated.

“I already knew of the Fattoria Montecchio,” says Vescovo, “but it was during the 2016 edition of Vinitaly that I first tasted not only the wine Priscus, but also other wines made by the same farm, with the same grapes, of the same year but using the classical method.

The difference in the two vinification and ageing methods hits you at first sip. This was what made me want to write a book about the Montecchio terracotta project. There are other wine farms that have started making wine in terracotta but only the Fattoria Montecchio has its own furnace, where they can adapt each jar, vase or amphora to the specific needs of vinification and ageing. Being hand made, they can experiment and come up with the best utensils for each phase of the procedure, so as to get the best results from their grapes.

Professor Massimo Ricci is well aware of this, being an expert in the restoration of antique artefacts for UNESCO, and having lent a helping hand to the production of amphorae in 'cocciopesto' (an ancient method of making waterproof, clay objects) of many different sizes and shapes according to their uses, and giving results that are not dissimilar to wine made in wooden barriques.

“The technology used in restoring monuments,” said Professor Ricci, “can be used for the creation of amphorae in 'cocciopesto', if suitably adapted. The raw materials are basically the same as those used by man for thousands of years and are not hazardous to human health. We have revived the ancient tradition for storing grain, olive oil and wine. This return to the origins was possible because the Fattoria Montecchio has a terracotta furnace on its estate. In a world where people are bending over backwards to invent new methods and technologies we are doing the exact opposite.” The success in using ancient wine making methods is partially due to modern equipment that allows us to control each phase. “We managed to make a terracotta keg that holds 5000 litres and has all the necessary devices to ensure the correct procedures in vinification. What’s more is we have discovered that terracotta has no influence what so ever on the flavour of the wine, allowing the grape to release it’s own flavour without the slightest adulteration.”

But how old is the history of wine making and its methods? Dr. Giuseppina Carlotta Cianferoni, curator of the Etruscan Museum, which is part of the National Archaeological Museum of Florence, explains: “The history of wine making goes back thousands of years and the techniques used are numerous. It is interesting to follow the evolution of the instruments used during the various ages. For example terracotta was used by the Greeks, the Etruscans and the Romans, as we can see from the archaeological artefacts found in tombs and houses, with images of satyrs pressing grapes in canisters – and then culminating in the ritualistic symposium. We have found evidence of wine making in Georgia that dates back to the fifth millennium B.C. along with vines that had already been domesticated.”

Starting from the history of wine making and the use of materials like terracotta is useful to understanding how and why the wine we drink today is what it is. As Stefano Di Blasi explains “The evolution of oenological techniques owes a great deal to the use of terracotta. Being able to compare the results of different methods has enabled us to see the different effects they (the different methods) have on the wine. From a sensorial stand point, terracotta helps to stabilise the colour and the natural expression of the grapes, having a flavour which is uncontaminated by wood. Over the past few decades we have come to appreciate aromas like coffee, chocolate and coconut, which do not come from

the grapes but from the wood of the barrels and barriques. With terracotta there is no such contamination; the tannin keeps the colour intense and increases the structure of the wine. In this way we produce a fuller and richer flavour that is closer to the original taste of the grape.”

To understand how the Etruscans used wine, we must also consider what they ate. Luca Bertini, founder of the ‘Magna Etruria Project’, says “During my dinner-conferences I always tell the participants about the origins of the dishes they are eating. I include snippets of Etruscan history, which for many years was entwined with that of the Romans. We don’t have any Etruscan literature but thanks to archaeological artefacts, frescoes and painted ornaments, as well as what the Greeks wrote about them, we have been able to reconstruct what they ate and how they prepared it. By studying this we can find the origins of the Tuscan food of today.”

Among the guests at the presentation of Vescovo’s book was the mayor of Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, David Baroncelli. He showed great interest in this new wine making project of the Fattoria Montecchio. “An extraordinary example of competence and experience” he said, “ that is born from a legacy of historical knowledge and enhanced by modern understanding, which underline the values of our traditions. The Fattoria Montecchio is an example of excellence in our territory and this convention, open to everyone in the world of wine making, bears witness to the dynamic and forward looking mentality of the wine makers of Chianti. The know-how of this wine farm in San Donato in Poggio, is a treasure trove of highly qualified, professional people in the world of wine, of history and of terracotta, and all this is offered to the younger generations of both Italian and international wine enthusiasts who want to continue along this path with passion, capability, courage and future vision.”

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