

Jear the rocky outcrops of the Dolomites in Italy, in the northern part of Italy, of wine are quietly ageing in the rows of Azienda Agricola Foradori. But in an area near the rows of neatly stacked, stained oak barrels, plenty of large pots can be seen.

own south, hundreds of miles away in Vittoria, a wine centre in the eastern part of Sicily, a similar phenomenon is taking place. Here at Azienda Agricola COS, as it is at Foradori, one of these clay vessels contains wine that is slowly ageing — as it would in a barrel but without taking on any influence of oak — until it is ready to be bottled and shipped around the world.

Foradori and COS are part of a growing number of wine producers, and quite counter-intuitively it seems, employing an ancient method of winemaking once commonly used by our ancestral forefathers millennia ago — making wine in clay vessels known as amphorae.

Unlike conventional winemaking, where grapes are pressed on the day of harvest and the skins and seeds are quickly removed either immediately or after a matter of days or weeks, wine in amphorae spend months with skin and seed contact. One mistake in the process could turn the harvest from juice to palatable vinegar in no time. But if done right, the result is said to be quite different from any other wine made according to the industry's standard procedures.

Not all of the wines at Foradori and COS go into amphorae, however. Only those in cuvees are given this special treatment, and this, it can be seen, is a natural extension of the tedious work that is done in the vineyards.

Live Appeal

It is impossible to talk about Elisabetta Foradori and her eponymous biodynamic estate without mentioning Teroldego in the same breath — the one grape and wine that has come to be most associated with her name.

Teroldego, which recent studies have shown to be a genetic ancestor of Pinot Noir/Shiraz, has long been a part of winemaking in the Dolomites, but it was not always used for blending. The son of Elisabetta, who took over the reins of the estate from her father in the

1980s following his untimely demise, was to change all that. Armed with a firm conviction of the grape's intrinsic quality, Elisabetta became singularly focused on making a fine wine out of it. But the initial step of sourcing suitable fruit proved to be a hard row to hoe — Teroldego grapes at that time came from three clones that produced big berries and high yield, since growers and winemakers were more concerned with quantity than quality. She quickly turned her attention to old Teroldego vines, from which small bunches of fruit were selected for studies and experiments. Old Teroldego vines were rare, as they no longer produced the desired yield required for mass



production, and were usually uprooted to make way for younger vines. (Older vines are less vigorous in producing grapes, but the quality of the fruit is considered higher in quality.) By 1996, she had identified 15 clones, which she used to replant her vineyards. Meanwhile, she also made Teroldego using existing fruit from her oldest vines, which was bottled and released under the name Granato. Since its initial release, the wine has consistently been ranked among the best in Italy, catapulting this once-humble variety into stardom.

Elisabetta's cause in championing native varieties continued with Nosiola, a grape that derives its name from the distinct hazelnut (or "nicciola" in Italian) character after vinification. Nosiola naturally has a very neutral expression, and the only way to coax its flavours is through prolonged skin maceration. In order to achieve this, Elisabetta needed a vessel in which she could vinify the wine while retaining its pure fruit expression and focus.

The amphora turned out to be the solution. Elisabetta's son Emilio



FROM LEFT | ELISABETTA FORADORI HAS IMPRESSED THE WINE WORLD WITH HER NOSIOLA WINE VINIFIED IN AMPHORAE | THE VINEYARDS OF FORADORI ARE SET AGAINST THE MAGNIFICENT DOLOMITES MOUNTAINS

also felt the stress of catering to market demands — the Americans preferred bigger, oakier styles, while the Europeans tended towards more subtle, refined wines. COS' insistence on producing terroir-driven wines unaffected by fads eventually led it to the amphora.

The first experiment at the turn of the century turned out to be catastrophic, as the team could not find a way to seal the vessels properly. It took the estate another three years, during which he experimented with amphorae from various countries, before settling on the vessels from Spain, the country where his fascination with the amphora began.

"The structure and depth of amphora wines are much more complex and interesting. They are less showy, but definitely more profound and deep." — Giusto Occhipinti

explains, "The amphora is aromatically neutral, but like a barrel, it also allows oxygenation. It's the purest way to vinify a wine, so what we get is a pure expression of the soil and the fruit, without oak getting in the way."

Driven by Terroir

Over at COS, the amphora was chosen basically for the same reason. "We wanted to keep a pure expression of fruit and terroir in our wines," explains Giusto Occhipinti, one of the three owners of the estate (and the "O" in COS), lamenting that the use of barriques in ageing wine was resulting in a standardisation of taste. There had been times Occhipinti felt that all the work accomplished in the vineyard was undone by oak, which, while

imparting pleasant attributes to the wine, was also taking away the flavours of the fruit. In short, it was getting in the way of pure terroir.

But that is not to say that he's completely done away with oak — he still employs barrel ageing in his cellars, and believes that it has its place. The great attraction of the amphora, he says, is in its neutrality. "What the amphora is doing is the oxygenation of the wine, as the oxygen that comes through the clay is quite the same as a barrique. So it's like ageing in oak but without the oak."

"Ten years ago, winemakers would be asking themselves, 'What oak should we be using?' The concept of winemaking lay more in the cellar than in the vineyard," he continues, noting that winemakers

Today, COS has about 150 amphorae in its cellar, likely the largest collection in a single wine estate in Europe. Foradori, who started its experiments with the amphora in 2009, now has 90 amphorae in the cellars, possibly the second largest following COS.

COS and Foradori are now reaping extraordinary results with their amphora wines. Although the process is highly labour-intensive, the estates would have it no other way. As Occhipinti sums up, "Wines in amphorae have lots of unique aromatic characteristics. The first impact might not be all that amazing in a blind tasting, but the structure and depth of amphora wines are much more complex and interesting. They are less showy, but definitely more profound and deep." 