THE WORLD OF SICILIAN WINE

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9

AT THE HEART OF SICILY

Cool, dry north winds howled. They swirled around us. We looked up at a vast blue sky punctuated by white clouds racing overhead. An undulating golden carpet of wheat spread out to the mountains that defined the edges of the valley below. From the top of a ridge we looked eastward and down on Feudo Montoni, a white square cut into an island of green. Vines in a sea of wheat. Clumps of trees sprung up here and there like tufts of grass.

Fabio Sireci's voice rang out above the winds. "The trees near the vineyards are eucalyptus. Giacomo Tachis smelled them in our Nero d'Avola. We are at the heart of Sicily, where the provinces of Agrigento, Palermo, and Caltanissetta meet." His right hand pointed over my shoulder and to the southwest, at a high mountain not far off. "From Mount Cammarata you can see the Mediterranean Sea and the coastline of Africa." His hand swung to the east. A volcano rose menacingly on the horizon. "You can even see Etna today." He pointed down. "That's Valledolmo running along the slopes of the Madonie Range. My grandfather Don Rosario lived there. He bought Feudo Montoni at the beginning of the last century.

"There is always wind at Montoni. Today it's a cool, dry *maestrale* wind. When the scirocco blows on a summer day, it's a convection oven. The temperature can rise to over 40 degrees [Celsius (104°F)]. But if you move into the shade, you don't even break into a sweat. At night in the summer, you need a sweater."

Fabio is a *vignaiolo,* what we, following the French, call a vigneron. The word identifies someone who labors in all aspects of wine production, from growing the vines to

making and merchandising the wine. He or she has a particularly strong connection to, a respect for, the soil and nature. A vignaiolo commonly works about ten hectares (twenty-five acres) of vines, making and selling enough wine to support a family. The family helps with the work. Vignaioli (the plural of *vignaiolo*) are rare in Sicily, even when the definition is stretched. Montoni, for example, comprises about twenty-five hectares (sixty-two acres) of vines. Though Fabio engages in nearly every aspect of the work, he needs the help of full-time employees: Pietro in the vineyards, Pino on the tractors, and Andrea in the office. Francesco Spadafora, a vignaiolo near Alcamo, works his own farm, Spadafora, in a similar manner. He has ninety-five hectares (235 acres) of vineyards. At the other extreme are the nanovignaioli. You find them on Sicily's volcanic islands. On Pantelleria, two husband and wife teams, Salvatore and Dominica Ferrandes of Ferrandes and Giacomo and Solidea d'Ancona of Solidea, each own and work about two hectares (five acres), though they may also rent small parcels. Generational transmission adds dimension to the meaning of the word *vignaiolo*. One piece of land supports generations of vines and generations of vignaioli.

On our left, near the very top of the ridge, was a vineyard swaying in the wind. Fabio: "That is Sauvignon Blanc. I sell these grapes to Duca di Salaparuta. They told me they wanted them to give perfume to their wine. Further down the slope our Catarratto is planted; below that, Grillo. The soil gradually changes from sand- to clay-dominant. The sand gives wine elegance, perfect for white wines. The clay gives structure, perfect for reds. Below the baglio, iron compounds make the clay reddish."

A gust pushed us back. Fabio turned and motioned us back to the Jeep. In the relative quiet inside, he continued. "This was the granary of the Romans. Not far from here, Sicily's three primordial valleys meet: the Val di Mazara from the west, the Val Demone from the northeast, and the Val di Noto from the southeast. Arabs in the eleventh century at what is now Vallelunga established Regaleali, 'the farm of Ali,' where today the Tasca d'Almerita family has their winery. After the Arabs came the Normans. King Ruggero gave this land to his wife. Later different Aragonese nobles possessed the land. In 1469 one of them built the Montoni baglio. They chiseled that year into a rock at the winery. Over a century later the Vatican commissioned Andrea Bacci, the physician to Pope Sixtus V and a professor of botany, to visit Sicily to discover its best wines. He came here or very near here. He found vineyards and he tasted the wine, red wine. In his *De Naturali Vinorum Historia,* Bacci wrote about the 'unheard of fertility of vineyards where stout vines grew as big as tree trunks.' He described the wine as 'very strong, deep red, with the most pleasant smell and flavor, and a capacity for long aging.'[1] Considering that the wines of those times were made without good hygiene, what Bacci tasted must have been incredible. And the Vatican today is one of our best clients!" He laughed in amazement. "As far as everybody can tell, a vineyard has always been here. To find another you have to go nine miles. Wheat was very valuable throughout much of the history of Sicily. Yet there have always been vines here. That means a lot. My grandfather Don Rosario bought Montoni and its vineyards in the early 1900s.

When Don Rosario died, his nine-year-old daughter, my mother, was left an orphan, and Feudo Montoni, hers by inheritance, was without someone to manage it. After my father married my mother in the late 1960s they came back to Montoni and restored it and eventually passed it on to me."

We drove down the ridge past vineyards and the baglio, then more vineyards. We passed the low point in the valley and drove up to another vineyard. Fabio told us these vines were five years old. Pietro, the vineyard man, was waiting for us. Under his blue Montoni baseball cap, white whiskers jumped out like flames. He stood with his tanned, muscular arms crossed against his chest, a black dog, Nerrone ("Big Black One"), and a hoe at his side. Nerrone's size did not live up to his name. Pietro was sixty-one years old. He had worked at Montoni for ten years. Fabio recounted an incident that occurred during the 2009 harvest. Chunks of ice fell like knives from the sky. A severe hailstorm destroyed a piece of the vineyard. Flies swarmed over and on the bleeding Nero d'Avola. Wild yeast and bacteria were finishing the job. Pietro had carefully nurtured and trained these vines. He stood there crying. Nerrone pawed his leg. Their eyes met. Pietro was certain that Nerrone was comforting him, trying to tell him that he had to look forward. Fabio told us that when he is not at Montoni, he feels safe knowing that Pietro is there. Pietro feels the spirit of the place.

The Vrucara vineyard one-third of the way up the hillside of vineyards is the source of Fabio's most structured Nero d'Avola wine. The vines are old, averaging eighty years. The grasp of their innumerable rootlets goes deep, some fifteen meters (forty-nine feet) into the reddish soil, a blend of 80 percent sand and 20 percent clay tinted by iron oxide and peppered with fossil seashells, the murmur of a prehistoric era when Montoni was submerged under water. The depth of the roots insulates the vines from drought, from ground-level fluctuations of sound, compression, temperature, and moisture, and from surface vineyard treatments and soil additions. The rootlets absorb a sap of water and minerals that is primarily held by the clay. This sap rises up to the grapes and leaves a faint print of the soil in the wine. Documents chart the human history of Montoni ownership. The DNA of Vrucara vines charts the vines' history. The reputation of the site as ideal for vines and its isolation from other vines make it possible that the genetic identity of the Vrucara vineyard is a direct path into the distant past. Does this path lead back to Andrea Bacci? Fabio suspects that the Vrucara Nero d'Avola is a unique biotype significantly different from the "original" one that experts believe was selected near the town of Avola on the southeastern coastline of Sicily. He posits: "Could the Vrucara biotype be a selection of Nero d'Avola that predates that of Avola?" He shrugs. He suspects that his Catarratto, selected from an old mountain vineyard, is unique too. He propagated it from seventy-five-year-old vines.

Vrucara Nero d'Avola looks and tastes different from the other Nero d'Avolas in Sicily. Vrucara wine is paler. Its smell lacks the dried grape character of Nero d'Avola wine made in the Noto zone. Along with the typical berry scents, Vrucara wine smells of laurel. Tachis identified dried rose petals and eucalyptus in it. The 2008 vintage

smelled less oaky than the 2007. Fabio has been increasing the size of the barrels in an effort to decrease this smell. In the mouth the wine is less viscous, less hot, with a clearer, more obvious thread of sourness than Nero d'Avola wines from other areas of Sicily. The astringency is finely textured, arrives late, and lingers on and on.

These characteristics could result from many factors. The continental climate of the vineyard means high diurnal temperature excursion. The cool nights preserve total acidity, thereby enhancing sourness. The high elevation (400 to 750 meters [1,312 to 2,461 feet] above sea level) and persistent winds delay and lengthen the harvest period. The harvest occurs in early to mid-October, weeks later than in most other areas. The grapes finish ripening in cool weather. This preserves aromatic precursors in their skins. During ripening, light more than heat drives photosynthesis. Ripening occurs slowly, allowing for a gradual selection of the finest and ripest grapes.

How the wine is made also modifies its flavor. Fabio allows the vineyard and winery yeasts and then the winery bacteria to drive fermentation to completion. As a result, Vrucara is less fruit driven and more vinous. He leaves the skins in contact with the fermenting juice or wine for as much as one month. Though this reduces fruitiness, it adds underbrush smells. More tannin is extracted too. If the tannin compounds are well developed, the wine astringency has a pleasant vibrating dryness that lasts and lasts. If the rest of the attributes are in balance, this astringency is a sign of quality and potential longevity. Finally there is the finishing period, twelve months in mostly new, 225-liter (fifty-nine-gallon) oak barrels or some larger barrels and casks. During its maturation, Fabio racks the wine according to smell and taste as it moves further away from the purple appearance, tutti-frutti smells, and coarse texture of its youth. Vrucara terroir evolves as it moves from subsoil to vine to berry to wine and to our lips.

The best way of maintaining the genetic identity of a vineyard while improving its performance is to select and propagate individual vines with desired characteristics. This process is called mass selection. In mass selection, terroir itself is the testing ground for individual vine performance. It is the arena for the selection process. The process occurs over generations of vines and people in a certain place. Very few wine producers or grape farmers in Sicily perform mass selection. Instead they select vine types from nursery catalogues, a process that is less precise and does not preserve the genetic identity of the existing vineyard. Mass selection is an essential activity of the vignaiolo. Though it can be achieved using the services of a nursery, the best way to do it is on-site. If the vignaiolo does not have enough skill to graft in the field, he must hire a professional. Grafters work in teams. One member, the head (*capo*), organizes the team and is the point person in contact with the vineyard owner. The owner and the capo agree on either a daily or a per-graft rate. The owner plants the American rootstock that he purchased from a nursery well before the arrival of the grafters. He then provides them with cuttings (*bacchettini,* canes ten to fifteen centimeters [four to six inches] long and each with two or three buds) from the individual *Vitis vinifera* vines he has selected from his vineyard. The grafters will attach the *Vitis vinifera* to the rootstock.

Field grafting is a dying trade in Sicily. Nurseries offer services that take its place. Young people do not want to enter the trade. They associate agriculture with poverty and older generations. Sicilian grafters are usually about seventy years old. Though they are on pensions, they continue to work, out of habit and friendship.

Fabio had asked the capo of his grafting team to meet with us. On our arrival at the baglio, Don Calogero was waiting for us. Sicilians show respect for older people by using the title *don*. Fabio thinks that Don Calogero is about eighty years old. He is the capo of a squad that numbers, according to the job, from five to fifteen grafters. He is responsible for the quality of the work. By law, at least 90 percent of the grafts have to take. If this is not the case, Don Calogero and his workers must do a *ripasso,* which means regrafting the unsuccessful grafts. This is not a simple issue. The failure of a graft can be caused by either the grafter or a vineyard worker. In a ripasso, Don Calogero determines which grafts are his team's responsibility to redo. The rule is that if the implanted bud is still green (i.e., living), it is not their fault. The graft might not have developed because it was inadvertently buried during the growing season, left without irrigation during a dry period, or bruised by a rock or clump of dirt thrown by a tractor. If the failed bud is brown, it has died. This indicates that the grafter is at fault. He might not have properly cut out the bud or inserted it into the rootstock. There might have been a bad match between the bud and the rootstock. The determination of fault is a sensitive issue. Resolution depends on the relationships Don Calogero has with the vineyard owner and the owner's workers. Fabio couldn't recall a failed graft that was the fault of Don Calogero's team. Fabio has unwavering trust in and respect for Don Calogero.

Fabio had prepared the ground for the meeting: he had made clear that we were knowledgeable, respectful journalists who wanted to record for posterity Don Calogero's work. Without this introduction, Don Calogero likely would have done no more than introduce himself. The fact that he was willing to go further and demonstrate his craft showed us that Don Calogero respected and trusted Fabio. It is unusual for an older Sicilian man to esteem a younger one.

We met Don Calogero under the gate of the baglio. He was of average height, thin and wiry. Under his bald pate, white hair shot out from the sides of his head. His hands trembled and his head bobbed. Fabio later told me that Don Calogero shakes when he is emotional. Sicilian men are not supposed to show emotion. He also avoided direct eye contact with me. I interpreted this as shyness. Fabio mentioned that Don Calogero is wary of strangers. They may wish to steal the secrets of his work.

Don Calogero explained that he had learned field grafting from his father when he was a boy. Don Calogero had worked for a squad hired by Giuseppe Tasca from 1953 to 1959. From 1959 to 1975 he worked for another property owner. Then he left this job to form his own squad. I asked him what it takes to be a good grafter. He replied, "A knowledge of grafting technique, seriousness, honesty, collegiality, and a willingness to ask the capo for help if they need it. I select the ones who come with me. They must be good. Otherwise they stay at home."

We sat down on a bench under the gate of Montoni. Don Calogero explained how he grafts. "Grafting takes place from mid-July until the end of September. Before mid-July the *marza* [a scion, a piece of vinewood and bark carrying the bud to be grafted onto the rootstock] is too tender and green. The *linfa* [fluid or sap underneath the bark] is not yet able to adhere to the rootstock because its consistency is too watery. The trunk of the rootstock too has to be ready to receive the marza. Its linfa should have nearly the same consistency as that of the marza. The cuts have to be clean and the fit has to be perfect. Then I wrap an elastic band around the graft. This presses the marza against the cut in the rootstock. I slip a leaf from the rootstock under the elastic, over the graft. This protects the graft from abrasion and light and preserves humidity at the point of the graft."

He swung around to a wooden case sitting next to him on the bench. It looked like my father's well-worn medical bag. Don Calogero explained: "This is a *cassettino*. Each grafter has his own. Cabinetmakers make them to order. This is Pino's." Pino is the tractor man who was standing nearby in a blue mechanic's jumpsuit. Don Calogero had given the cassettino to Pino as a gift. Don Calogero lifted up a green bacchettino from one of its compartments. "If this were August, I would soak this for a day before using it. Since it is July, the linfa has enough water in it."

From another compartment of the cassettino he pulled out a snub-nosed knife. "This knife is very, very sharp." To show us, he shaved the hair off the back of his hand.

He then took the knife in one hand, grasped the bacchettino in the other, and wedged the cane against his chest. He slid the blade to a bud on the bacchettino. His hands stopped trembling. He made one slice, a crosscut, above the marza and one below. The marza, a flap of bark with a little erect bump, innocently waited. He placed his thumb against the wood above the marza. Then slowly from below, he slid the knife blade under the marza and cut it off. The slice looked like a fingernail. On the convex side was the bud.

Don Calogero: "The wood is still too tender. The cut was not perfect. The wood must be white, not green." He turned over the slice and pointed to the center of the concave side at the point where the bud was. "The inside of the marza must be white with a brown heart. Within fifteen days the bacchettini will be perfect for the rootstock."

Fabio whispered to me: "Observe Don Calogero's force, his sensitivity, his love."

Pino handed Don Calogero a yearling rootstock that Pino had removed, roots and all, from the vineyard. Don Calogero explained that the grafting would be done in the vineyard. The rootstock vine would be in the ground, not dug up like the one brought to us. Normally, out in the vineyard, he pins the rootstock against the ground with his foot. His patient still, the surgeon wields his scalpel.

With shears he cut off all the shoots emerging from the rootstock trunk. Just under where the first had been, he made a crosscut, this time brandishing a pointed knife, and then an incision. He lifted up the bark on either side of the incision, remarking, "Like the bacchettini, the rootstock is too green. The bark doesn't open up easily." He

picked up the fingernail-shaped marza. He inserted it firmly into the incision and then wrapped a red rubber band over it and attached a leaf. "Next spring a green shoot will grow out of the bud."

Don Calogero continued: "If the marriage is right, the two will become one. You will never be able to pull the top of the plant off the roots. If the marriage does not take, the next year the rootstock will reject the marza or will be weakly attached to the plant above. If the marriage is bad, you can pull the vine from its roots even after ten years."

Throughout this demonstration, Don Calogero had made comparisons between the work of this team and that of a team from Marsala that Tasca d'Almerita had hired. He told us that while his team could achieve 220 to 230 grafts per man per day, the Marsala team could do five to six hundred. Waving his trembling finger, he asserted that his team's grafts had a much higher success rate. The Marsala grafters cut out a much smaller marza. It formed a less successful union. He referred to the Marsala grafters as *quelli* ("those"). The presence of these quelli violated his world.

Our parting with Don Calogero was graceful, humble, and respectful. We had learned a lot about Montoni, but we had not yet met Fabio's father, Elio Sireci. That had to wait until more than a month later, in early September.

It was Elio who restored Montoni after it had been adrift for decades. When he married Fabio's mother in 1967, he promised her that if they had children, he would "pull the thorns at Montoni and plant flowers." The thorns in this case were not only the weeds but also the former *mezzadri* (sharecroppers) and others who lived on and farmed Montoni as if it were their own.

Before the 1950s, mezzadri had been the labor that worked the *latifondi* in this area. During the 1950s, agrarian reform laws enabled the government to appropriate large parcels of land from the owners of *latifondi*. The government divided the land into smaller parcels, which it gave to mezzadri and other poor people. Regaleali in nearby Vallelunga lost 700 of its 1,220 hectares (1,730 of 3,015 acres). During those years, Montoni drifted without leadership or management, while Fabio's mother, Adele Belliotti, its owner, grew up in Palermo. Though Montoni was too small to be directly affected by the agrarian land reforms, former mezzadri lived on the property and farmed it as squatters.

We arrived at Montoni late in the evening. Fabio introduced us to his father and mother. It was evident that Elio was very ill. He told us that as soon as his wife had become pregnant (with Fabio's sister) during their honeymoon, he had focused on restoring the property to his family. He showed us a photo of Montoni as it was in 1967: there was a little village of huts and tents on the property.

Elio explained: "There were eighteen former mezzadri who were living on the property and farming it. It was terrible. I told them that the property was ours, but they refused to move. A ringleader had everyone in the palm of his hand. He carried a scepter. He told the rest that I would be gone like a young captain who gave orders, then threw

up his hands and left. The ringleader told the mezzadri: 'Stay where you are. He will be gone in ten months.' I assured him I would be making a career out of being a captain."

Elio paused, removed his beret, took a difficult breath, and continued: "I brought legal action against them. The case went all the way up to Rome, where it was ruled in my favor. The ruling became the precedent for a national law. Instead of having them forcibly removed, I paid them to leave. After that, they told me they had paid for fertilizers. I paid for that too. By midnight I was Montoni's only captain.

"I surprised them. I went around and met everyone and developed a friendly relationship with everybody. I brought them work. I was always mannerly and honest and hardworking. These same people now show me special respect. They admire me. When I meet them now, they kiss me and hug me.

"My wife and I had a lot to do. Many things were stolen. We had no electricity, no water. We transformed everything. I bought the first tractor in the area and renovated the baglio to house it and other tractors that I bought afterward. I restored the vineyards. I sold their grapes to Settesoli, Duca di Salaparuta, and Tasca. They earned medals with my grapes. Giuseppe Tasca once told me that he would make wines that the world would notice."

Fabio: "But Giuseppe Tasca taught us much. Papa knew how to manage the property, but Giuseppe Tasca helped him understand the agronomic part. Tasca taught us where to plant grapes, how to train them, and when to harvest. Tasca made wines that were technically correct. Papa bottled wine every year for friends and the family. The wines were good but not at the level of Tasca's."

Elio: "Fabio grew up in the vineyards and in the cellar. He began to bottle Montoni. Now Montoni wins awards around the world. He goes to Japan. The Japanese invited him to dinner to show Montoni wines. I wish I could help him now. "

Fabio: "You are helping. You are helping."

Elio's spirit wanted to leap out of his chair and get to work, but he breathed unevenly and heavily. It was time for us to go.

Fabio drove us to our farm lodging (called an *agriturismo*). During the drive he told us, "My father and I have been carried here by the wind. It is our family duty to maintain Montoni, to be socially responsible, and, through responsible agriculture, to preserve its nature." We learned eight weeks later that Elio had passed away soon after Fabio completed the harvest in the autumn of 2010. His spirit lives on in Fabio and in the vines of Montoni.