



Whether joining forces to promote biodynamics or going their own way, Lucca's growers have a different take on Tuscan wine.



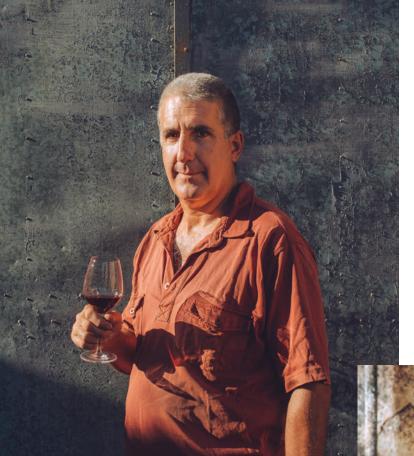
by STEPHANIE JOHNSON

ack in the early 16th century, a time when walls could actually keep people out, the citizens of Lucca decided to build a wall around their city to defend against the growing threat from Florence, some 40 miles to the east. The Lucchesi went all out, constructing a massive wall 40 feet high and broad enough in places to march a company of soldiers abreast. The wall helped Lucca maintain independence for centuries while other Tuscan towns like Pisa and Siena fell under Florentine domination. As its defensive utility began to fade, the wall became a recreational space for the townspeople and was eventually converted into a municipal park. Visit Lucca today and you'll find hundreds of walkers, bikers and joggers traversing the 2.6mile tree-lined path that runs atop the wall, with views of the city's bell towers and terracotta roofs, as well as glimpses of the Apennine Mountains to the north.

Those rugged peaks distinguish Lucca's landscape from the rolling hills and cypresslined roads of Tuscan towns like Montalcino and Montepulciano, about a hundred miles to the south.

Wedged between the Apennines and the Tyrrhenian Sea, the vineyards of Lucca enjoy abundant rainfall, sea breezes and cool evening temperatures that refresh the vines during the warm summer months. Perhaps that's why sangiovese thrives here when it would sizzle in the lower-lying coastal regions to the south. French varieties like merlot and syrah also grow here, introduced more than 200 years ago during the rule of Elisa Bonaparte Baciocchi, sister of Napoléon.

The Colline Lucchesi DOC is a small wine region by Tuscan standards, its 220 acres dwarfed by Chianti Classico's 17,000. And most Lucca wineries are small, family-run operations. Close to 70 percent practice biodynamic farming, an extraordinarily high rate for a single region. In 2013, the owners of three wineries spurred the formation of Lucca Biodinamica, an association aimed at sharing knowledge, materials and equipment among its members in an effort to promote biody-





namic agriculture. Biodynamics is an approach to viticulture and winemaking elaborated by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s. Among other things, it calls for timing actions in the vineyard and cellar around the moon's phases, and preparing treatments that promote soil fertility and manage vine diseases without the use of chemicals. Biodynamics is a holistic system that goes beyond organic viticulture and is, to say the least, a polarizing subject among winegrowers. During visits last September to Lucca Biodinamica's three original members - Tenuta di Valgiano, Fabbrica di San Martino and Podere Còncori-I encountered a fascinating set of characters from different backgrounds who share a commitment to biodynamics even as they produce widely different wines. I also found that, despite the region's biodynamic wave, Lucca is still a place where some

THE EVANGELIST AND THE ARISTOCRATS

are determined to swim against the tide.

Saverio Petrilli, Tenuta di Valgiano's oenologist and a leading evangelist for Lucca's biodynamic movement, wasn't always a believer. Petrilli had worked in Australia, New Zealand and Chianti Classico before meeting Moreno Petrini and Laura di Collobiano in 1993. The couple was buying a property in the hills northeast of Lucca's walls that included a 16th-century villa and several acres of vines, but they had no winemaking experience. Petrini interviewed several prominent oenologists before choosing Petrilli, who,

Tenuta di Valgiano The property (above right) and the team of Petrilli, Petrini and Collobiano paved the way for Lucca's biodynamic movement.

after surveying the dilapidated property at Valgiano, told the new owners, "If you really want good wine, save your money and just go buy some."

MORENO PETRINI

In the estate's early years, the team followed advice from agricultural company representatives who recommended chemical fungicides to treat oidium, a fungus that's a common problem in Lucca vineyards. They were disturbed by the "boxes with skulls and crossbones on them," and they happened to notice that one of their old, neglected vine-yards, which had never been treated with chemicals, was free of oidium. This, and a feeling that their wines were not quite living up to their expectations, led the team to look for other solutions.

Petrilli had been exploring biodynamics for years, and had discussed biodynamics with renowned practitioners like the Rhône Valley's Michel Chapoutier, but he found their approach too amorphous, "nothing but words and fairy tales." He began looking into biodynamics with more

SAVERIO PETRILLI



urgency, and eventually met Julian Castagna, an Australian winemaker who took a more pragmatic approach, telling Petrilli: "Just spray the [biodynamic] preparations and see what happens." Petrilli followed the advice and soon noticed changes in the texture of Valgiano's soils. The team decided in 2001 to convert the entire estate to biodynamics.

Petrilli is the oenologist at Valgiano, but Petrini and Collobiano are hands-on owners. Collobiano, a cousin of Piero Incisa della Rocchetta (at Tenuta San Guido), grew up in Turin and attended boarding school in England; on harvest days, you'll find her knee-deep in grape must, foot-treading the fruit alongside the other vineyard hands. Petrini, a former executive in the glass industry, grew up just a few hundred yards from Valgiano, and seems most at home in the vineyards. During my visit, as we walked the rows, Petrini picked up a clump of soil to show how the humus holds it together, giving it texture and body without leaving the soil hard or sticky, an effect he attributes to the biodynamic preparations. "Even after just two years, in the hot and dry 2003 vintage, our wines still had very ripe tannins. The soil was already reacting," he said. According to Petrini, biodynamic preparations increase the microorganisms in the soil and create humus, which acts as a sponge, soaking up all available water and helping the roots absorb nutrients naturally, something that he found chemical or even organic fertilizers failed to do.

Valgiano's 40 acres of vines occupy some of the most enviable terroir in Lucca, with south-facing slopes that bask in sunshine during the day and enjoy cool evening drafts descending from higher peaks to the north. A stream runs along the eastern edge of the vineyards, depositing sandstone over the clay subsoil, a combination that suits syrah. Merlot grows in the cooler limestone-derived topsoil on the eastern edge, while sangiovese occupies the large central section, a mixture of the two soil types. The estate's flagship wine is Tenuta di Valgiano Colline Lucchesi Rosso, comprised of sangiovese with ten to fifteen percent syrah and merlot, though Petrini emphasizes that it does not follow

Fabbrica di San Martino

The Arcipressi

VInevard lies just

below the estate's

18th-century villa.

a preordained formula. "We taste from the vats every day, and decide what is the best wine we can make from what the vintage has given us," he says. Cool vintages like 2014 called for 40 percent merlot; earlier, in the warm 2003 season, the blend included about one-quarter syrah and no merlot at all. It was hard to identify any single variety in the 2015 Rosso, a seamless wine that smelled of wild herbs and tasted of ripe plums and licorice. Fruit from Valgiano's younger vines goes into Palistorti, a fresh, easy-drinking red, and the team makes about 400 cases of Palistorti Bianco from trebbiano, vermentino and malvasia, varieties that were interplanted in the vineyards by the previous owners and used to soften the red wines.

THE PURIST

Giuseppe Ferrua, another founding member of Lucca Biodinamica, developed his passion for food and wine during a 22-year career in the restaurant industry. He managed a trattoria in Lucca that served traditional dishes made from locally sourced products, and local wines from barrels and demijohns. It was here that he met his future wife, Giovanna Tronci, a pharmacist and daughter of a prominent Lucca family that owned Fabbrica di San Martino, an estate just a few miles north of Lucca with an 18th-century villa and a few acres of vines.

Ferrua is a calm, soft-spoken man with a professorial air. At the edge of the vineyard, he points to a ditch that housed an ancient oven, stooping to pick up a pottery shard that he says dates to the Roman period. Ferrua learned about winegrowing from Mario Pasquinelli, a third-generation farmer who was born at Fabbrica and spent his entire life working the estate's vines. Pasquinelli's methods would be called organic today, Ferrua says, but he simply did things the way they had always been done, with respect for the land and without the use of chemicals. Initially, Ferrua and Pasquinelli worked together on a field-blend wine for the restaurant from an old vineyard plot with more than a dozen different varieties. When Pasquinelli retired, Ferrua sold the restaurant and put all of his energies into managing





Fabbrica's vineyards and bottling the wines.

Ferrua had farmed Fabbrica's vineyards organically since 1995, but organics didn't address all of the challenges he faced. He began reading books about biodynamic agriculture and attended a seminar by Alex Podolinsky, a prominent teacher of the practice. Podolinsky came to Lucca at the invitation of Saverio Petrilli, who found his brand of biodynamics more practical than the approach of others. Ferrua decided to give it a try and, like the team at Valgiano, he says he began to see changes after just one year. His clay-based soils became darker and more structured, no longer sticking to his boots after heavy rainfalls. Those results convinced him to convert to biodynamics in 2002.

Ferrua farms just under five acres and produces about 12,000 bottles annually, an intimate size that he says allows him to "know each plant individually." He works only with local varieties and continues to make a field blend from that vineyard near the villa, now called Arcipressi, vinified entirely in stainless steel and best enjoyed in its youth. Fabbrica di San Martino Rosso is a Chianti Classico-style blend of sangiovese with some ciliegiolo, canaiolo and colorino aged in large oak barrels. Ferrua is adamantly noninterventionist: He doesn't fine or filter his wines, uses minimal sulfur and allows fermentations to begin spontaneously. His wines can come across as rustic in their youth, with the best bottles exhibiting pure fruit flavors and distinct vintage differences. He finds that biodynamics affords his grapes the purest, most intense expression of the Lucca territory, observing that "we can't do things better than nature can."

Podere
Còncori
Gabriele Da Prato's
oldest syrah vines perch
precariously above
the Serchio River.

THE DYNAMO

Podere Còncori, the property of Lucca Biodinamica's third founding member, is about an hour's drive north of Lucca, following SP20 as it climbs along the Serchio river into the foothills of the Apennines. Perched on a steep slope, Podere Còncori's collection of modest buildings and animal pens is a world away from the grand villas of his fellow founders.

Gabriele Da Prato emerges from his cellar in a purplestained t-shirt and extends a hand sticky with grape must. Handsome in a lean and swarthy way, with deep-set brown eyes, he reminds me of a young, less hairy Burt Reynolds. Da Prato brims with energy and seems perpetually in motion. He leads me to a small wooden platform overlooking his vineyards and dives right into the story of his conversion to biodynamics, with now familiar comments about the texture of the soil and how quickly it improved after he began using the preparations. I can hear chickens clucking away in a pen next to a corral where Pietro, the donkey, stands quietly, perhaps contemplating whether I'll be his next Instagram follower (he currently has 222 at pietro concori). On a stroll through the vineyard, we run into Foxy, the horse, grazing between the rows. The animals are all part of the biodynamic system that Da Prato has fully embraced, and his vineyards are like a garden, with a multitude of grasses, herbs and tomato plants growing among the vines. Everything gets harvested here; some of the tomatoes ended up on our plates at lunch.

Podere Còncori sits at 1,300 feet above sea level, much higher than Valgiano or Fabbrica, and the site calls for grape varieties suited to its cool and rainy microclimate. Da Prato makes two whites, one a richly textured blend of pinot and chenin blanc, the other a pure traminer that's fresh and lively. His reds are crisp and vibrant, almost as energetic as he is. Sangiovese doesn't grow well here, but syrah flourishes, and Da Prato blends it into Melograno, a violet-and-herb-scented wine that includes some old local varieties. In the best vintages, he makes a pure syrah from Vigna Piezza, his oldest and steepest vineyard, a plot that seems suspended over the Serchio River hundreds of feet below. Most surprising of all is his pinot noir, a variety rarely encountered in Tuscany. Da Prato's is cool and juicy,





lifted by delicate floral scents and bursting with flavors of fresh Morello cherries.

Like Giuseppe Ferrua at Fabbrica di San Martino, Da Prato comes from a restaurant background. Working at his family's local osteria, he became intensely interested in the quality of the produce he was buying, and what he calls the "digestibility" of the wines. Da Prato first met Saverio Petrilli at the osteria, and they fell into a prolonged discussion about biodynamics. After Da Prato took over management of the family farm, he recalls that Petrilli came on a rainy day to help him dynamize his first biodynamic preparation.

I had heard similar stories from other winemakers around Lucca about Petrilli's influence in their conversion to biodynamics, and I asked him why he felt compelled to help other growers when he was working for Tenuta di Valgiano. Petrilli pointed to the example set by Alex Podolinsky, who made multiple visits to Lucca without asking for anything in return. "The only way we can pay back is to spread the knowledge to other people," he said. "If someone has a problem, and there is something you can do to help, whether you do it or not, you are still responsible."

THE CONTRARIAN

As strong as the biodynamic movement is in Lucca, not everyone has drunk the Kool-Aid. During visits with producers, I would ask them who else was making good wine in the area. The name Giampi Moretti kept coming up, always with caveats. "Giampi makes really good white wines, but maybe they're not so typical of the area," said one producer, adding, "and he might not see you. He doesn't really talk to journalists." Moreno Petrini at Valgiano concurred with the quality assessment of Moretti's wines, but when I asked if he could help arrange an appointment for me, Petrini was uncertain. "Giampi and I are very good friends, but we go in phases. Sometimes he takes my call and sometimes he doesn't." This time he did, and I found myself making the five-minute drive from Lucca on the last day of my trip.

Moretti, a former publisher, is an introspective man who seems to enjoy examining his methods and looking for ways to improve, but who also seems comfortable trusting his quarter-century of winegrowing experience. His estate, Terre del Sillabo, lies in the Freddana Valley, a cool microclimate that favors white varieties. Moretti works primarily with chardonnay and sauvignon blanc, and he emphasizes

that all of his wines come from the estate's 15 acres of vines: "I do not buy wine; I do not buy grapes; I do not make 'August rent contracts' from vineyards around here." His basic whites, vinified entirely in stainless steel, are clean and fruity, varietally spot-on, and surprisingly refreshing for Tuscan whites. Moretti ages his reserve chardonnay, called Spante, in oak barrels, showing a deft hand in preserving the ripe, almost tropical fruit flavors. His sauvignon blanc, the Gana reserve, was my favorite, offering delicious herbinflected flavors of lime and white grapefruit.

Moretti took over the family farm in the late 1980s, spent a few years replanting the vines and renewing the cellar, and bottled his first vintage in 1993. Grass grows between the rows of his vineyards, and the vines look a little more unruly than those I had seen in other Lucca vineyards, which is just how Moretti likes it. "The more experience I have, the more comfortable I become with chaos," he says. When I ask him about biodynamics, he audibly scoffs. "I went to some of the early presentations, but what I heard wasn't enough to convince me," he says. Moretti didn't see any compelling reason to change his farming practice; he already worked without chemicals. When I ask what he thinks of Lucca's trend toward biodynamics, he launches into a long discourse on the city's history, the building of the walls that kept Lucca independent, and the town motto of Libertas. "Lucca is not Tuscan," he says. "We never succumbed to Florence." Moretti clearly values his independence above most things. "I grew up a religious man, but if you think about it, Jesus Christ would have been a much more interesting person if he wasn't the son of God," Moretti says, arguing that his insights would have been his own, and the courage to follow his convictions would have been more admirable without the backing of absolute certainty.

What really seems to bother Moretti are proselytizers—people who push an idea and imply that their way is the only way. "I don't like to follow trends," he says. "If the trend goes away from biodynamics, then maybe I will try biodynamics." After tasting Moretti's wines, it's hard to argue with his methods. It seems there is more than one right way to approach growing and winemaking in Lucca. For now, and maybe forever, Moretti will continue to follow his own path. What could be more Lucchese than that?

Terre
del Sillabo
Despite this sign on
the door of his cantina,
Giampi Moretti hosted
a lively tasting and
discussion, speaking
candidly about why
he resists Lucca's
biodynamic trend.

