

2018 Season at La Torre alle Tolfe

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Following a moderately fresh and rainy start, the 2018 agricultural year quickly made itself memorable with an uncharacteristically bitter cold end of February. The cause was the Burian - the chilliest of winds which sweep across Italy; the low temperatures reflect the Siberian origin of the wind, which arises in the steppes west of the Ural mountain range. Although it more typically heads into Asia, occasionally the Burian can reach the lower latitudes of Italy, without transforming into the milder Favonio, resulting in temperature drops of up to 10 degrees within half an hour. As a consequence of this event, we were forced to stop pruning for a few days, to avoid damaging the vines, but with no significant consequences to our overall work program.



Left: Workers being briefed on pruning approach by our consultant agronomist Stefano Amadeo (Vitenova). Right: Snow in late-February, with temperatures falling to minus 10°C

The budding of the vines was in line with previous years (maybe 15 days delay compared with 2017), and was followed by a vigorous vegetative phase.

The spring too stood out; this time for abundance of rain and intermittent turbulence. The challenges of the high downy mildew (peronospora) risk were dealt with using carefully targeted interventions in the vineyard. Our aim was to prevent and control infections, yet limiting to the minimum the use of sulphur and copper, and trying to avoid soil compaction.

It was decided to invest in extra manual labour in the management of the vegetation (targeted leaf removal and thinning of the fruit) so as to promote the ideal microclimate necessary for the development of the grapes.

The management of the spontaneous grass cover on the vineyards has been hugely important: balancing our efforts to avoid erosion during the rainy phases, with attention to reduce water consumption during the dryer moments. Indeed, following the wet spring, with July came an

increase in temperatures and scarce rainfall. Even the summer showers which affected nearby areas, avoided Le Tolfe, leaving us dry, yet sparing us also from a couple of hail storms which affected nearby properties.

This summer drought particularly affected our more sandy and well drained vineyards, and by mid August we decided to plough, (on alternate rows for adult vines but all rows on the young vines) at 20 cm depth, in order to break the surface crust and encourage capillary movement of water from the deeper layers. This was an unusual decision for us, usually preferring to leave a grass cover until harvest or, at the most, ploughing alternate rows only. Nonetheless we were satisfied with the work done, and were able to avoid having to enter the vineyards when wet, hence avoiding compaction of the soil.



Due to dry conditions, we decided to plough alternate rows in mid-August.

Despite the low rainfall, the later part of the season featured frequent morning mists during the last part of August and early September, resulting in significantly wet leaves, often for extended periods. Often, close to harvest time and especially in rich soils and low areas, the grapes started to swell, threatening to burst and hence trigger the development of moulds and acid rot. We intervened with strategic leaf removal on the eastern or northern aspects of the vines most at risk, in order to improve their health. This allowed the grapes to dry rapidly from the morning dew and to provide ventilation around the grape bunches during the time of highest humidity (before the arrival of the tramontana wind). By leaving a good leaf cover on southern and western aspects of the vines, we were able to maintain some protection of the grapes from direct sunlight during the hot hours of the day, avoiding withering during the subsequent hot phase



Early August also found us lightly thinning areas of grape clustering, in order to encourage a more uniform and better ripening.

Avoiding mildew through a combination of targeted leaf removal and the thinning of grape clustering

Finally, the harvest was intense and very dynamic: sudden rushes to harvest alternated by pauses as we responded to changing climatic conditions. We started on the 12th of September (with the Ciliegliolo and Merlot varieties) and finished on the 2nd of October. There were two definite phases of harvest: one before and one after the Tramontana. Throughout the harvest, we moved between

different areas of the vineyards collecting the grapes when they reached their best possible condition for vinification.



Having harvested all fruit which had any risk of over-ripening, mould or acid rot, and encouraged by the positive weather forecast, we decided to take a few days' break. This allowed the remaining grapes to reap the benefits of the cold weather brought about- finally- by the Tramontana wind. It was possible to allow the cold to improve the ripening of the more noble part of the skins, until the sugar levels became the limiting factor to harvest. This was enough to further develop the aromas and further soften the tannin components.

Fending off some local "wildlife".

For our 5 hectares of new vineyards (known as Pozzo Nord and Querce), 2018 has been the first year of production. The low yields and very sparse bunches, allowed the grapes to be unaffected by the humid periods, and to ripen evenly throughout the September sun. The fruit was healthy and bodes well for future harvests.



Vendemmia – the grape-harvest - 2018

In the cellar, every 100kg of grapes received 4-5g of sulphur dioxide . This was considered a low but necessary quantity in order to control the heavy microbial burden of the grapes, associated with a difficult year featuring fluctuating climatic conditions. The indigenous yeasts on the grape skins and in the cellar, triggered an immediate and vigorous fermentation, leading to temperatures just above 30 degrees within a few days. This later slowed down bringing a long tail to the fermentation process. All vats had a skin contact time of around 30 days. This year the malolactic fermentation followed immediately after the alcoholic fermentation.

The vats were bled to different extents, in order to extract the must for our Rosato wine. It too fermented using the native yeasts, with no additions, and no interventions for clarification. This year we also decided to experiment with part of the Rosato must, fermenting it in old oak barriques. We are not looking for wood tannin aromas, but we are using the wood to bring more structure and softness, and to allow us to make the most of the positive influence of the fine lees.

Most of the hard work is complete- the wines will be allowed to rest and settle throughout the winter and by the spring we will have a better idea of the characteristics and full potential of the 2018 harvest.



Left: Rosato in oak barriques. Right: Giacomo Mastretta in the cellars.

Buon natale e buon anno a tutti!