

PROFILES

Primitivo Don't Age? Meet Fabulous Fatalone.


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alice.feiring Pasquale Petrera, 5 generation of Fatalone in Gioia del Colle, Puglia gave the most mind boggling vertical tasting stretching back to 1969 and 1977 (those from dueling grandfathers) the acidity, fruit, balance. Electric. Favorites of mine, 2011, 2006, 2000, 1996, 1994, 1992, 1988 and holy shit, that 1969– salinity and sanity. #primitivo!

Back in the 90s, I used to drink much wine from Apulia, negroamaro was great but boy, I did love those primitivos. I would seek them out not only for value but for their rustic sunshine. Then in 2000 the big change came with modernization. I rejected the wines as just another old-world region gone to hell. Today natural wine is taking off but very few of the old natural, traditional and sensible remain. And it's for this reason that Fatalone in the Gioia del Colle is a treasure.

Pasquale Petrera is the fifth generation of his family's winery. (The name of the cantina, Fatalone, comes from his great-grandfather's nickname, Lady Killer). Coming over stateside for RAW 2018 he asked me to help him stage a Riserva retrospective of vintages stretching back to the winery's first in 1987, promising a few surprises as well. It's not that often I get to taste old primitivo, like never, with such an arc. Of course I agreed.

The DOC of Gioia del Colle is about 45 minutes south and slightly west of Bari. The estate is on a plot of 8 hectares. They are about 20 miles from the sea, on a rocky hilltop at 365 meters of karstic soils. Summer temperatures are hot with highs between 100° and 107°. Harvest tends to be between the second and third week in September. In 1987 Fatalone was the first winery to bottle their DOC as a monovarietal. This variety was of course the regional star primitivo.

Primitivo headed from Puglia to California in the 1800s, where it became zinfandel. After phylloxera wiped out the Apulian vineyards, the Italians imported the variety back from California and replanted with those primitivo cuttings. As Pasquale says, it's a great prodigal son story with present day primitivo being both son and father.

The grape has thin skin and as anyone who has gotten a mouthful of jam in their Apulian wine knows, it is very quick to over-ripen. It is late budding and gives an early harvest. It also is abundant in racemi, or second growth. And from that they actually pick one month after the regular harvest and make a delicious rosato, Terres. More like a cerasuolo, it has three days skin contact. Here is organic viticulture, always native yeast, no additions except modest sulfur. There is never any starter—known as pied de cuve. And no matter what kind of wine they are making, their white (Greco) rosato or red, there is no destemming to keep maceration to a minimum. The riservas are fermented in stainless. Then they are moved to Slavonian oak for two years after which they are bottled and stored in an upright position for 15 months.

When asked whether he was considering using clay for fermentation, Pasquale said no. It increases the volatility and reduces the acid. He is a believer in frequent racking to clarify the wine. He is also a believer in playing the wines music while they are in barrel. This is not unheard of, Benoit Courault in the Loire does this as well. Pasquale pipes in soft new age and classical music with sounds of nature, like wind blowing, birds chirping, all with the idea that the soothing sound waves effect what is inside the cask. Another oddity is his handling of the bottles. Because, as Pasquale says, "Alcohol affects the cork's elastic properties so, when in contact with the wine for such a long time, the closure can lose its ability to seal." He stores the bottles standing up to keep the seal solid.

The tasting was a game changer. These were important wines, from beginning to end. There was a direct link from the 2015 back to the first wines of the cantina. The place spoke. The vintage variation dramatic, profound. And as far as that surprise that Pasquale promised? The man delivered. In our future were two early wines from his two grandfathers. The 1977, from his paternal grandfather, was fermented in concrete. The other was the 1969, from his maternal grandfather, and fermented in chestnut. They did not disappoint.

And so, here are the notes from the dramatic tasting. It was a remarkable opportunity to see what Puglia can do. Overall the wines have a delicious transparency and the work to avoid excess concentration is evident. If you have a cellar, you might want to snag a few 2015s and lay them down.

The Marvelous Fatalone Wines in Brief



2015

Acid, chocolate. Closed drier tannins, long finished.

2013

Chocolate, acid, sour milk.

2011

Gorgeous, balanced long finish, lighter on its feet than the 2015.

2009

Gelatinous funky glycerin, a very different weight. There was cumin—a little prematurely aged, licorice, bitter almond which made me think that there was some under-ripeness.

2007

There's that slight cumin, acid spark. Extremely vibrant.

2006

Love this; wax rose lips, long finish, mouth-watering, with savory qualities, earth and garden, smoldering passion, and ripe acidity... begins to brown.

2005

A wet harvest and a slightly pre-mature wine. The color was a translucent brown, caramel nose, and some nail polish. Amarone-like, almost vin-santo-esque.

2003

The only wine to have new oak and perhaps why it is the only one that bordered on being 'short.' Yet it was elegant, no jam, with jumpy acidity. Harvest was in the first week of September.

2000

Christmas pudding in a Jewish house. Pretty hint of fruit, serious tannins. Happy with this one.

1997

Beginning to taste old, cement-like, maderized, mushroom, muddy.

1996

Another beauty. Fresh. Younger than the 97, round, kind of delish, tomato leaf.

1995

We got some black fruits going on as it hasn't gone to complete savory. It is changeable, alive, solid wine that I'd be happy to drink.

1994

The wine is headed towards cumin, alive. Completely complex, like a fast waving hand. Fruit herbal savory. Love.

1992

Similar to 2006 with cherry and rose. Intensity, acid, volatility, great quality of tannins with a little of that halitosis that is so good. Love.

1990

Complete, elegant, losing grip, sanded. (He had only one barrel.)

1989

A little on the weak side, pleasant and headed to linseed oil.

1988

WOW, a white delicate nose. Peony, sanded and sandalwood.

1977

Fermented in cement, this was definitely brown yet it had a finish that didn't quit. It was powerful with grip. A textural wine, there was prune and a touch of soap and coffee, seems hot but a big old wow.

1969

Fermented in chestnut, this was concentrated and had a coffee note here and there which coupled with an off-the-grid salinity that performed like a beautiful old madeira.



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