



Written by
Walter Speller
13 Jun 2018

Massaging Primitivo with music therapy



Last March I found myself in London at the same time as Pasquale Petrera of the Puglian estate Fatalone. He was there to present a flight of Primitivo going all the way back to their first official bottling of 1988, with two even older vintages, bottled for family use only, 1981 and 1977. From the start of the presentation, organised by Doug Wregg of UK importer Les Caves de Pyrène, it was clear that Petrera was on a mission: to show that Primitivo (the variety known as Zinfandel in California) can age. In his case more than 30 years. 'We want to show how Primitivo performs', Petrera exclaimed, 'and I'm very much against the idea that it needs to be drunk within five years'.

That Primitivo has the capacity not just to survive in bottle but gain in complexity is not a given. Most exported examples are full-throttle, fruit-driven, ready-to-drink wines with quite a bit of alcohol. Most of it comes at very convenient prices simply because there is so much of the stuff. Italy's plantings of Primitivo total 12,000 ha (3,000 acres) at the last count in 2010. The abundance of vines producing the raw material for a huge number of bargain bottles makes it hard for producers to invest in higher quality, which also obscures the fact that Primitivo is much nobler than its low-cost reputation would have you believe.

Primitivo has been planted all over Puglia, but historic documents from the eighteenth century plants it firmly in Gioia del Colle, a series of rolling hills south of Bari. It comes originally from across the Adriatic (see [The politics of Zin](#)). Fatalone's history begins at the end of the nineteenth century when Petrera's great-grandfather, Nicola Petrera, decided to plant Primitivo in the highest, windiest parts of the Gioia del Colle in the contrada of Gaudella. With thirty bottled vintages behind them, the fifth generation now running the estate has transformed it into a reference point not only for long-lived, complex Primitivo but also for organic viticulture. Fatalone is one of the first Italian estates to be carbon-neutral, with all the energy they need supplied by solar panels.

While Puglia is readily associated with a very warm, southern climate, Fatalone's vineyards are on the highest point of the Gioia del Colle hills at almost 400 m (1,310 ft) and about 50 km (30 miles) from the coast. 'Between our hill top and the sea there is nothing higher and hence the coastal breezes have a mitigating influence on temperature', Petrera explained. 'The vineyard soil, high in limestone and with a portion of water-retaining clay, results in the wine's elegance, and [provides evidence] against the idea that southern Italian wines are fruit bombs. Primitivo is very sensitive because of its thin skin. This is the key for all the decisions we make, either in vineyard or cellar.'

Primitivo has a tendency to pass quickly from perfectly ripe to overripe. This is why the last grapes they pick have always dried naturally on the vine. But this is in no way undesirable according to Petrera. If not more than 20–30% of them are added to the fermentation tank, then the result is not a stewed character but Primitivo's most essential aroma, that of toasted almond. 'You notice a long, bitter taste on the palate long after you have swallowed the wine. This is a typical characteristic of Primitivo from Gioia del Colle', averred Petrera, who claims that truly overripe fruit doesn't display the almond character, just stewed fruit.

Primitivo's other peculiarity is that its secondary buds are fertile. The bunches that grow from these buds are not cut off, as is normally the case, but left on the vine. Petrera called these bunches 'key fruit', because once the main bunches are perfectly ripe, the vines will no longer transport nutrition and water to these bunches, but to the secondary fruit, which become the raw material for a more-than-decent rosato. 'They [the secondary crop] are a certain control on the main crop, and we preserve acidity', Petrera explained. At between 6 and 6.7 g/l, the natural total acidity is exceptionally high for a red wine, not just one from the south, and brings out Primitivo's rarely seen vibrant side.

At the beginning of the flight of wines he presented, Petrera pointed out that during fermentation they do not keep the wine for very long on the skins. With the alcohol easily reaching 15%, the skins would completely dissolve, but the total maceration time is still a remarkably long two to three weeks. He doesn't believe in ageing the wine in new oak, preferring used Slavonian casks of around 7 hl instead. 'Oak will only smother Primitivo's delicate aromas'. The wines are fermented by indigenous yeasts and aged for only 12 months in cask. Any longer would lead to premature oxidation of the wine, according to Petrera. But this risk of premature oxidation is not inherent in the variety itself but is apparently the effect of too much 'music therapy'.

During those 12 months Petrera pampers his wines with 'soft new age and classical music enriched with sounds of nature (wind, rain, leaf movements, water flowing and chirping of birds), based on the idea that these soft vibrations improve the activity of the microflora present in the wine and support its breathing when in casks.' (This is how Fatalone's website describes it.)

I know, I thought the same, but the idea is not as insane as it may sound at first. Petrera has studied physics and has a keen interest in sound waves. He explained that the sound waves of classical music are a kind of massage of the wines, in which the casks become a sort of membrane and this massage magnifies the micro-oxygenation. This is the reason Petrera doesn't leave the wines any longer than 12 months in cask. He mentioned that to prove it he once conducted an experiment with two casks of the same wine, one with and one without music therapy, and they turned out differently. He did, however, admit that the difference could not be explained by the presence or absence of music alone.

Whatever the effect of sound waves, the 16 wines below more than convinced me of the ageing capacity of Primitivo as well as its complexity, provided it is in the right hands.

- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2012 Gioia del Colle Quite dusty nose of herb liqueur and damson. Quite intense plum palate with a good dose of acidity and plenty of dusty tannins. Hints of tar indicating some development. (WS)15% Drink 2015-2026
16.5
- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2011 Gioia del Colle Brooding, sweet nose of carob and cherry liqueur. The palate has real succulence to it and is a little vibrant with damson and fig on the finish and bags of crunchy tannins. (WS)15% Drink 2016-2028
17+
- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2010 Gioia del Colle Expressive, complex nose of damson and prunes with hints of spice camphor, shoe polish. Strawberry and plum palate with energetic acidity and firm, coating tannins. Great balance and length, and truly elegant with the alcohol virtually unnoticeable. Vibrant acidity. (WS)15% Drink 2014-2030
17.5
- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2009 Gioia del Colle *'[2009] was an experiment for us. Against common sense, we left some of the bunches on the vine to botrytise.' That part, around 20%, was fermented separately and later blended with the rest.* Concentrated yet brooding and not as open as the 2010. Licorice, plum and lead pencil, with a touch of leather, but adds rather than distracts. Intense and compact, ripe palate with a perfect dose of acidity and lots of powdery tannins. Very complete. (WS)15% Drink 2015-2030
17+
- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2007 Gioia del Colle *'You would have a hard time distinguishing between 2008 and 2007', which is why in this flight they excluded 2008.* Developed nose of plums, prune and shoe polish and minerally too. Huge depth and complexity and very distinct and unusual. Licorice and prune fruit succulent acidity. Minerally finish with fine, coating tannins. (WS)15% Drink 2014-2028
17.5
- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2006 Gioia del Colle *Very warm vintage and also completely dry harvest.* Dusty nose showing some development, chalky plum and chinotto. Licorice and dried strawberry and prune all tied together by juicy acidity. Lots of chewy tannins complements the whole. (WS)15% Drink 2012-2028
17+
- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2005 Gioia del Colle *Normally harvest doesn't start before the second week in September, and no rains are expected before the third, but in 2005 they had rain just before the harvest and cooler than average temperatures throughout the season.* Chinotto and Barolo chinato. Oxidative dark fruit nose, but doesn't affect the wine's complexity. A little lighter and with the acidity clearly showing through, while being less integrated, and really taking centre stage. (WS)15% Drink 2008-2020
16
- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2004 Gioia del Colle Beautiful depth. Notes of dried fig and prunes with undergrowth and a touch of tar. Lifted acidity pushing a fragrant damson palate. Just medium bodied, elegant and with soft tannins. No great intensity on the finish, but truly long and fragrant. (WS)15% Drink 2008-2024
16.5
- Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva 2003 Gioia del Colle A heady nose of herb liqueur with camphor hints. Richly flavoured attack and then supple and with lots of gritty tannins. Softly fragrant, long and minerally prunes on the finish. (WS)15% Drink 2010-2024

17

- Fatalone, Speciale Primitivo Riserva 2001 Gioia del Colle Enticing nose of prune, mulch and malt. Elegant, almost light palate weight that doesn't seem to be 15% at all. Still quite a bit of development possible. The palate is more youthful than nose. Fig and liquorice finish with fine powdery tannins. (WS)15% Drink 2006-2022

16.5

- Fatalone, Speciale Primitivo Riserva 2000 Gioia del Colle A little less aged on the nose than 2001, although, arguably, the latter is generally considered the better vintage. Notes of plum and shoe polish. Lovely concentration that keeps on lingering on the palate with finely integrated acidity and gorgeous, coating tannins. Very finely tannic and long. (WS)15% Drink 2006-2024

17

- Fatalone, Speciale Primitivo Riserva 1995 Gioia del Colle *'1995 can be compared with 2005: the acidity was really aggressive when we released it, but it is now a vintage that has aged the best.'*

Developed nose of undergrowth, mulch and tar. A hint of walnut. Lifted, vibrant acidity on the palate and the fruit takes a step back, but lingers on. Focused and with lots of powdery tannins. (WS)15% Drink 2000-2022

16.5

- Fatalone Primitivo 1991 Gioia del Colle *Only stainless steel and concrete.* Concentrated, almost firm nose of old leather, mulch and camphor and malt. The most marked by oxidation in this flight with hints of dried fruit and almost tart acidity, but full spread of aromas on the finish. Very long. Growing complexity on the finish. (WS)15% Drink 1996-2020

17+

- Fatalone Primitivo 1988 Gioia del Colle Pale rust-brown ruby. Quite concentrated malty fruit nose, a little smoky and tarry. Very energetic palate with linear, brisk acidity and softly perfumed prune and fig finish. Undertow of powdery tannins. Malty notes. (WS)15% Drink 1992-2020

16.5