“Wine - From the ground up”
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From the ground up

Piero Antinori’s space age winery represents a new high for Chianti. But, as he tells Matthew Wilcox, things haven’t always been smooth sailing.

For a man who has borne the burden of being the public face of Italian wine for the past 50 years, the imperially deserve Marchese Antinori is remarkably unhurried for his 76 years. Of late, though, he has had reason to form a few worry lines. He is telling me about the construction of his new ashen stone winery, something he describes with characteristic frankness as “nightmare.”

The ambitious scheme, completed two years ago, involved a number of challenges, including the excavation of a 59-acre hillside followed by the subsequent failure of the retaining walls. The project is estimated to have cost $28 million. As the Marchese explains, “we had a number of problems, including the fact that we changed contractors halfway through construction after the first builder went broke.”

As everybody knows, Antinori is the mastermind behind the “Super Tuscan” revolution of the 1970s which almost single-handedly re-established the reputation of Chianti for quality wine after a disastrous few decades.

“The Antinories have been making wine in Tuscan since 1535, and, as the Marchese concedes, occasional problems are unavoidable over that length of time. In the 19th century they were almost bankrupted by the influx of New World wine, and ruin struck again in 1944, when German forces machine-gunned the entire vintage in the cellars. But when the Marchese took control of the company in 1966, the 15th generation of his family to do so, the region was a whole was a low 20s.”

After the war, the rural population left for the booming cities. On top of that, in 1964, the wine market saw the European market (shock兢) rise. That meant that landowners were forced to choose that return directly for the first time in centuries. And Antinori believes that Tuscan wine is still catching up from the mistakes made during that initial transition.

“At that time it was almost medieval. The people in the countryside didn’t have vineyards as much as houses of the 19th century. The local market didn’t have to worry as much about the quality of the wine. The quality of the wines produced were down, and followed by the increasing need for the region. It is a very difficult period.”

To fix these problems, Antinori hired the legendary French wine consultant Emile Peynaud, who along with the house wine maker, Giacomo Tazzari, came up with a solution that has since become a standard international blueprint for wine. The new vineyards, higher vines, and shrewd aging in small French oak barrels to reduce the effect of oxidation on the wine.

Antinori credits Peynaud as one of the foremost influences in his work. “He was a great winemaker, literally, because he was a scientist, and at the same time, a practical winemaker. But most of all because he was a man who loved wine, even emotionally.”

It is Peynaud’s emphasis on the importance of the science behind wine that is most visible in Antinori’s new winery. From the road to the cellars, it is an enjoyable walk. The cellars are designed to be visible from the outside, with small, delicate terra cotta tiles inlayed into a white marble floor, with cherry and cypress trees.

The effect is something of a jungle itself. At three-quarters of the winery’s immense and polished glass reticulate, circular corridors and corridors made from Tuscan brick glazed with light emanating from the floor. There’s a touch of a Bond villain, but about it. The final project took 10 years to complete, and it will be be a number of years before the expected turnover of the facility has fully grown to complete the project.

“Before the project was only using half of the capacity of the winery. We needed more capacity than we had in the early years.”

Antinori says, “we are thinking in terms of hundreds of years.”

It is a big project that has inspired the march of the Antinori Art Project, a series of exhibition halls to be held at the winery’s new museum, home to a collaboration with the Palazzo Strozzi Foundation. The family has a long-held interest in art – the Marchese’s paintings in Florence contain a number of the world’s best works such as Titian’s and Della Robbia, while the younger daughter, Antonio, is MoMa’s international board in New York.

“With the new winery, we are thinking in terms of hundreds of years.”

To produce a great wine, you need an artistic approach. You don’t pretend to compete with the Museum; you don’t put important things to the direction from which the next generation can build something. These things take time.”

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