

The Contratto bubbles change owner

The historical company passes over to La Spinetta of Castagnole Lanze

ENRICA CERRATO,
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It's a change of hands of the type that makes waves in the wine world. The Contratto cellars of Canelli have been bought by the Rivetti brothers of Castagnole Lanze who hit the mark with a double-blow: on the one hand expanding their product range to include sparkling wines, and on the other entering into the prestigious circle of the spumante houses of Canelli. And that by way of the main door, seeing that the Contratto winery (with its adjacent historical guest quarters, and a brand that includes "gems" such as For England and Asti DOCG De Miranda) is one of the oldest wine-making enterprises in Piedmont.

The agreement is being finalised in these days, and the effective changeover will happen between April and May. At the negotiation table with the Rivetti brothers Giorgio, Carlo and Bruno is Carlo Micca Bocchino, who bought Contratto with his family in 1993. It has been an ambitious project for the celebrated family of distillers: not only because of the quality of their wines (they deserve the credit for the rediscovery of the traditional bottle-fermentation method in the spumante production), but also because in those years, they took it upon themselves to restore the cathedral-like underground cellars, the courtyards and the historical guest quarters, adding another jewel to Canelli's crown. Not to be forgotten among their projects was a venture into elite gastronomy with the "World's Best Hosts" events. With the



entrance to the Contratto winery in Via Giuliani, Canelli



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but we are farmers.
We move ahead one
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Giorgio Rivetti,
co-owner, La Spinetta

The Company

La Spinetta, founded in 1977 by Lidia and Giuseppe "Pin" Rivetti, takes its name from a hilltop, the bricco of Castagnole Lanze. Today, it includes 165 hectares of vineyards in total: beside the property in Castagnole, there are also rows of Barbaresco at Neive, and of Barolo at Grinzane. In the Tuscan hills around Terricciola, they cultivate 65 hectares, and also produce olive oil. 600,000 bottles leave the winery each year, 75% of those bound for outside Italy. Owners today are Bruno, Giorgio and Carlo Rivetti. There are 65 full-time employees.

years, however, the management of the cellars grew ever more complex: turnover and volume of production steadily increased to about €1m and 100,000 bottles respectively, and the idea to pass the company on began to take hold, as Carlo Micca recounts: "I have invested a lot into this company in the last 18 years, both in work and commitment, but we are distillers in the end, and it is not easy to pursue both the world of wine and that of grappa. With my daughters Miranda and Marta I will now be able to focus again on the traditional work of the Bocchino family as producers of high-quality grappa." He continues: "I am glad to have been able to leave Contratto to the Rivettis, who are people from the same land. I would not have wanted to see the cellars end in the back catalogue of a large group or multinational."

Smiles among the Rivettis, who are aware that have acquired a piece of history, and that so close to the anniversary of the Unity of Italy, incidentally also a period in which the spumante houses played an important economic role. Giorgio comments: "We like to take risks and to aim high. For me, my brothers Carlo and Bruno and our families, having bought Contratto is an important step, but also a great opportunity to produce sparkling wines of the highest quality in an extraordinary location." But as a good Piedmontese, he adds: "We have plenty of projects, but in the end of the day, we are farmers, and we take them on step at a time!"

The epic story of a town and a company

A family of moscato-producing ‘farmers’ are set to rekindle the lights at Contratto

SERGIO MIRAVALLE

The changing of hands of the Contratto cellars is good news for Canelli and the wine region of Asti. Good news for a town of little more than ten thousand inhabitants that wants to keep considering itself the capital of Italian spumante and of wine-making technology, and for a region that on the basis of its historical cellars, the underground ‘cathedrals’, has requested to be recognised as UNESCO World Cultural Heritage.

But in recent decades, many of the shining stars of the Canelli wine and spumante producers have expired, and the brilliance of others has waned. Along the Belbo Valley everything can be found, enologically speaking: from industries producing millions of bottles of low-cost bubbly to those who still believe in working with the vines and put their emphasis on quality rather than quantity. The Contratto cellars have always adhered to the top range of the market, an iconic brand for many generations. The winery was founded in 1867, and passed down from fathers to sons in the Contratto family, alternating between Alberto and Giuseppe, the traditional names of the family. It enjoyed great success in the last decades of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, the times of the Belle Epoque and Art Nouveau. At the time, wines were leaving Canelli for destinations all over the world. The Contratto winery even invented its own secret code for telegraphing their sales representatives abroad without ceding any information to the competition. Those were the days. For the 120th anniversary of its



A perspective of the striking Contratto cellars of Canelli

foundation in 1987, Alberto Contratto (Class of 1980, who also held the positions of mayor of Canelli for the Liberal party, and of president of the Industrial Union of Asti) declared a production of a million bottles per year, 60% of which sparkling wines, the rest divided between Vermouths and still wines from their vineyards in top sites of the area. The Contratto cellars also produced the Spumante Riserva Extra Dry “For England”, originally intended for export, but quickly becoming rather chic to be ordered in the local bars of the Asti region.

In 1993, the company passed out the family’s hands for the first time. It was said that “the grappa has been drinking the spumante.” Because it had been their neighbours who bought the company, the Bocchino family, long-established distillers only a few doors down from Contratto (today, the distillery is situated in the plains towards Calamandrana). Carlo and Antonella Bocchino, under the supervision of Mama Miranda, took the leap towards spumante-making – and

with considerable success, as evidenced by the Asti DOCG De Miranda that became one of the most coveted aromatic sparkling wines immediately upon release. The past 18 years also saw great renovation and restoration works at the cellars, not least of the impressive “Sempione” where the bottles of spumante are resting head down in their riddling boards. A kitchen opened to welcome “The World’s Best Hosts” with a parade of Michelin-starred chefs.

But in a difficult time, a company may need fresh energy and ideas. The new owners come from the hills of Castagnole Lanze where they are cultivating Moscato, the same grape that brought fame to the sparkling wines of Canelli. There had also been the possibility that the Contratto winery would be absorbed into the orbit of some large group, as happens often in these times, and happened also here just recently. Of Riccadonna, another brand “made in Canelli”, only the eagle and the name written in marble over the old offices has remained – the wines themselves are now made at Nova Ligure, at the Campari factory. The Rivetti brothers – sons of Pin, the farmer who loved the Moscato grape and managed to see “La Spinetta” rise to the top of the category, expand and also start to produce great red wines – now have a new task: to rekindle the brilliance of Contratto, and help to illuminate once more Canelli and its region.

*this is a free translation of the article “La Spinetta dei Fratelli Rivetti acquisisce Contratto”