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“Each and every farm should aspire to be a self-contained and self-sustaining entity”

Rudolf Steiner



An Italian inspiration

SATISH KUMAR

If your question is, “How to make an ecologically sustainable farm also financially sustainable?” then my answer is, “Follow the way of Fattoria La Vialla!” And if your question is, “How to grow good food in sufficient quantity and at the same time address the climate crisis?” then, too, the answer is “La Vialla way.”

I had the pleasure of visiting this flourishing farm in Italy. I was impressed and inspired.

My gracious guide was Annette Mueller. We walked together around the farm visiting vineyards, olive groves and gardens of herbs, fruits, flowers and vegetables grown organically and biodynamically.

This 2000 hectare estate is situated in the fertile fields of Tuscany, near the town of Arezzo which is famous for its medieval Basilica of San Francesco. I had visited Arezzo a few years ago to see the masterpiece fresco by Piero della Francesca depicting the Legend of the True Cross as dreamt by Emperor Constantine. But at that time I was not aware of the masterpiece of La Vialla. As the

famous fresco was created by a Piero Della Francesca, the legendary La Vialla farm was created by Piero Lo Franco together with his wife Giuliana.

Annette narrated the brief history of the farm to me.

Over 40 years ago the Lo Francos were pained to see the devastation of rural Tuscany. Small farmers were being forced to leave the countryside as their livelihoods became unviable. Driven by the desire to conserve the countryside Piero and Giuliana bought a run-down farmhouse together with some land even though they had no experience in farming; they were textile merchants. But they had a vision to revive the rural

surroundings of Arezzo! So, they dedicated their minds and money to fulfil the mission of restoring the rural economy.

Piero and Giuliana had three sons; Gianni, Antonio and Bandino. Love of land grew in their hearts as they grew up in the hills, fields and forests. The three brothers together not only inherited the legacy of the land from their parents they also inherited their passion to care for the soil, animals and trees. The growing of good food became a profession as well as a vocation for them. During the past 40 years Lo Francos acquired many deserted, broken-down and empty farmhouses, abandoned land and endangered forests. Thus they contributed to the vitality of culture and agriculture of Tuscany.



Much attention is devoted to maintaining the highest quality of food and the greatest satisfaction of the customers. This approach fosters personal relationships and a sense of belonging with all buyers of La Vialla food.

The three brothers work together and run La Vialla as a family farm. They are totally committed to organic and biodynamic principles of farming. It is a superb example of regenerative agriculture rooted in the ideal of biodiversity.

La Vialla produces variety of grapes to make prize winning wines. The olive oils and Pecorino cheeses are of superb quality. The farm makes its own pasta and bread which is baked in wood-fired ovens. Then there are La Vialla preserves of tomatoes, artichokes and other fruits and vegetables.

When I experienced La Vialla food I knew what artisan food looks like and tastes like. Olives, grapes, herbs, vegetables, fruits and flowers are all hand harvested, hand crafted and well presented. Italians are master designers and at La Vialla they cherish and celebrate the Italian sense of Beauty, Utility and Durability; what I call the BUD principal.

The ruined and derelict cottages and farmhouses have been restored

modestly, simply and elegantly in the traditional way, keeping the rural spirit of the place intact. These houses are tucked away in the woods, valleys and hilltops so that guests can enjoy holidays in healing surroundings. In the therapeutic tranquillity of nature they can experience solitude without the feeling of separation.

Annette explained that the key to the financial success of La Vialla is in the fact that all produce is sold directly to customers, without any intermediaries. Nothing is sold through restaurants, shops or supermarkets. All foods are value added and supplied straight to individual households. Thus all income comes back to the farm and in turn the profit is invested in the farm. Much attention is devoted to maintaining the highest quality of food and the greatest satisfaction of the customers. This approach fosters personal relationships and a sense of belonging with all buyers of La Vialla food.

I had lunch at the old farmhouse, which is the summer residence of the three brothers and their families. This is an enchanting place. It is high on a hill plateau blessed with mix of wild woods and planted trees. In front of the house is a large piece of levelled ground in the middle of which stands a majestic tree. Our lunch was served under it.

Antonio, his wife and their two delightful daughters and Bandino were my hosts. The lunch was truly a feast! This was the best Italian home cooking that I have ever experienced. All the ingredients were from the farm itself, a superb evidence of self-sufficiency and local economy. Rudolf Steiner would have been delighted to see his vision being realised in practice.

"Whenever I have any worries or anxieties, any problems or dilemmas I come here to find solutions and peace." Said Antonio, "I have been listening to your audio book, Elegant Simplicity. We are trying to put some of your thoughts and ideals in practice here at our farm."

"I am moved by your practical idealism! This is the kind of farming we need to address the climate crisis." I said, "Between 30-40% of Carbon emission and greenhouse gases in the atmosphere come from food and farming!"



Pictures courtesy of Fattoria La Vialla



*Soil has the answer!
Soil is not only the source
of all our food, soil stores
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look after everything else.*

"Yes, industrial agriculture is contributing to the climate crisis on the one hand and producing unhealthy food on the other. Therefore, getting food and farming right is the urgent imperative of our time," said Bandino.

"Soil has the answer! Soil is not only the source of all our food, soil stores carbon; it is a carbon bank! Soil provides living conditions for millions of microorganisms. If we can look after soil then soil will look after everything else," said Antonio, "We need to love the living soil!"

Annette added, "Researchers at the University of Siena have been monitoring La Vialla over a long period of time and they have concluded that there is a high degree of carbon sequestration in La Vialla soil."

Craig Sams who is an expert on soil science has remarked that, "If farmers follow the La Vialla way the sequestered carbon would

cancel out the entire increase in greenhouse gas globally!"

Congratulating the Lo Franco brothers I said, "Climate catastrophe is the nuclear bomb of 21st century. And the La Vialla way is to listen to the voice of the land and make peace with our precious planet Earth. It is time to transcend our narrow national, political and sectional self interest and focus on our common interest. The whole of humanity needs to unite to protect our common home.

We can do it by following the economy of nature, the economy of zero waste and zero pollution; the circular economy. Whatever comes from the soil, must go back to the soil. That is the economy in practice at La Vialla! May you go from strength to strength".

It may seem that La Vialla, though a success story in many ways, is still a relatively small farm surrounded by giant fossil fuel dependent farms across the world. Nevertheless, La Vialla gives me hope! A great river starts as a small spring somewhere in the remote hills. Likewise, a river of regenerative agriculture is springing forth in the hills of Tuscany. May it become a forceful flow of transformation.

After visiting La Vialla, I can confidently say that ecologically sustainable agriculture can also be financially sustainable and can mitigate the climate crisis at the same time.

Satish Kumar is the author of a bestselling book, *Soil, Soul, Society*, available from www.resurgence.org/shop

For more information about Fattoria La Vialla visit: www.lavialla.com

