

Meininger's weinwelt

GAME CHANGER



Some summers bring us new insight. They teach us just how vulnerable our vineyards have become. While in much of Europe winegrowers are beginning the harvest unusually early, elsewhere violent thunderstorms, hail and downpours are leaving a trail of devastation in their wake. Within a few hours, torrid heat gives way to torrential rainfall. Where yesterday parched soil was crying out for water, today floodwaters are washing away soil and vines. Viticulture has always had to coexist with the whims of nature. However, the events we are witnessing today are no longer exceptions – extremes are becoming the new normal. The early grape harvest is a clear sign of this. From Sicily to northern Italy, from the south of France to the German wine-growing regions, plants are growing more rapidly than in the past, and uncertainty is mounting. Every heatwave, every thunderstorm, every capricious turn of the weather can determine whether a promising vintage turns into a great wine or a bitter disappointment.

Perhaps now is right moment to change our perspective. Not just with regard to the climate, but also the way we consider agriculture. Anyone strolling through the vineyards of Fattoria La Vialla in Tuscany will immediately realise that a different approach is taking root there. Biodynamics have been in integral part of the estate's identity for many years. Now La Vialla is taking things a step further. In collaboration with agronomist Felipe Pasini and the FiBL research institute, an experimental plot is being created dedicated to syntropic agriculture – an approach that doesn't aim to organise or dominate nature, but to utilise its intrinsic mechanisms. Trees, vines, herbs and all kinds of plants grow together rather than one beside the other. In this way the soil remains alive, retains water, produces humus and develops a resilience that, in times of climatic extremes, could prove more valuable than ever. Today, nobody knows whether such a concept will one day become established in viticulture. Perhaps it doesn't even need to. What is far more important is the approach behind it. It reminds us that the future does not always mean becoming even faster, even more high-tech or even more efficient. Sometimes progress begins when we learn once again to observe more closely and place greater trust in nature. Each year, wines tell the story of their vintage. This year, it will be a story about the heat, about early harvests, about devastating storms and about the realisation that climate change is now a reality. But maybe it will also be about people who have the courage to venture down new paths ...

Ilka Lindemann, editor-in-chief, lindemann@meininger.de



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The future begins today

Fattoria La Violla is one of the best-known biodynamic wine estates in Italy and has built a reputation that goes well beyond the borders of Tuscany.

Text: Ilka Lindemann

PHOTOS: JACOPO LORENZINI / GABRIELE MICHELI



Aroma, texture,
nutrients: Gianni
Lo Franco during a
soil tasting



Farms are increasingly judged according to their ability to preserve natural resources, promote biodiversity and create ecosystems that remain stable in the long term. La Vialla already embarked on this path decades ago. Since it was founded, in 1978, the Fattoria has been using organic agriculture. When Piero and Giuliana Lo Franco purchased the first farmhouses and the surrounding land, it was immediately clear to them how the land should be cultivated – in harmony with nature. Their grandmother Caterina had always only used natural fertilisers and followed the lunar calendar for both sowing and pruning. La Vialla was one of the first farms in Italy to be certified organic, when the AIAB (Italian Association of Organic Agriculture) was created in 1983. Since 1996, the farm's land has been cultivated biodynamically.

“Right from the beginning, the work of our grandparents and parents has been based on a very simple principle: producing high-quality food using healthy, responsible and respectful farming methods. We don't do anything that we wouldn't choose for ourselves and our families,” says Beatrice Lo Franco, who belongs to the third generation of the family.

She, her two sisters, and five cousins are gradually getting involved in the running of the family business, and have inherited the family's commitment to environmental protection. For the Lo Franco family unity is a top priority, and the challenge consists in maintaining the legacy received and carrying it into the future. “For this to work we need to be a team”, says Antonio Lo Franco, the second of the three brothers – Gianni, Antonio and Bandino – who have made the business what it is today. For the three the motto is “family first”. “The cousins spend a lot of time together, they go on holiday together and once a week they go to their grandmother for dinner together,” he reveals. His daughter Caterina adds, “What our grandparents and great-grandmother knew and have passed on to the next generations, is more relevant today than ever – it all starts with the soil. If you want to produce good food, first you have to preserve the fertility and vitality of the soil. Only healthy soil can produce healthy plants, and only healthy plants can really nourish people.”



A fascinating
masterclass with
“soil sommeliers”
Yasmine Cathell
and Alessio Corti

To understand this concept better, we join a masterclass on the different characteristics of soil, with the “soil sommeliers”, Yasmine Cathell and Alessio Corti. Using four different soils, one of which farmed conventionally and three from Fattoria La Vialla, we analyse the olfactory characteristics and learn how to bridge the gap between soil health and human health. “Soil Sommelier” is a unique project, based in Amsterdam, which scientifically assesses the quality of soils, analysing their structure, aroma, moisture and nutrient content in order to determine their suitability for various crops.

“We want to leave our children a healthy ecosystem. Our land must be healthy enough to resist climate change,” emphasises Gianni Lo Franco, posing the question that's worrying everyone, “How will farmers survive? Until a few years ago, biodynamic agriculture was sufficient, but in the future it will become increasingly difficult.” While in many places the future of viticulture is being discussed, here that future is already taking shape among the rows of vines.



An experimental plot is currently being set up using syntropic principles

Together with Felipe Pasini, an expert in syntropic agriculture, and the FiBl research institute, La Vialla is carrying out experiments in the vineyard using the principles of syntropic agriculture. The pilot project, given the name of “Syntropic Vite Maritata”, stems from the work of Swiss agronomist Ernst Götsch and is based on a concept that’s as simple as it’s ambitious: agriculture shouldn’t go against natural processes, but rather learn to mimic and accelerate them. While a traditional monoculture concentrates on a single plant species, the syntropic system creates complex plant communities. Different crops grow alongside one another, supporting each other and helping to increase soil fertility. The ground is naturally shaded, the formation of humus is encouraged, water retention improves and biodiversity increases. An area of roughly one hectare has been chosen for the first experimental plot, which will become a “living laboratory”, where it will be possible to directly compare conventional viticulture with syntropic viticulture. The grape variety chosen is Sangiovese, so that the results can be compared with those of existing vineyards.



The Fattoria’s guests are treated to Tuscan hospitality and a unique atmosphere

The aim is not simply to integrate a few trees into the vineyard, but to recreate the natural processes of a forest ecosystem. The vite maritata rows form the heart of the project – every three metres, living tree supports are planted, and the vines are trained to grow up them. Currently white willow, field maple, black mulberry and poplar trees are being used. In the lower vegetation layer perennial companion plants are integrated; rosemary, sage, lavender, thyme and oregano favour microbial diversity in the soil, nourish beneficial organisms and help improve the biological stability of the entire system. Each plant has a specific function; fast-growing species produce biomass and provide shelter, while the longer-living ones gradually establish the structure of a stable ecosystem.

The main objectives are to protect the grapevines from excessive sunlight, mitigate the effects of frost in spring, improve the soil’s water balance, boost the build-up of humus and soil fertility, enhance biodiversity and microbial life in the ground, stabilise grape quality, boost the content of polyphenols and aromatic compounds, and increase carbon sequestration in the soil. In this way it will be possible to produce wines that, despite rising temperatures, continue to show balance, freshness and complexity. “We don’t see syntropics and an alternative, but rather as a further development of our concept of agriculture,” says Gianni Lo Franco. In fact, many of the current core principles of syntropic agriculture echo the cornerstones of biodynamics: favouring natural cycles, preserving soil vitality, and considering an entire farm as a sole living ecosystem.



Fattoria La Vialla is home to more than 200 bee colonies



FATTORIA LA VIALLA
Via di Meliciano 26
52029 Castiglion Fibocchi
Arezzo/Italy
www.lavialla.com

The bottom line is this: with this project, Fattoria La Vialla could become one of the leading European examples for climate-resilient, biodiverse and regenerative viticulture. After all, La Vialla has always been at the forefront in environmental and nature conservation, as demonstrated by the numerous accolades received over the years. In 2017, the estate won the B.A.U.M. Environmental Award for its “outstanding commitment to environmental protection and sustainable development”. It has also been certified by natureOffice as having a “Positive CO₂ Balance”. In 2022, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), together with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), chose Fattoria La Vialla as a #GenerationRestoration Partner for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. And at the German Sustainability Award 2024, La Vialla was honoured as an outstanding example of sustainability in agriculture. The numerous accolades awarded to Fattoria La Vialla’s wines over the years at the MUNDUS VINI Grand International Wine Award also speak for themselves. During the “25 Years of MUNDUS VINI” celebrations, La Vialla was given the award for “Best Organic Producer”.

La Vialla is a world of its own. It could be described as a large, family-run organic farm, where wine, extra virgin olive oil and a wide range of speciality foods are produced, while at the same time welcoming guests in an extraordinarily beautiful setting. A total of 500 hectares of vineyards, fields, olive groves, vegetable and fruit patches are cultivated according to the principles of biodynamic agriculture. Almost 76% of the total surface area is Demeter certified. In addition, there is other land that is certified organic and around 1,290 hectares of woodland. As well as the sheep, whose milk is used in-house to make pecorino cheese, the farm is also home to over 200 bee colonies. The fans of Fattoria La Vialla – and there are many of them – love the wines, olive oil, honey, cheese, antipasti, sauces, pasta, biscuits and vinegar, as well as the range of natural cosmetic products. The Lo Franco family also grow vineyards at San Gimignano, in the Oltrepò Pavese, Abruzzo, the Marche, the Maremma and Sicily. There is constantly research being carried out, and efforts to promote regenerative economy are ongoing. At La Vialla they always go a few steps further than is strictly necessary – everything is in constant evolution. “Over the years, many innovations have helped us get closer to this goal. We’ve always welcomed new ideas and methods, provided that they



Tasting with the head winemaker Marco Cervellera



La Vialla’s organic wines regularly win awards



Giovanna, Caterina, Beatrice, Piero, Alessandro and Tomaso Lo Franco



The brothers Gianni, Antonio and Bandino Lo Franco

were in line with our values and helped to promote the health of our land, the plants, animals and people,” says Beatrice Lo Franco summing up their philosophy.

René Schaack, an ornithologist working for a research centre based in Husum, also confirms, “Here there is an unspoilt ecosystem unique in Europe.” During an early morning walk, he describes the extraordinary range of species documented on the estate. Some 138 bird species were recorded in the area, 72 of them were breeding species and, overall, 2,160 breeding pairs nest there, as can be read in the “avifauna” report. When we stop at the wastewater collection basin, he enthusiastically explains, “The water that remains after the treatment process at Fattoria La Vialla is so clean that birds nest here and raise their young.” For his study he examined three different zones of vegetation – the lower river valley, the hillside area characterised by shrubs and bushes, and the woodlands on the higher slopes. These three habitats each have their own biodiversity, and he asserts with conviction, “There is no farm in Germany that is quite so clean and can boast such an extraordinary ecosystem.” The Lo Franco family can be more than proud.

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