

Highlight Portrait

An interview with Antonio Moretti / Feudo Maccari Winery (first part)

di: Daniel Thomases

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Antonio Moretti Cuseri, a highly successful entrepreneur in the fashion and footwear fields, was born and raised in the Tuscan city of Arezzo where his father was an esteemed architect. Accordingly, he was not a man “of the trade”, i.e. from a winemaking family, a fact which has not prevented him from becoming an important force in Tuscany, where he succeeded first in giving new luster to an historic area of his native region, and then in creating major wines in other parts of Tuscany. A man full of curiosity, dynamic, many-sided and multi-talented, “restless” in the best sense of the term, he was part of the first wave of non-Sicilian entrepreneurs to show an interest in the island and believe in its wines. And, more importantly, put his money where his mouth was, adding important financial resources to his interest and investing time, energy, and capital in his Sicilian projects.

T. It might seem a bit strange that an entrepreneur with commitments to many companies which required much time and attention should enter an entirely new field, one which also required a great deal of energy and involvement. Could you explain what was behind this decision?

M. To tell you the truth, we were already involved in a certain sense, we owned a vineyard which had been planted in the 1930's along with another planted by my father in the 1950's. The grapes were sold, however, and among those who had an excellent opinion of them was Ambrogio Folonari, head of the Ruffino firm and certainly a man who knew his Sangiovese. My father, however, architect by profession and a hunter in his spare time, had no interest in fermenting and then marketing a wine from these grapes, and I, at grips with my work in the fashion business, didn't have the time for a second activity. But wine and food have always interested me, I don't define myself as a gourmet, I'll let others make that kind of judgment, but the pleasures of the table have always been very important for me.

T. The first wines were Tuscan if I am not mistaken, unquestionably a logical choice for a resident of the region, could you describe these first steps in the world of wine?

M. As I already said, the vineyards and the grapes were already in place and were available for use. Accordingly, in 1997, I decided to throw myself into this new adventure, my other business activities were going well and I have always enjoyed new challenges. And in addition, it should be remembered that the zone, the upper Arno river valley, was chosen in 1716, in the famous proclamation of Tuscan Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici, which singled out this area, along with Chianti (what we today would call the heart of Chianti Classico), Pomino, and Carmignano, as a choice territory. Historically, therefore, a potential for high quality seemed to exist. These other three zones, now appellations, are still considered some of Tuscany's finest areas for outstanding wine. Finding capable and talented consultants to assist me in the vineyard work and in the cellar was not at all difficult in Tuscany at the time, to tell you the truth the possible choices were many. As is the case today as well. The prerequisites for a successful operation, accordingly, were already in place and available and I went to work. Given that we already had Sangiovese, we planted Bordeaux grapes, Merlot, Cabernet, and Petit Verdot, varieties which had already demonstrated not a good but an excellent acclimation indeed to Tuscany, its soil, and its climate. The first wines were marketed in 2000, the commercial response was highly favorable, the reviews even more so, at times very flattering indeed and my second career was under way. And I have never looked back, this is a field which, once you enter it and a passion for the product gets hold of you, becomes almost a mania, you're always looking for a way of doing more and doing better, improving becomes a true obsession. And this because the variables which make for quality are so many, the factors so difficult to calculate given that formulas – fortunately – absolutely do not exist, therefore you have to throw yourself into the work each and every new year. But without this kind of burning desire you are not going to go anywhere.

T. To be precise, where exactly did you go after this bolt off the blocks?

M. Towards the Maremma on the Tuscan coast, an area which I know rather well, the seaside gives me a great deal of pleasure and I have a summer home at Punta Ala in the province of Grosseto, a well known vacation spot on the Punta Ala promontory; when I was a child my family vacationed in this part of Tuscany. The first wines of the Morellino di Scansano appellation of a certain level had begun to appear on the market and create a certain interest for themselves, and for an entrepreneur to arrive after others is unthinkable. For me, inconceivable. Accordingly, in 1999 I purchased virgin land in the township of Magliano in Toscana, for me a choice spot for Morellino di Scansano, and I began to produce a brief line of typical Maremma wines, Sangiovese and Vermentino to maintain a certain tradition together with Cabernet Sauvignon, the grape which, in a certain sense, was behind the rebirth of the viticulture of the zone after World War II. Then, in 2005, I was given the possibility of acquiring a vineyard at Castagneto Carducci which gave me the possibility of producing a Bolgheri appellation red wine. A rather interesting story, a California producer, Delia Viader, whose wines – according to what I have heard – are quite good had planted the vineyard, a lovely one indeed, more than 3000 vines per acre and then, before producing her first wine, had changed her mind. Or perhaps had been forced by new circumstances to abandon the project, I have never known the details. We are talking about a mere thirteen and a half acres but, in successful vintage, we can make 30,000 bottles of a wine which the market has received quite well. It's interesting to taste this wine, Orma, in comparison with our Oreno, produced in the upper Arno valley: the same grapes, more or less, the same working concepts, techniques, and practices both in the vineyard and in the cellar, but the wines could not be more different. A convincing and incontestable demonstration of what *terroir* means, we invest all of our efforts and knowledge in the work but, at the end, it is Nature, even when you do your utmost, which is the decisive factor.

T. With all of these projects either already operating or about to be launched, what made you decide on a further expansion, to go to Sicily to produce other wines in a place rather distant from your birthplace and residence?

M. Travelling, quite frankly, has never been a problem for me, quite to the contrary, I have always found it stimulating, I have always travelled a great deal in my other business activities both to keep track of production necessities and, as well, to follow the commercial part of the work. They haven't given me a pilot's license yet, but I'm almost there and I am very much at home in airports! The distance between Tuscany and Sicily was not an obstacle for me, instead it has given me the possibility to escape from the usual daily routine, see new places, meet other people, enjoy new and different experiences.

T. Why did you choose Sicily when you began this new adventure rather than the many other Italian wine zones? The wines, at the time, after all, did not have either the reputation or the allure they have now gained?

M. It struck me more interesting as a challenge to confront a new area rather than a zone with a long history of its own or a place where many others were already making good wine. It's always a disadvantage commercially in any case to have to create a space on the market and go head to head with competitors who already have a certain reputation, who enjoy good distribution and have wines that are well known and sought after. I cannot say that I had any sort of profound knowledge of Sicily and even less of its wines, but I sail during the summer, I had seen the port of Marzamemi in the island's southeast where I am now working, and the excellence of the tomatoes and melons of Pachino seemed to indicate that a quality agriculture already existed. The splendid architecture of places such as Noto, Modica, and Ragusa Ibla certainly do not need to be pointed out by me. I knew that in the past the place was well known for the quality of its Nero d'Avola and that there was once a flourishing and extensive viticulture in the area, a clear sign as well that this was a promising spot. The level of the local cuisine was already, at the time, a notable one and in recent years has also gained a certain fame, there are currently restaurants which compete with some of Italy's best. A whole series of reasons which, together, intrigued and attracted me.

T. When did the project and the investments actually begin?

M. The project in 2000 when I acquired the first "tumuli (a Sicilian land measurement, approximately four tenths of an acre), but I also ran into what might be called "obstacles" when trying to make the project operational, at least as far as the schedule I had worked out was concerned. Tuscany is a region of large properties, and I was simply not accustomed to fractioning and sub-division of landed property which I found on the island, to put together all of the pieces of estate – Feudo Maccari – as it now exists I had to purchase the land of fifty different smallholders. The profession of notary, the men who stipulate the contracts, is not exactly the worst one or the least remunerative which a Sicilian can exercise! But perseverance always pays off, and in the end I found myself with a 425 acre property, 150 of which are now planted to vines, in various parts of the townships of Noto and Pachino. There are obviously significant differences of soil, altitude, and exposure but I consider them a great advantage in that we can work with a notable number of different lots both in terms of quality and of personality. A greater complexity which is available to be created, to say it in a few words, and we always attempt to respect and bring out this complexity to the maximum degree in all of the wines which we produce for the benefit of our clientele.

T. Can you tell us something about the vineyards which you found and, as well, those which you planted?

M. I'm happy to do so, the zone, and moreover virtually the entire island, utilized one sole sort of training system for its vineyards: head-pruned bush vines. We have been entirely faithful to this tradition, all 150 acres of our vineyards are trained in this way, and I consider this decision far more than a mere homage to the past and to tradition, even though this sort of respect is never mistaken. I consider it, instead, almost an obligatory choice, we cannot consider ourselves so brilliant that we can invent everything from scratch, our forebears were not all fools. It should be remembered that systematic viticulture goes back almost three thousand years in Sicily, and shouldn't be necessary to point out that in the past metal wires and proper posts to train the vines on, both indispensable for an espalier training system, simply did not exist. Over the centuries and millennia, bush vines have shown themselves to be by far the most suitable way of cultivating grapes in a Mediterranean world with its high summer temperatures and lengthy periods without rainfall. The form of the canopy of leaves protects the crop from damaging direct sunlight and rays while the shade which the leaves create assists the conservation of ground water in the soil. I never considered, not even for a moment, an irrigation system. I am happy to leave that stuff to the Californians and the Australians, they make wines in areas with no viticultural history, places where irrigation is a necessity for survival. Our viticultural consultant, Dr. Andrea Paoletti, whom I consider a superb professional, one who has worked all over the world, firmly believes in bush vines, he makes some wine at his own small property near Florence, and has told me that the rows planted to bush vines regularly give him better grapes than those trained to an espalier system. As far as the grape varieties we chose to plant is concerned, it is obvious that we gave priority to local varieties, to come to Sicily from Tuscany to make other "international" wines would not have made any sense from the point of view of the production, not to speak of marketing aspects. There is unquestionably some good Merlot in Sicily and some excellent Cabernet as well, but I already had them at home in Tuscany and, independently of commercial considerations, duplicating wines which already existed would only have created confusion. I decided instead to try Syrah which, if "international" in a certain sense, is much less widely planted than Bordeaux grapes. We enjoy working with the variety, as we do everywhere we make wine, and we always try to achieve the maximum, but we are talking about eight thousand bottles a year. I consider Syrah, among the better known French grape varieties, the most Mediterranean of all, the French normally plant it in warm areas, it is virtually unknown to the north of Lyon. In my opinion, it gives very nice wine in Sicily. And a place which is more Mediterranean than the southeastern corner of Sicily is difficult to find, we are on the same latitude as the city of Tunis.

T. You have spoken of native grape varieties, can you be more specific?

M. Yes, we are in one of the historic zones of the cultivation of Nero d'Avola, I have been told that in the area of Noto and Pachino alone there were until recently some 7,500 acres of vineyards planted almost exclusively to the grape. The cherry tomatoes of Pachino, in fact, became famous because the grapes were so little remunerative that many growers uprooted their vineyards and threw themselves onto other crops. If I and my colleagues have contributed to the rebirth of the local viticulture we have seen in recent years I can only say that I am very happy indeed. I have already described the type of vineyard we planted, in terms of the genetic material – the clones and selections – we planted, I can say we had the good fortune of finding an old vineyard, a bush vine parcel as espalier systems did not even exist in Sicily fifty years ago (and I am tempted to say "thankfully"). And the cuttings we used for the grafting have given us a quality we consider excellent, it is precisely this old-vine parcel which gives us the grapes for our Nero d'Avola selection, 60 thousand bottles in vintages in which the weather is on our side. We age this wine in oak but, just as with our Sangiovese in Tuscany, the aging has been modified, we are using larger casks in the search for a greater elegance and balance, more fruit and a greater sense of territory.

T. Noto and Pachino are, historically, red wine areas, have you respected this tradition as well?

M. Not entirely, tradition is, and must continue to be, our guiding light, but it doesn't have to be followed literally and pedantically. We have no desire to throw away or entirely dispense with everything which came before us, but we are of the idea, in our own limited way, to be able to add something as well. As the Russian philosopher Rozanov said, "tradition must be pious, but not mad", and this is the philosophy which guides us. Therefore, we planted a Sicilian white grape, Grillo, which has given us a white wine which not only has completely satisfied us but has been well received in the various markets which we serve. A very fine grape indeed, I love its fragrance and amplitude, and we have now reached an annual production of 60 thousand bottles. And, in addition, in a nod to important tradition of the city of Siracusa, we also make a dessert wine, a dried-grape Moscato made from Muscat d'Alexandrie, just a few bottles, unfortunately there is little request for sweet wines at the moment, but this offering satisfies us as a homage to a glorious past, one upon a time Moscato di Siracusa was a very famous wine.

T. Fifteen years have no passe since you set foot in this corner of Sicily for the first time, how have the wines changed over the past decade and a half

M. There has been an evolution over time as we have gradually learned more about the characteristics of the grapes and the area in which we operate. We never sought to make muscular, potent wines as an end in itself, but we have become more aware of qualities such as balance, harmony, and finesse and for that reason we have modified both the viticulture and the winemaking. On average, depending on the level of the grape production in the vineyards, we thin the crop a bit less, we are not looking for a concentration which would not be appropriate for our grape varieties. The Syrah continues to be aged in small oak barrels, but the percentage of new oak is significantly lower than in the past, while the Nero d'Avola – at least our highest quality selection – which is also aged in oak, utilizes 260 gallon, 520 gallon, and 1560 gallon casks during the aging phase. The fermentation is much less vigorous, it is carried out at lower temperatures and with a more delicate pumping over of the skins in the tanks during the extraction process, and is both shorter and less intense during this phase. The overall period of contact with the skins, instead, has been lengthened, we want an extended period of skin contact, a full but more gradual extraction. By now our tastes are different, in a certain sense we have changed the wines because the wines have also changed us. Those who know our line have noted, for example, that the most recent vintages offer a new style compared to the past, and I would like to emphasize that this change in style is something that we aimed for, it is not merely, and not even principally, something due to the vintages themselves, to the differences in the growing seasons. We thought long and hard about what we wanted to achieve, I and our consulting winemaker, Beppe Caviola, another professional whom I consider an outstanding talent, and we have attempted to study each and every detail of our work, to leave nothing to chance. Our wines are intended to distinguish themselves by their finesse, fragrance, and length on the palate, and by velvety, sustained and sustaining – tannins. Brute force, muscularity, intensity – these are characteristics we are happy to leave to others.

T. With three estates in Tuscany and another near Siracusa it would seem that you are not lacking in commitments that require time and effort.

M. True but I have always thought that a professional organization in support of his work should allow an entrepreneur to take on new challenges if and when they presented themselves. In my case I was struck, and I was surely not the only one, by the new wines produced on Mount Etna, at least partly because there could not be two grape varieties more different from one another than Nero d'Avola and Nerello Mascalese. And, tasting these wines here and there, I began to think that it would be very interesting indeed to operate in this new – but at the same time age-old – wine producing zone and measure myself and my working group against the other capable producers and consultants whose wines had begun to appear on the market. There's no such thing as an entrepreneur without a competitive spirit, and I have it in my blood and in my genes. If, as my friends tell me, I have a fiery spirit, what better place to give it full rein than on Europe's largest active volcano? The idea took on a concrete form in 2010 with the acquisition of the first parcels of land, the usual number of notaries who got into the act (to be sure, to judge by the sums spent, I am a true benefactor of this professional group), and at the end I managed to create a 38 acre estate with some 25 acres of vineyards. We produce two wines, an Etna red and an Etna white, the first a 100% Nerello Mascalese, the second a blend of Carricante with a bit of Minnella. The latter is an intriguing grape variety with rather interesting aromas, there is a very light touch of sulfur that is also perceptible in certain wines produced in the Campi Flegrei near Naples and some Lacryma Christi white wines from grapes grown on Mount Vesuvio, again near Naples. Both of those zones are volcanic, perhaps this soil, given that Etna, obviously, is also volcanic in its terrain, is a determining factor, we need to better understand this variety, a grape which is little known either by us or by the other producers in our area. As far as the Etna red is concerned, we intend follow the more recent style of our Nero d'Avola wines, a nice richness but nothing exaggerated, much suppleness and silkiness, a fine expression of fruit, a discreet use of oak, the noble austerity which distinguishes many high level wines, long and sustained on the flow but without any sort of heaviness. And, above all a wine which is unmistakably an expression of Mount Etna, a wine which could not be produced anywhere else.

T. How do you see your role in the current Sicilian panorama and that of the future?

M. I clearly did not go to Sicily to give lessons to anyone, nor does it seem to me that my colleagues need any, they are doing very good work on their own. I went to live a new entrepreneurial experience which, as always, is, at the same time, a new life experience. I, and my staff as well, went to learn something but we also managed to bring something of our own, i.e. years of work in the vineyard and the cellar, in other latitudes and with other grapes to be sure, but nonetheless knowledge and working experience which we were able to put to good use in the production of Sicilian wine. After all, the island which on which we landed did not enjoy many years of successful experience in markets for quality wine. Accordingly, we certainly learned a great deal but we also brought something to this new place, and the undersigned does not say this *pro domo sua*, this encounter on the island of Sicily has enriched all of us, those already in place and the newly arrived as well.

(to be continued)

by Daniel Thomases