

Tenuta di Trinoro - a Tuscan eccentric

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There is something endearingly frank about a wine producer who describes his life pre wine production thus: 'I had a restaurant in Rome, distributed Italian wines in New York from '82 to '86 and before that I was in a beautiful tunnel of dope. I can't remember exactly when.'

Andrea Franchetti looks like a youthful Yves Saint Laurent, complete with impressive height, heavy specs, mop of tow hair and out-of-focus look. His speech is a cross between a mumble and a Washington state growl through the teeth. He would make a pretty good film star but at the moment is utterly focused on his idiosyncratic wine estate Tenuta di Trinoro which has achieved quite remarkable renown considering it was first planted in 1992.

He comes with a South Carolina textile fortune on his mother's side. His uncle is the artist Cy Twombly. There are roundabout connections with the families who own Cinzano and Montalcino wine producers Argiano and Col d'Orcia which presumably helped draw him to his very particular corner of central Italy, in sheep country which had not been planted with vines for a century.

Tenuta di Trinoro sits in viticultural isolation in a valley just west of the Florence-Rome autostrada near Sarteano where Tuscany meets Umbria and Lazio. Franchetti describes it as 'a godforsaken place on the east of the first limestone mountain north of Rome with an ex-volcano between it and the sea'. The 600-metre high Monte Amiata protects Franchetti's vines and the sheep so that summers are hot and there are still leaves on the trees in December. 'The weather swirls round us,' according to Franchetti who is glad to leave his grapes long on the vine, building up the extra layers of flavour so beloved by modern wine lovers. His 2001 harvest was still unpicked in early November last year when I met him in London, showing off baby wines in large bottles.

What I like about Franchetti (apart from the nerdy film star looks) is his contrariness. He has deliberately concentrated on the often-overlooked Cabernet Franc vine because he likes it, and he thinks the Bordelais make too little of it. He has to admit though that another Bordeaux grape Petit Verdot probably does best on his terrain of eight hectares apiece of 'Graves' and 'Côtes' (he borrows St Emilion nomenclature for soil types), so he has quite a bit of that planted too.

Here Cabernet Sauvignon plays a subordinate role and the fashionable Merlot is being made to eat humble pie. Despite getting rave reviews in the US for his Palazzi, a blend of Merlot with Cabernet Franc, and being able to sell every one of the thousand cases he was making several times over, he is abandoning it altogether.

'Palazzi was less complex, so why do it?' was his dismissive explanation. The 1999 is the last vintage of Palazzi (the 1998 won 93 points out of 100 from America's wine guru Robert Parker). He has no plans to pull out Merlot vines but will increase plantings of Petit Verdot ('even the Bordelais admit it's better here than in Bordeaux') so that they might eventually constitute a quarter of Tenuta di Trinoro.

From 2000 on he will produce just one flagship wine Tenuta di Trinoro (about 600 cases of Cabernet Franc blended with other Bordeaux varieties) and more than 2000 cases of a second wine, Le Cupole di Trinoro. The Cupole blend according to www.tenutaditrinoro.it is a precise 78 per cent Cabernet Franc, 11 per cent Merlot, six per cent Cesanese d'Affile and five per cent Uva di Troia. According to its British importers the proportions are 23 per cent Cabernet Franc, 19 per cent Merlot, 23 per cent Uva di Troia and 35 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon. Take your pick.

I first met Franchetti at the tail end of a long day tasting 2000s in Bordeaux *chez* his great friend Jean Luc Thunevin of Château Valandraud in St Emilion (Peter Sisseck of Dominio de Pingus is the third member of this triumvirate of ambitious red wine producers). He was showing his wines alongside some of the highest priced red bordeaux without a qualm. And quite rightly, as the notes below suggest.

Tenuta di Trinoro is remarkably direct and appetising. It is not like red bordeaux but is much more complex than most Italian Bordeaux blends. Like them it qualifies not for any DOC but is sold as an IGT, a wine with an Indicazione Geografica Tipica of Toscana - not that there is anything remotely typical about this wine. It has been treated to every rich winemaker's plaything: tiny yields; the strictest selection (hence the appearance of a second wine); top-quality oak used in abundance to give it longevity; some tricky malolactic fermentation in barrel to soften it; a touch of micro-oxygenation to

keep it fresh.

So what is the down side? Price of course. Thunevin has never knowingly undersold his wines, so why should Franchetti? Corney & Barrow of London, EC1 (www.corneyandbarrow.com tel 020 7539 3200) who sell it in Britain list Le Cupole 1999 at £300 a case but Tenuta di Trinoro and Palazzo simply carry the worrying slogan 'Price on application'.

Like his mates Thunevin and Sisseck however, Franchetti has itchy feet. His new project is on the slopes of another volcano, Mount Etna in Sicily where he has bought vineyards 1,000 metres up on the north flank. Last year he picked his first crop of Nerello Mascalese grown there. Surely that will be more affordable, at first anyway.

Tenuta di Trinoro is imported into the US by The Rare Wine Co of Sonoma, CA (tel 707 996 4484 and 800 999 4342) and Guilford, CT (www.rarewineco.com tel 203 457 1431). Since the wines have been launched on the Bordeaux market, they are also available from fine wine traders Farr Vintners of London SW1 (www.farr-vintners.com tel 020 7821 2000) from £450 a case in bond.

For detailed tasting notes, see [purple pages](#).