Thai food in Le Marche

26 May 2012 by Matt Gladstone

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'I fell in love with her food, and then with her'. This being Italy, he might be forgiven. So might we, for expecting a tale of *formaggio*, pasta and tomato sauces, stirred suggestively beneath the olive trees of Tuscany. But we are in Le Marche, on the Adriatic coast of Italy and the man speaking, being a biodynamic-cum-natural winemaker, has more adventurous tastes. The food he fell in love with was a sesame prawn; the lady was from a local Thai family.

Perhaps Natalino Crognaletti (pictured below) is not the first man to be seduced thus but perhaps he also sensed a deeper affinity. His natural winemaking, Thai and Italian food all share an aesthetic - simple ingredients, minimal intervention; let things be, allow them to shine as they are, let the cook step back and allow nature to show her hand.

Curiously, under his direction of simplicity, the normally light and fresh Verdicchio wine has become a richer, more profound contender - with fine fruit sweetness and the medicinal tang of dried chrysanthemum flowers that the Chinese use as herbal tea. And if, on his side, the wine has become a better partner for Asian food, then her cooking has embraced the range of local ingredients - buffalo milk, salt cod and pasta in place of coconut, grouper and noodles - but has kept the Thai trademarks of purity and freshness.

Our visit to the remarkable San Lorenzo winery and agriturismo to test this theory was not unchallenging to arrange, there being no telephone number on the website. Once found, the number was rarely answered, and even once booked, the road was peppered with seductive but misleading choices. But after several diversions, calls for directions and Italian debates, we found our way to the courtyard of the winery/guest house/home, to be greeted by Lorenzo (age three) and his grandmother. Natalino himself soon appeared, face beaming through yesterday's five o'clock shadow. He is a man of great ebullience.

We started on the Verdicchio while the sounds of frying started in the kitchen. Three bottles were produced and soon, plates of assorted starters arrived, which enabled in-depth consideration of the wine and food combinations. For the crostini with home-churned buffalo butter - was the mellow, spicy butter made for the round and fruity di Gino bottling, or the more reserved and mineral Superiore? Tiny cooked sardines, cold, in olive oil and chives - perhaps their salty richness was better with the fuller di Gino? Prawn tartare, seductively slippery and delicate with a crunch of crushed pink peppercorn, a real triumph of unexpected flavour combination, was voted unanimously better with the purer Superiore. Salt cod cakes (bacala), an intriguing hybrid of the European potato fishcake with the aromatics of the Thai, sent us back to the di Gino. Finally came the famous sesame prawns, whose almost imperceptible coriander could have been made for the 30-month aged Riserva's dried chrysanthemum and melon. Perhaps this was what Natalino had in mind when he first tasted the sesame prawn.

Egg pasta with thumbnail-sized clams and prawn followed. Again, this was simplicity itself, tasting of nothing more or less than the sea and the essence of the shellfish that lay within the pasta's tangles. We had left the smells of the sea an hour behind but this brought the coast back into the room.

As we contemplated the remains of the pasta, Natalino, having seen our enthusiasm for the whites, was moved to ask if we now would like to try a few of his reds. After a brief check with the hepatologist among our number (probably one of the shorter consultations he has ever given), we pressed on. From a pure and plummy Burello (named for the fluffy rabbits grazing the weeds in the vineyards) to a richer and more tannic Gattara, and several in-between, he led us on a vinous tour of the local hills and his plantings of Sangiovese and Montepulciano.

The next course arrived with steamed merluzza (cod) and calamaretti (small calamari) and grilled vegetables from the garden. The calamari were a particular talking point for Natalino - flash dry-fried in a wok, they were resistant on the outside but delicate, raw and soft inside. The texture obeyed the rule of perfect pasta, but in reverse - the crunch on the outside and the softness within. 'No one else in Italy makes it like this', he beamed proudly with a glance back at the kitchen. Adorned with black salt and split coriander seeds, this was the essence of the Italian dictum of 'no more than four ingredients', but married with a Thai sensitivity to aroma and texture. On hearing our questions about the salt, Mrs Crognaletti herself appeared, bearing an armful of salt types and colours, explaining their various uses, dependent on the

season and catch of fish available.

As we pondered the remains of our plates, Natalino piped up with a 'and perhaps a couple more?' He had saved the best till last - his Solleone, a pure Montepulciano that would stand happily on an international stage. Here was a *vino de contemplazione* to end the meal with. 'From vines older than me and as thick as my leg!' he explained proudly. And then, the Paradiso (named auspiciously for the hill it comes from), from a local variety called Lacrima, the grapes selected individually from the bunches ('we only get one bottle from three vines') - an extraordinary finish to the meal, whose intense rose and violet could best be conjured up by imagining violet and rose petals afloat in a sea of peachy fruit and dried blueberry.

After such a long to and fro, it was the cook who had the final word at table, appearing with cheesecakes fluffed into clouds so light they hardly weighed in the spoon - the concentrated, sweetened essence of buffalo milk itself.

Which left only a digestif stroll through the sunny vineyards, cradling a glass of the Paradiso as we examined the peas busy fixing nitrogen into the soil between the vines, roses planted at the end of vine rows as early warning of mould, and domestic rabbits frolicking inappropriately, in-between bouts of (no doubt fully biodynamic) weed nibbling.

Fattoria San Lorenzo, Contrada San Lorenzo 6, 60036 Montecarotto, Ancona, Italy, tel +39 0731 89656, fattoriasanlorenzo.com (NOT fattoriasanlorenzo.it - a different place entirely).

San Lorenzo wines are available from Caves de Pyrène, including the one that got away from us - a Verdicchio aged for 10 years in steel tanks, of which there is none at San Lorenzo itself. We stayed at the Borgo Storico Seghetti Panichi, Ascoli Piceno.