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FEDERICO GRAZIANI: COUPS DE FOUDRE

How did the child of an accountant and a shopkeeper become a champion sommelier and a star Etna winemaker? Margaret Rand finds out

A butcher walked into a bar... This should be the start of a joke. What would the punchline be? "And the barman said, 'Why the hatchet face?'" A joke, however, it is not. (Not even an unfunny one.) It is a milestone on the journey of Federico Graziani—from teenage sommelier, to fully fledged producer on the slopes of Mount Etna. We'll catch up with the butcher later—being a teenage sommelier is enough to start with.

Graziani wasn't born into wine; he grew up in Ravenna, where his mother had a shop and his father was an accountant. At 14, he decided to go to hotel school, and for the sommelier course his parents had to give their consent for him to drink alcohol. They gave it, he says, "but they weren't happy." They wanted him to be a pilot, and when he started working in a restaurant, they pointed out that he would be working when everybody else was on holiday. "This was correct. When I was in London, I worked four days and had three days off. In Milan, I did 14 shifts a week, and there were no breaks in between.

This was at the end of the 1990s, and it was like that. I started at gam, worked until 1pm, had one hour off, and then worked until 1 or 2am. It was hard. I understood what my parents meant, but I really loved hospitality, talking to people, and wine. I never left wine from the age of 15. At 19, I became a professional sommelier and worked in one- and two-star restaurants, then I moved to London in 1997."

He spoke no English when he arrived, but he stayed three and a half years, working in three different Italian restaurants and learning a lot about other wines. In 1998, aged 23, he won Best Italian Sommelier in the Italian Association of Sommeliers contest. The following year, Graziani returned to Milan, and doors were open to him. At Cracco, he had the opportunity to create the best wine list in Milan, and it sounds like sommelier heaven: 2,200 labels, including 12 vintages of Petrus. That was followed by nine years at Il Luogo di Aimo e Nadia, where the

Above: Federico Graziani. Opposite: The three red and one white wine in the Fedegraziani range, all with specially commissioned art on the labels.

All photography courtesy of Federico Graziani



labels were in the hundreds rather than in the thousands. "Two thousand two hundred is too many," he acknowledges now.

After that, he spent four years studying viticulture and winemaking at the University of Milan, where Attilio Scienza was professor of viticulture and confirmed in Graziani his fascination for vineyards. "I didn't agree with the winemaking side so much: it was very technical, with a focus on ripeness and tannins and extraction. I do wines like in the 1980s."

Because this is what Graziani's sommelier experience has taught him—that wine should be drinkable. "I was always looking for drinkability. I loved wines you could drink without thinking too much, with hidden or not-hidden complexity." He also says, "I had the luck to taste the best wines in the world. It doesn't mean I do great wine [now], but I know what great wine is. I like wine that doesn't stop you from drinking. Masseto, for example—it's one of the greatest in Italy. I could stay for two hours, tasting and talking about it. But I could not drink a bottle." Of another famous wine, he says, "I never saw an empty bottle of that. There was always half a bottle left."

Later, if we can briefly jump ahead a few years, Graziani went to a Margaux tasting in London—he was studying for the MW at this point. The tasting was of ten wines from the previous 20 years. One was 2005, and another was 1985. "The cellar master started saying, 'Today we start the harvest 14 days later than in 1985.' And I thought, the 2005 is perfect, but I want to produce wine like the 1985, with low alcohol, but power."

Feeling and transmitting Etna's energy

But back to the story. In 2008, Graziani had a book to finish, which was late; his friend Salvo Foti, winemaker and founder of the I Vigneri consortium on Etna and elsewhere, lent him a little vineyard house on Etna for a couple of weeks so he could

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work in peace. At the end of that time, Graziani and Foti found themselves, as one might, in the bar in Passopisciaro village. And in walked a butcher.

The butcher wanted advice on what to do about a small vineyard that he was considering uprooting. When they went to see it, "It was a *coup de foudre*. The vines were ancient, and not in bad order. They'd never used chemicals. They called that piece of land La Piscina [the swimming pool], because they used to fill it with water just before picking. I'm a bit fatalistic; if something is going to happen... It wasn't expensive—between €80,000 and €90,000 per hectare, and it was half a hectare [1.2 acres]. I didn't have a wife then, so it was probably easier."

Before buying the vineyard, Graziani had also fallen in love with Etna. "It gives energy. I feel an energy. Over the past two years, the top of Etna has changed, and it's now 115ft [35m] higher than it was. It's a bit scary... But I have an olive tree that is 800 years old... so there has been no eruption on my vineyard for 800 years."

Graziani's 0.5ha remained a hobby for the moment. He was still working in restaurants until he took a job with Feudi di San Gregorio, five days a week, as a sort of ambassador. He bought the vineyard in August 2008, and the butcher worked on it for another month, so his first vintage was 2009—"a very bad year, with a rainy September. But Salvo said, 'Wait another year.' And 2010 was very good."

He made 1,000 bottles that year. "After a couple of years of *no piscina*," he says, "I got to 1,500 bottles by taking care." When it came to buying more vineyards, Feudi di San Gregorio helped him: "It lent me money. We had a partnership, in which it had 20 percent." That continued until 2020, when Feudi got a new director and decided to focus only on the core business. "It was my distributor, too. It lent me money, it worked with me, it was my only client." But distribution was not really its business, says Graziani now, "and the costs to me were too high, higher than usual. And so, we parted."

The vineyard had been a Saturday-and-Sunday occupation until now. But at the end of 2020, instead of selling Feudi his new vintage, Graziani had to buy back the old one from them: "Not an easy moment," he says.

"People saw me as a sommelier with a hobby, which I was not, but this was probably the perception," he says. "I had a

salary, so it was easier." People's attitude to him changed, he says; and his wines, had he stayed as he was, would not be where they are now.

Special sites of height and wines of space

Graziani has 6ha (15 acres) now, all on the north and northwestern sides of the mountain. Where you are on Etna matters hugely: "For white wines, the eastern side is supposed to be best, but my workers wouldn't be able to see what is happening there. It can rain in Randazzo and not in Passopisciaro, and if a vineyard is 19 miles [30km] away, it doesn't sound like much, but the climate changes completely. There can be 35in [900mm] of rain on one side, and 5in [130mm] on the other. A vineyard on the other side wouldn't have the same attention; and the roads are winding. It's so slow to get there, and you don't recognize the climate. It's too different."

The first vineyard, the butcher's 0.5ha, sits at 1,970ft (600m) on the north side of Etna, in Passopisciaro, and it gives a wine called Profumo di Vulcano. Into that 0.5ha are crammed more than 40 white grape vines, among the reds, which are Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio, plus Alicante and Francis. Why Profumo di Vulcano? Because when Graziani had finished the book (the one he was writing when Foti lent him the house,



which was when the butcher walked into the bar, he gave a copy to a client in the restaurant where he was working. At another table was food critic Andy Hayler—"one of the few who had eaten in all the three-star restaurants in the world." He asked to see the book and happened to open it at the page where there was an interview with Etna producer Giuseppe Benanti; the piece was called "Profumo di Vulcano." Hayler said, "If I made a wine, I'd call it that." And this happened," says Graziani. He had been thinking of names like Black Queen; this was clearly an improvement. "Hayler showed my wine to [UK restaurateur] Gordon Ramsay, and he became my first overseas client. All my friends have very good positions in top restaurants. It's like a repayment for 20 years of no Christmas, no New Year's Eve. If I'd been working in a trattoria, I would never have met Andy."

One of the other two reds is the Etna Rosso (Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio)—raspberry-ish, precise, and vertical. That verticality is something Graziani searches for, and picks early to get. "I like to produce wines that age well, and weight of muscle kills the wine." Many wines of the early 2000s remind him "of broth, of glutamate; they feel cooked, overripe. And it depends on when you pick your grapes. If they're overripe, it will be like marmalade. If you want white fruit, not yellow fruit, in white wine, you must pick earlier."

(As an illustration of his tastes: Two weeks before we met, Graziani bought himself a case of La Consillante 2015. "I went to a friend to taste a bottle and found it impossible to drink more than half. I had a case of it, and I didn't like it at all.")

The third red, Rosso di Mezzo, he describes as "a work in progress"; it's cool, precise, grippy, savory. All his reds have a feeling of spaciousness—not opulence, not remotely—but a cool shadiness, like walking into a cave on a hot day.

Mareneve is the only white wine, planted at extreme altitude (nearly 4,000ft [1,200m]) in Milo, to see how the vines would cope. He rents this plot from Foti. The varieties are Carricante, Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Chenin Blanc, and Grecanico. It's a complex wine—spice, some fatness, plenty of

acidity—with a good admixture of philosophy, based on the ideas of Foti, that wine is a living organism and reflects our society. "I understood what Salvo was doing, his vision of maintaining a territory, restoring walls and houses; it's a human project, it's not just about making wine. I liked it." It also involves low intervention in the vineyards and conversion to organic methods, though he's not so sure about biodynamics. "I have been very fascinated by it, and I read Nicolas Joly's book. I agree with some points, and I work as cleanly as possible, but if I have to use a systemic product to save the vintage [as he had to in 2013], then I will." Apart from that, he uses nothing except copper and sulfur. "I feel the mountain is alive. I feel it, and I hear it. It's not a normal place."

The initial idea in Milo was to create an Etna Bianco Superiore; the Gewurztraminer wasn't Graziani's choice, "but it gives complexity, so actually I'm quite glad to have it. It's fate again: I found this vineyard, and I do my best to vinify it according to my palate." He also picks the Gewurztraminer a week before the rest of that vineyard, for "rose- and white-fruit aromas, not papaya and tropical fruit."

The succession of new plots—some planted, some not yet—can be bewildering, but all are small, and all are high up. There's a new piece of land, for example, next to the Mareneve plot but even cooler, with frost in June; it's too cold for local varieties, he says, so he thinks he'll try Riesling. "I was going to plant it now, but Salvo suggested I wait until there's a proper fence. Shepherds are terrible up there..." There are 0.8ha (2 acres) of what he calls "ex-vineyard" in Montelaguardia, at 3,100ft (950m), which he'll plant first instead, with Carricante, "to be a bit more independent." Mareneve is going well, so he's happy, "but it's not an easy vineyard, not at all."

Oh, and there's one more thing. In 2010, he met a girl called Anna Maschio, whose family owns a distillery near Venice, Bonaventura Maschio. They met twice in the same day. Graziani had published a newspaper about wine—printed on very good paper. She had bought some copies of the second edition, whereupon he decided to also take a copy of the first edition around to her. Then, later, by complete chance, she came to his restaurant for dinner. They married a year later.

A woman walked into a restaurant... ■



Above: Federico Graziani (center), Salvo Foti (right), and Maurizio Pagano. Opposite: One of the ideally situated vineyards looking up to the volcano.