ALAIN ELKANN INTERVIEWS

Giacomo Cattaneo

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A LONG HISTORY OF VINICULTURE. Giacomo Cattaneo Adorno is Genovese by family and grew up in Brazil. He is the current Marquis of Gabiano, whose "Castello di Gabiano" in the Piedmont Region of north-west of Italy has a long and fascinating history. Giacomo Cattaneo and his wife Emanuela are directly engaged in the wine making and other traditions of the castle.

You can listen to the podcast of this interview here.

How did the Castello di Gabiano come to your family from the Durazzo family, another prominent Genovese family that is renowned for its art collection and its libraries?

Giacomo Durazzo was the husband of Princess Matilde Giustiniani my adoptive

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grandmother – adoptive because she adopted her niece, my mother Carlotta. The Durazzo family came to Genoa from Albania at the turn of the 15th century. Being foreigners, the Durazzos were able to keep out of the litigious oligarchy of the republic of Genoa, although they counted 9 doges and 2 cardinals. They became prominent bankers very fast, with offices in most of the known world at the time – London, Paris, Amsterdam, New Orleans – and were extremely wealthy. Their nobility wasn't inherited; it was based on commerce, on business, on banking.

Since when has the Gabiano Castle existed?

There's a deed by Charlemagne establishing Gabiano in about 720 AD. Situated on the River Po, it was at the centre of the trade going up to Switzerland from Piedmont and Liguria, and was mainly established to collect taxes.

Who did it belong to at the beginning?

The Church of Vercelli, whose hands it stayed in until about 1100, when it was taken over by the Marquis of Monferrato, the local landlord and a great warrior. He fought wars against all the kingdoms around and established Gabiano as his base. Later, when the Palaiologos, the Byzantine Greek ruling family in Constantinople, saw things going sour around them they started buying lots of property in Monferrato. They bought the Castello di Gabiano and gave it to their daughter as a dowry for her marriage to a Gonzaga, and that's how Gabiano went into the Italian princely Gonzaga family in about 1520.

Then how did it come into the Durazzo family?

The Gonzagas set up a very long war against the Savoy family, a war that has remained present in Italian literature – Umberto Eco speaks about it a lot in his novel *The Island of the Day Before*. The famous siege of nearby Casale lasted 10 years, but the Gonzagas lost the war and their whole fortune was destroyed. Their fantastic art collection was sold, and most of it was bought by the royal family ruling England at the time. Genovese bankers had financed the Gonzagas and stepped in to collect their debts. In 1623 possession of Castello di Gabiano was taken by the Durazzos, together with the title of Marquis.

> "Our wine has a definite character due to our geographical position"

Giacomo Cattaneo is the Marquis of Gabiano. The spectacular location of the Castello di Gabiano is shown here in winter.

Giacomo Cattaneo, since when has wine been produced at Gabiano?

We have proof in papers in Gabiano City Hall of wine transactions around 940 AD. The Durazzos continued the production of wine. They were keen art and book collectors, and the Durazzo Giustiniani library is noted for its unique incunabula, early printed books. I have the pleasure and the burden of maintaining it, together with my wife Emanuela, who luckily is very passionate and helps me with it. We keep it open to scholars.

How many volumes does your library have?

10,000 volumes. Collected by Giacomo Filippo Durazzo between 1730 and 1813, the basis of the collection came from the bankruptcy sale of the Marquis de La Vallière in 1760. Apart from the quality of the books, it's an interesting portrait of a man of the Enlightenment. At that time libraries were very rarely in the hands of private people, they were in the hands of the church or of kings and kingdoms, and it was unusual for a layman to have such an important and serious library. Durazzo wanted the highest quality. He was a very knowledgeable man, and intensely rigorous culturally. We also have the archive from since around 1200 AD, which, with all the ledgers and the business books and correspondence, is like the accounting of a modern corporation.

Is this very extensive archive part of your library?

It was part of the Durazzo library, now it is with my brother; but I have access and it's extremely interesting. It is very easy to read because everything was very orderly. The accounting was very precise. The correspondence was exactly filed. You can see how, for example, that while interest rates for people like us – who lived most of our lives with inflation and high interest rates that mean we are always are thinking about the inflation that will come – in fact the periods of high interest rates and inflation in history are very, very small. The First Crusade, the Second Crusade, the discovery of America and all the silver and gold coming in, the French Revolution, and the Second World War. All the rest of the time you have interest rates that go between half a percent, 1%, to 1.5% maximum. Nowadays the bankers, especially Italian banks, are having difficulty adjusting to this concept that they don't make money by lending money, but they make money by giving service. However, it was the fact for banking for most of this millennium that they made money by letters of exchange, by providing anticipation for trading ventures and things like that. Interest rates were very low and were not the source of profit, and reading the archive gives you a very clear outlook on things that are happening now.

Who built the famous labyrinth at the castle?

The Durazzos, around 1860, and it's still there now. The labyrinth is a symbol of knowledge, of the intellect. It's full of symbolism.

From 1798 to 1814 the region of Piedmont became part of France under Napoleonic rule. What happened then?

The Republic of Genoa, including the Durazzos, felt a natural affinity with the idea of Napoleon and the French Revolution. At the same time they were financing most of the kingdoms of the coalition, and when the coalition won the war, the first thing they did was to annex Genoa to the Kingdom of Savoy and omit to pay back the debts. That started a period of decadence for the Republic of Genoa.

What happened to the Gabiano Castle?

Gabiano didn't suffer much; the Durazzos were a solid family with lots of real estate. Obviously their banking activity was highly reduced, but their properties remained, and as the Durazzos were very parsimonious they didn't really change their way of life and they carried on. Genoa came back with the period of Louis Philippe, who became King of the French from 1830 to 1848, and who had very good connections with the Genovese bankers. That was a period of renaissance for banking in Genoa. A second period of renaissance was around the First World War, as the war industry was concentrated in

Genoa.

When did modern day restoration of the castle begin?

Giacomo Durazzo, one of the founders and chairman of Credito Italiano (today UniCredit) from 1896 to 1908, restructured the castle from 1908 to 1928 as a present to his beloved wife. At that time there was this idea of the medieval castle as a cultural pleasure, and of medieval architecture as a symbol of perfect architecture. For those 20 years artisans made artefacts, worked on the structure, and recuperated medieval furniture which was then easy to buy and bring in from ruined castles in the Valle d'Aosta.

> “Due to global climate change the whole outlook of wine cultivation has changed”

Giacomo Cattaneo, which kinds of wine do you produce at Gabiano?

The main grapes of Piedmont are Barbera, Grignolino, Nebbiolo and Freisa. Gabiano is in Monferrato, and for Monferrato it is Barbera and Grignolino. For Langhe, which is a set of hills in Piedmont, it's Nebbiolo wine. To make a long story short, the manager of the farms for my grandmother was the brother-in-law of Renato Ratti, who is a mythical person for Piedmontese wine production because he charted the whole Langhe region. In fact, he created what is today the modern Barolo. He then moved to Asti, where directing the Asti consortium he set the basis for Italian sparkling wine. I remember as a kid, going down to the winery and seeing him with our manager at the time, experimenting with techniques of pressing and of aging.

Why has Gabiano wine and the Barbera grape become more and more famous in the world in the last 10 to 20 years?

Because a very serious job was done, not only by us , to make Barbera a quality wine. As for us, we have a definite character due to our geographical position. We have the tallest hill overlooking the River Po, and overlooking the famous Arborio rice fields to the north. Then we have the circle of the Alps and the glacier of Monte Rosa, which I can see from my window. All this makes for a particular microclimate, with the glacier wind bringing very strong temperature variations between day and night. In summer, you go more than 15 degrees between the evening when you put on a sweater and the day when it goes up to 35 degrees. This is very important because it gives the grape thicker skin, and the grape protecting itself results in stronger aromas, stronger perfumes and longer-lasting tastes. The land is typical Monferrato land. It was a sea bed, so you have about 60 centimeters of clay and then a limestone base. When you plant the grapevines you do a deep ploughing, breaking into the limestone and bringing lime to the surface. This creates an extremely high pH of about 9.5, which makes for complexity and very definite long-lasting aftertastes.

What is the determination of your wine?

We have our own determination called Gabiano d.o.c, which is a blend of Barbera and Freisa. Freisa is a fruity, very dark colored wine, probably not so pleasant on its own, but in small quantities it brings structure, tannins and complexity and makes for a very long lasting wine. We have bottles in our cellars from all the best years from 1946 onwards. It's a complex, mature wine, a wine which has to be drunk at a certain age, and it has a very definite and particular flavor.

Is your wine organic?

It is nowadays mostly organic. We are still not 100% licensed organic but believe this is the only way to go. Organic means utilizing technology that enables you to obtain the same quality that you obtained with chemistry, but without touching the natural growth and natural development.

What about global climate changes?

The climate issue is very important and it is definitely changing a lot. When I was young, I remember we were very careful that the grapes had matured, that they had developed the right volume of sugars that then brought to alcohol. Nowadays it's the contrary. What you're looking out for and carefully checking at the harvest moment is the acidity, the perfumes, and you are just waiting for the right acidity to develop and then you have to jump in. If you are too late you have a wine that's overripe and too sweet. So the whole outlook of wine cultivation has changed.

Castello di Gabiano is not only your home, but people can also stay there?

A winery sells an experience. A friend who is a wine producer in Valle d'Aosta, says, "When I sell a bottle of wine, it is like I am selling a messenger who is bringing around the world the terroir, the land, the atmosphere, the whole emotional experience of living in the wine estate." I feel exactly the same, but I feel that you have to develop a way that people can actually live the tradition, the history, the land, the terroir, the climate, the historical position, the culture, and how they have developed in this region. The wine is one of the elements. We also had a few apartments inside the walls of the castle and so we transformed them into places where people could stay. People really participate in the motion, the way of life which has developed over centuries in this place. We started with four apartments, and then saw that it was a big success. Friends and travelers started coming through word of mouth. Now there are 12 apartments and suites and we have a small restaurant where we have some young chefs working. The vegetables come from the castle orchard.

The River Po as seen by Giacomo Cattaneo from the Castello di Gabiano

The castle is not only a family home but also holds a significant library

The symbolic maze at Castello di Gabiano

Craft metalwork from the period of the castle's restoration in the 1920s

The vines of Gabiano flourish in its unique microclimate

Keeping the castle very much alive is the shared work of Giacomo Cattaneo and his wife Emanuela

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> "The Chinese and the Europeans have a sense of the long term in common."

Giacomo Cattaneo, and do people come to Gabiano to taste the wine?

Lots of people come to taste the wine! 30% of the wine is sold in Gabiano, and then our first main export market is China. That was another fantastic experience. I was in Hong Kong at Vinexpo about ten years ago, and a gentleman passed our booth and tasted our wine, and said, "I like this wine a lot. How much do you produce?" I answered, "160, 000 bottles," and he said, "I want to buy it all," and I said, "I won't sell it all." It became a fantastic relationship because we'd go there once or twice a year, and get to visit all the cities in southern China. A normal city in China is usually about 10 million people, and during the day I'd do conferences telling about Gabiano history and Gabiano terroir, and in the evening we'd have a dinner with the mayor, the party secretary, the important entrepreneurs of that place, and beautiful ladies would come and have selfies with me with a bottle of wine.

How do you feel when you are in China?

I feel extremely comfortable. I feel that culturally their way of thinking is extremely close to us Europeans, to us Italians especially. Obviously, we were educated with knowledge of the United States, and American culture was part of our youth, but I question myself if basically we Europeans are not in fact closer to China than the United States in our view and sense of time. In China they have a sense of the future, a sense of the importance of culture and tradition, and while we obviously have the sense of freedom and the sense of technology which the United States has brought to our culture, we certainly don't have the American individuality. The Chinese and the Europeans have a sense of the long term in common.

How much time do you devote to your wine production?

For the last 15 years, I have been spending much more time on the wine production, the wine promotion and the development of wine. I think the results are there, I'm very happy because I developed an image of Gabiano which is well known. The Durazzo family were wine producers in the Ligurian region too. We had some land behind Genoa and I started developing vineyards in very nice valleys overlooking the sea at about 350 meters. It is completely different terroir from Gabiano, and there we have sand, schist, there is the presence of broken slate and quartz. Very acidic land which makes for a fresh, salty white wine.

What is the name of this wine?

Coronata, the typical wine of Genoa. It's a wine that was produced very long ago, even at the time of the Romans. In fact, Stendhal, in his book *Voyages en Italie*, dedicates a few pages to the wine of Coronata as part of his Italian trip experience.

What food should one eat with Gabiano wine?

Gabiano wine is very earthy, so a good *arrosto* of meat, a good *agnolotti* with *ragu*. That is the typical pairing. It's a wine which grows in your glass, what they call meditation wine. You open the bottle, you pour it in your glass and during your whole meal different secondary and tertiary flavors and aromas come out and slowly change.

How long before a meal should a bottle of wine be opened?

I don't think it makes such a difference for a white wine. Our Gabiano wines, which are wines that have a long lasting aroma, you can open up at least half an hour to an hour before you begin and they will accompany you through the meal.

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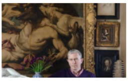

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan

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