

WINERY OF THE YEAR CA' DEL BOSCO

Maurizio Zanella (lower left) took French perfection as his model from the start. He soon sold his superb wines to top restaurants around the world.

WINE TRAVEL FOOD GAMBERO ROSSI

specialwine
Winery of the Year

NUMBER 33
2003
\$5.95
(CANADA \$7.95)

Winery of the Year Ca' del Bosco The Gate to Paradise

BY MARCO SABELLICO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SANDRO MICHAELLES

Ca' del Bosco
via Case Sparse, 20
Erbusco (BS)
tel. 0307 766111
email: cadelbosco@cadelbosco.com

The wine producers and technicians that climbed on the bus at the Brescia railroad station one spring dawn in 1973 couldn't know how that group tour of Burgundy was going to transform one of the participants. The itinerary, which included two days of fun in Paris, had been organized by an official agricultural bureau of Lombardy. Among the seasoned professionals was a clinker, a teenager who had signed up in order to skip school for a week. Maurizio Zanella was the son of a well-to-do Milanese businessman. He'd been shipped off to Franciacorta, to the family's country home, to get him away from the turbulent student scene at home, where he'd already joined in demonstrations. Maurizio had certainly never paid any attention to the hectare of vineyard that surrounded the Zanella villa. The zone of Franciacorta was only at its beginnings as a winemaking territory, but was famous for a motorcycle race, much more interesting to the boy.

By noon, the bus reached Domaine de La Romanée-Conti. Maurizio, lazily following the group, struck up a conversation with the cellar master, André Noblé. Meanwhile, the Franciacorta grapegrowers were making sarcastic comments among themselves. A group of women were grafting vines for planting: "What's the point? You can buy already-grafted vines at the nursery," they mumbled. Densely planted vineyards? "That's crazy. If you leave space, you can get between the rows with a tractor and produce more, more cheaply." In the cellar, the barriques were lined up. That was seen as a sign of backwardness. "We have big cement tanks that control everything better. You save time and work." And finally, they tasted the wine. Maurizio remembers, "Noblé uncorked all the Domaine's labels for us to try. No tasting from the barriques." After the reds, the cellar master opened the legendary Montrachet, and the Italians were convinced he was a hopeless case. But Maurizio was bowled over. The wines were different from any he had ever tasted, and he decided to buy some. The only bottles for sale were packaged together: Romanée Saint-Vivant, Richebourg and Echezeaux. To make his purchase, Maurizio had to dig into his entire cash supply for the trip and borrow 30 francs besides.

When, as the bus drove on, the teen explained what he had done, his countrymen teased him and explained how many bottles of their wine he could have bought for that price—three hundred, one said. But Maurizio ignored the comments. In the following days he visited other Champagne wineries and was impressed by their majestic underground cellars.

Back in Franciacorta, he looked longingly at the vineyard planted by his mother, Annamaria, in 1968, five years before. He was seventeen, young enough to be sure he was destined to make great wine. One year later, backed by his parents, he borrowed 165 million lire from the bank, about \$150,000, to build Ca' del Bosco's first real cellar.

Maurizio was an anomaly on the Italian wine scene of the day. The group that went to France with him was perfectly representative of the country's producers. The only requirement for wine was that it be 'correct', that is, without obvious defects.

In 1978, Zanella brought his first Franciacorta, the '75, to a wine show in Genoa and began to attract fans. Giacomo Bologna, a respected producer of Barbera di Rocchetta Tanaro, and Luigi Veronelli, ground-breaking wine critic, befriended and encouraged the young entrepreneur. Maurizio attended courses held in

Bordeaux and Burgundy by celebrated winemakers Jean Siegrist, Denis Dubourdieu and Emile Peynaud, and managed to hire cellar master André Dubois away from Moët and Chandon. He traveled to California to meet André Tcheliacheff and Robert Mondavi. Soon Brian Larky, from Davis and Napa Valley, joined Zanella's team in Erbusco. A whiz at public relations, Maurizio introduced his wine to restaurateurs Piero Selvaaggio (Valentino in Santa Monica) and Siro Maccioni (Le Cirque, New York). He organized blind tastings for experts, proving that his wines could stand up to the best in the world, and by the mid-80's, Ca' del Bosco was a celebrated label. Visitors to the beautiful winery, all woods and vineyards, also found a stunning gate designed by renowned Italian artist, Arnaldo Pomodoro. "I wanted to bring the world of art and culture closer to the world of wine. Wine was entering a new era, and I wanted to spotlight these changes." Maurizio also forged an image for himself: passionate, competent, unpredictable, eccentric and extravagant. He explained, "Very few Italian producers made a point of regularly drinking great wines from all over the world. But how else can you begin to understand what's behind their success?"

Although many competitors saw Maurizio Zanella as the spoiled son of a wealthy businessman, everyone agreed that his wines were extraordinarily good. When the first edition of Vini d'Italia was published in 1987, Maurizio Zanella '85 won a Tre Bicchieri. He has repeated that feat twenty-one times, second only to Angelo Gaja. Despite rumors to the contrary, in 1993, according to Maurizio, "Ca' del Bosco was a profitable firm. Our expenses were in proportion to our growth. We were entering a world of top wines that was new to Italians. Pomodoro's extraordinary gate helped us convey an image of wine as a refined aesthetic experience, as opposed to a simple daily necessity." It was at this point that Maurizio decided he needed to make an investment that was beyond his own family's capabilities. He approached the Marzotto family, owners of Santa Margherita, one of Italy's most widely distributed and familiar names. Not only does the joint venture allow Ca' del Bosco to grow, but it leaves Zanella full autonomy in its management. From 600,000 bottles annually, production swelled to 900,000. From 55 hectares, the winery's vineyards increased to 130. In 1995, millions of dollars were invested in cellar improvements, and 12 million euros more will complete the transformation by 2003. Today, plans to increase production to 1,200,000 bottles annually are in the works at the same time as longer aging for Franciacorta and red wines is planned. The search for perfection goes hand in hand with expansion.

The fundamental philosophy behind the most recent cellar work is to make gravity the source of energy, to select the grapes in the most perfect manner on their arrival in the cellar, and to vinify and age small quantities of wine separately and mix them at the moment of creating a cuvée. "It's like painting a picture with a rich palette of colors," Maurizio tells us. But it's hard to imagine more brilliant, lively wines than the Cuvée Annamaria Clementi, Chardonnay, Maurizio Zanella, Pinerio and Carmenèro that Ca' del Bosco releases today. But never underestimate Maurizio Zanella.

