

REHABILITATION THROUGH WINE

The penal colony on Gorgona, an island off the coast of Tuscany, has a recent addition – a viticultural project overseen by the fabled Marchesi de' Frescobaldi. Michèle Shah reports.

The beauty of the Tuscan coastline, with its neighbouring islands of Elba, Giglio and Capraia, are among Italy's major summer attractions. Sailboats duck in and out of hidden coves, while speedboats trail in search of isolated beaches. The backdrop to the shimmering coastline is the equally intense emerald green pine forests, interspersed by vineyards. These are planted principally to the local Vermentino and Ansonica grapes and produce crisp, mineral whites, characterised by a slight tang of saltiness brought by the sea winds.

Few will have ever heard of, or even visited the island of Gorgona, which lies some 18 nautical miles off the coast of Livorno. Gorgona has been a penal colony since 1869 and is the only penitentiary island still operating in Europe. Currently it hosts some 60 male inmates, most with life sentences for homicide and 'crimes of passion'. To these inmates, Gorgona signifies the last stepping-stone to freedom. As such, Gorgona is a much-desired destination and is only attained by showing an impeccable track record of good conduct and a will to work. Those who disembark on Gorgona have spent the last 10 to 20 years locked behind bars and it is here where they will spend the last period of their sentence, anything from three to five years of rehabilitation, before being released to their final stage of freedom.

The Frescobaldi project

Since August 2012 there has been considerable hype around Gorgona thanks to



The penitentiary boat docking at Gorgona

Marchesi de' Frescobaldi, one of Italy's oldest winemaking families, who has given a new breath of life to Gorgona through its involvement in a viticultural project run on the island.

"This project came out of the blue and was quite unexpected," says Lamberto Frescobaldi, president of Marchesi de' Frescobaldi. Frescobaldi explains that it all started with an e-mail addressed to Frescobaldi's Vigneti di Nugola estate in Collesalveti, on the Tuscan coast. The e-mail was from the Italian Penitentiary department of Livorno, seeking a winery interested in actively sponsoring a vineyard project to assist convicts in a rehabilitation project. Out of the many wineries contacted, Frescobaldi was the only one to respond.

"It was the beginning of August, almost time to harvest the grapes, so there was no time to lose. I was curious, so I went to have a look," says Frescobaldi. "When we reached the island, I was stunned by its beauty and deeply touched by my encounter with the inmates." He says the decision to get involved was totally impulsive. "And what really struck me, as I was leaving the island, watching it fade into the distance the thought of how fine a borderline there can be between freedom and reclusion and how much we take our freedom for granted."

Like any island, Gorgona can be logistically difficult to reach, especially in winter, when the force of the open sea makes it impossible to reach the island. At times one can be cut off for days or weeks. At eight o'clock sharp,

weather permitting, the penitentiary police boat leaves Livorno port returns to the mainland at 5.00pm. In good weather the crossing takes about one hour; however, even in choppy weather, as the waves crash against the hull, the powerful engines will challenge the rough sea. Weather aside, being a prison island, it is not an easy destination to visit. Documents have to be submitted weeks ahead and are rigorously checked before being given permission to set foot on Gorgona. Once on Gorgona you are checked again and your documents, cameras and phones (except for those with special permission) are taken away until departure.

The first harvest in 2012 kicked off with little formality, sealed by a simple handshake between Lamberto Frescobaldi and the prison director at the time, Maria Grazia Giampiccolo. The official paperwork came in January 2013, along with a number of bureaucratic complications and expenses.

Frescobaldi was fortunate to inherit a well-groomed vineyard, which had been planted in the 1990s and then abandoned until 2008 when it was re-worked by one of the inmates with basic viticultural knowledge. The cellar existed, but it was missing vessels for vinification and for ageing, as well as materials for cleaning. There was no tractor or vineyard equipment, and no know-how. The only thing in plentiful supply was good will. Today vinification and ageing takes place on Gorgona and only the final product is shipped to mainland for bottling and distribution.



Carmelo Casella with Lamberto Frescobaldi and guard Alessandro Zaccaria



Inmate Carmelo Casella

The economics

"People constantly try to see the profit in this project, but I assure you there is no profit. The secret of running such a project is not to have a financial plan," says Frescobaldi. "In such a project it is impossible to budget and quantify the cost of investment, the logistic hassles and the training and retraining of the vineyard staff, all of who receive a regular union pay. It makes it an unlikely proposition for a savvy entrepreneur."

The first cost was the rental of the one hectare vineyard, an astronomic €13,000.00 per annum, against the average €1,500.00 annual rental in Chianti Classico, or €500.00 in the Chianti area.

"Paying ten times the actual value of the rental of the vineyard is the 'humanitarian' factor. We wanted to make it quite clear that we were not taking advantage of the situation," says Frescobaldi.

Frescobaldi made a further investment of €20,000.00 for equipment and repairs. "I even had to purchase the tires and a starter motor for the penitentiary 4X4 vehicle, as well as pay for the tractor insurance, as the government couldn't afford to pay for these," explains Frescobaldi. "Fortunately my friend Landini Tractors donated the tractor." Inmates get an average of €250.00 to €350.00 a month as salary, depending on the trade they carry out, which could be farming or even maintenance. Frescobaldi today employs three fulltime agricultural labourers and two part-time helpers during harvest, all of whom receive the same union pay as those working in Frescobaldi's wineries.

Gorgona is a premium bottling of 60% Vermentino and 40% Ansonica, presented in an attractive packaging. Production is limited. In 2012, only 2,700 were produced and in 2013 about 2,500, of which 1,600 bottles remain in Italy, sold at premium prices around €50.00 a bottle. About 600 are exported to USA and sold at \$90.00 a bottle. A small number is exported around the world, with an allocation of about 30 to 40 bottles per country. "Considering this, we are not looking at a profitable production, even if the aim is to increase production to 5,000 bottles over the next five to six years," says Frescobaldi, explaining that the value lies in the story behind the label. The story is worth a lot; between 2013 and 2014, over 600 articles on Gorgona were published highlighting Frescobaldi's project, and 25 TV documenta-

ries or news items have been released.

"We import 500 bottles into the US market," says Galen Crippin, the US Marchesi de' Frescobaldi export manager, saying that while the story is unique, it is positioned as part of the Frescobaldi family's story and their commitment to supporting community. "This is one of Lamberto's personal projects of which he is justifiably proud, and clearly wine quality is imperative as it bears the Frescobaldi family name. In addition, the back story of how the project came to be, and the long-term commitment the family have to the project makes it appealing to the sales team and their customers in the US."

Frescobaldi was savvy enough to involve a worthy team of experts, starting with his head oenologist Nicolò d'Aflitto. One of their young winemakers also stays some 20 days on the island during harvest. Other eminent names that have become involved include the Michelin 3-star Florentine restaurant Enoteca Pinchiorri, which dedicated a dish to Gorgona matched to its wine. More recently, Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli put pen to paper and wrote an introduction on the label, which was designed free of cost by Simonetta Doni, one of Italy's well-known wine label graphic designers.

Rehabilitation

Since their first harvest Frescobaldi has trained a number of inmates to tend the vine and help in the cellar. The aim is 'rehabilitation' and to teach inmates a profession that can be used when they are discharged. Marchesi de' Frescobaldi wineries has already employed one of the inmates who worked in the vineyard last year, after his release.

Carmelo Casella, mid-fifties, sentenced for homicide and with another 15 years to go, coordinates the work in the vineyard. He transferred to Gorgona with the hope of an early release. Once out, he would like to find employment with Marchesi de' Frescobaldi.

"On Gorgona the inmates re-acquire a sense of freedom, which they often have to learn to re-adjust to. It is not an easy process and can take time, says superintendent Alessandro Zaccaria. "Above all they come here with the motivation to work, to learn a trade, be it carpentry, farming, fishing, winemaking or other farm-related work. Gorgona is a rehabilitation centre. Here they regain their confidence, and learn what it means to be responsible to the community." On Gorgo-



Gorgona bottle overlooking the quay.

na the prisoners are free to go about their work, returning to their living quarters to eat and to sleep. "Recidivism in Italian prisons is normally as high as 80%, but when rehabilitation projects work, it can recede to as low as 20%."

Sicilian-born, 53-year old, Benedetto Ceraulo, responsible for the cellar, was given a life sentence when he was in his twenties. He came to Gorgona just over two years ago, with another four years to go. This is his second vintage. "Before Gorgona my life was marked by the sound of footsteps followed by keys turning in the lock. On arrival here the very sight of the sea and the freedom of space was overwhelming," says Ceraulo. His wish is to return to Agrigento to tend to his family's 3-ha vineyard and olive groves. "I left Sicily when I was 16, and later married in Milan, where my wife lives with our sons 28 and 25, and 18-year-old daughter. The opportunity of working in the vineyard and cellar has given me a know-how that I hope to use when I am released."

Frescobaldi is looking to expand production. Next to the initial hectare of vineyard, a further hectare of ground has been prepared to plant more Vermentino. In addition to the rental of the land, which was included in the initial cost of rental, Frescobaldi bears the cost of machinery for excavating the land and the cost of the planting rights.

Gorgona's success has been reported far and wide, so much so that the neighbouring ex-penal colony Pianosa, also on the Tuscan coast, is looking to implement a similar rehabilitation project. Frescobaldi has been invited to participate. Invitations for his involvement and advice have come from as far as USA, where the director of Colorado Correctional Industries invited him to set up a similar viticultural project. Asked whether he would consider it a possibility, he replied that these projects take time and personal dedication, and Frescobaldi's motto is "never say never". ■