

Blech's Blog

Putting some fizz into the La Spinetta empire

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Last month La Spinetta's Giorgio, Bruno, Carlo and Giovanna Rivetti and the rest of the family finally acquired the Contratto winery at Canelli in Piedmont for an undisclosed sum. The Contratto brand is a prestigious label that has produced legendary spumante wines such as 'For England', 'Bacco d'Oro' and 'Miranda'.

Contratto was founded in 1867 by Giuseppe Contratto and the winery is known as the oldest producer of sparkling wine in Italy. In fact, the "Metodo Classico" 1919 Contratto Extra Brut was the first vintage sparkling wine ever made in the country.

The winery has a long, distinguished history. At the turn of the 20th century, its wines were leaving Canelli for destinations all over the world (predominantly to royal houses), and Contratto was the personal supplier to the Vatican as well as to the Italian Royal Family. Awards and medals from international exhibitions and contests of the time emphasise why the name of Contratto has long been synonymous with prestige and quality in the world of sparkling wine.

In 150 years of winemaking, Contratto went from producing Moscato and red wine to Spumante Metodo Classico, still white wines, as well as Vermouth, tonic and syrups. The historic cathedral-like cellars at Contratto, now designated a UNESCO Heritage Site, are a real treasure, and among the finest of their kind. These huge underground cellars, covering more than 5,000 square metres, were built into the heart of the hill that protects the small town of Canelli, excavated from tuff limestone to a depth of 32 metres. The project took three years of manual work to finish. The cellars maintain a constant annual temperature of 12 to 13 degrees and sufficient natural humidity, an ideal environment for bottle fermentation and the slow and steady bottle maturation of "metodo clasico" sparkling-wines.

For many generations the winery remained in the hands of the Contratto family. In 1993, after 126 years and somewhat in decline, it was sold to Carlo Bocchino, owner of Canelli's grappa distillery of the same name, who undertook the restoration of these historic cellars and the impressive building and tasting rooms with great effort and investment.

Bocchino will now return to concentrate his efforts and resources on the family distillery. "I am glad to have been able to leave Contratto to the Rivettis, who are people from the same land" states Bocchino. "I would not have wanted to see the cellars end up in the back of a large group or multinational's catalogue."

For La Spinetta on the other hand, the acquisition of Contratto represents the entry into one of the top Italian sparkling wine houses, by way of a prestigious brand whose Champagne-style production from Asti DOCG to Brut, have greatly influenced the history of Italian Spumante, and whose potential is yet to be fully developed. "We are very excited to have acquired this important facility," says Giorgio Rivetti. "It was important for us to enter into this market, and to do so with a famous brand. From now on, we can play an active role in making Contratto known throughout the world, thanks to our own high profile abroad. Italian sparkling wine does not yet enjoy the recognition it deserves on the international scene. Now, we will be able to bring the wine onto all the international markets, along with our Barbaresco, Barolo and Moscato. There are some real treasures hidden in these cellars."

What has not been said is that for the past four years or so, Giorgio Rivetti has been acting as a consultant to the Contratto winery and has succeeded in producing elegant and complex sparkling wines from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from vineyards located in Oltrepo Pavese. With the facility now completely in the hands of the Rivetti family, one can now expect a further upturn in quality from this famous and prestigious estate.