

# BROWSINGITALY

## UNESCO World Heritage Site: Contratto Cellar In Canelli, Piemonte

Posted by: BrowsingItaly on August 20, 2014

I've always said "What lies beneath is as equally fascinating" and our visit to the Contratto cellar founded in 1867, in the small town of Canelli in the region of Piemonte, is further proof of this.

### ***Contratto cellar in Canelli, Piemonte***



Added to the list of the UNESCO World Heritage Site in June 2014, a visit to the Contratto cellar is a unique and fascinating experience. The original cellar known as "The Cathedrals", because of the vaulted ceiling, is below street level and it was only in 1898 that the same crew working on the Simplon tunnel connecting Italy to Switzerland also started work on building a larger cellar.

Due to the stratification of the rock, the cellar, which reaches a depth of 40 meters, had to be hand-dug and it took 8 years to be completed. Today this colossal cellar covering an entire area of 5000 sqm maintains a constant temperature of 12-13C (53-55F), and holds about a million bottles of wine.

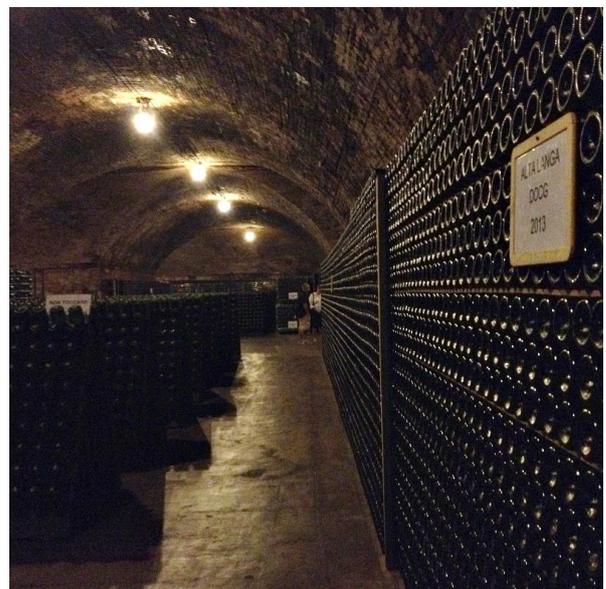
Not a wine expert, I was in awe not only by the enormity of this cellar and the countless number of bottles, but also the insights shared by our lovely guide Elisa on Metodo Classico, the traditional method for [sparkling wine](#) production. See the video below on the cellar and Metodo Classico.

### ***Learning about Metodo Classico***

A process that takes 4 years, Elisa shared that they anticipate the harvest to avoid the high level of sugar in the grapes in order to preserve acidity and to avoid a high level of alcohol. The first fermentation begins in the steel tanks for 10 months and after that, it is bottled along with yeast and sugar. This is where the second fermentation takes place for a period of 3 years.

Elisa pointed out that in the first two months of fermentation in the bottles, CO<sub>2</sub> and alcohol are produced as a result of the yeast "consuming" the sugar, and the pressure in the bottle in this short period goes from 1 bar to 6 bars. Though rare, bottles have exploded.

After lying dormant for 3 years, the bottles are then given a shake and placed in rectangular racks called





pupitres at a 45-degree angle. This stage of the process, called remuage (in French), is incredibly fascinating.

The goal at this stage is to accumulate the yeast sediments (lees) in the neck of the bottle for removal. After the bottle has been shaken, it sits for a week before it is given 1/8th of a turn and this is done manually every day for the next 22-25 days so the yeast sediments eventually make their way to the neck of the bottle.

The job of turning these bottles daily is done by, as Elisa calls him, “Mauro the Magician” (he’s in the video above) who overlooks the entire cellar and can turn 250 bottles per minute.

Even more fascinating is that even though the accumulated sediments are removed (called disgorgement) by a mechanical process today, Mauro is able to do so manually “à la volée”: with the bottle neck facing down, he tilts the bottle at just the correct angle that would allow him to swiftly remove the bottle cap, let the lees out, close his thumb over the bottle and tilt the bottle neck back to an upright position to ensure minimal loss of sparkling wine. That expertise is thanks to over 30 years of working in the industry.

After disgorgement, the bottle is then topped up with liquor d’expédition, a combination of wine and sugar with the recipe differing from each producer, therefore allowing them to

add their own special touch. The cork is then inserted and secured with a wire cage.

If you think it’s ready to be drunk, not quite yet. The bottle is laid horizontally for another 6 months before it is ready to be sold and as you can see, it’s no surprise that the process takes at least 4 years.

It was an incredible experience and learning about the Metodo Classico has given me a deeper appreciation and respect for those who continue to uphold traditions despite the challenges. And we can definitely drink to that!

***We would like to thank several people for making this visit to Contratto possible:***

Laura Gobbi for making all the arrangements despite her crazy schedule as she is also the organizer of the Di Gavi in Gavi event taking place on August 31. If you are visiting Alessandria, she is the person to get in touch with.



The Ottone Park Hotel (owned by Laura’s family) who hosted us for the night. Address: Tenuta San Michele 1, Mugarone Bassignana, Alessandria. Email: [ottoneparkhotel@virgilio.it](mailto:ottoneparkhotel@virgilio.it)

Lucia Hannau at Turin Epicurean Capital for putting us in touch with Laura.

Our guide Elisa for being the perfect guide, Mauro for sharing his personal experiences and to Contratto for generously allowing us to see their incredible cellar. Here is more information on visiting Contratto