



**MERLOTTA**  
VIGNAIOLI DAL 1962

LESSON 1

**THE HISTORY  
OF WINE AND THE GRAPE**  
(BY FRANCO DALMONTE)



# THE HISTORY OF WINE AND THE GRAPE



Without going too far back into prehistory, where the birth of wine is narrated in many myths and legends, we can roughly trace the beginnings of the cultivation of the grape to Mesopotamia, from where it spread rapidly to all Mediterranean countries and particularly Greece between the 10 and 12 BC.

The first vines were probably introduced by seagoing Phoenician merchants, even though it's possible they came overland from the North.

Greece was the ideal environment for the cultivation of the vine and Homer could not help describing them in his works "Ame with many bunches of grapes... Ithaca covered in vineyards..." or the wine of Prammo, mixed

together with cheese, barley, flour and honey that the Goddess Circe gave to the companions of Ulysses before turning them into pigs or the wine of Lemmo or Ithaca, a barren island but in which "there is grain and wine in abundance."

The increasing popularity of wine was mainly due to the Greek love and appreciation of drinking and also thanks to the climate of the Aegean Islands, which favoured the production of quality wines. The Greek winegrowers adopted a system of low trained vines, the vines were left free to trail along the ground and the grapes were protected from touching the earth with branches or matting.

The grape harvest was usually carried out in mid-September. The full baskets of grapes were taken to be pressed in basins of seasoned acacia wood or in brick which were slightly tilted to favour the straining of the must. A part of the must was consumed immediately, with the addition of a small amount of vinegar, whilst all the rest was used to make wine.

*The must was sent to the cellars where it was left to ferment in large terracotta containers (3,5 metres tall with an opening of a metre) called pithoi.*

## PITHOI

In order to reduce the transpiration the pithoi were covered on the outside by resin and pitch and then buried. This is what gave the wine a particular resinous aroma which is still typical of Greek wines. After six months in the pithoi the wine was then filtered and poured into waterskins or terracotta amphoras with a narrow opening to allow for the decanting of eventual deposits and then put on the market. In Italy the cultivation of the grape came from two distinct directions, from the south thanks to the trading of the Aegean-Mycenean civilisations and from the north thanks to the Etruscans of an Eastern origin. Even the wine-growing techniques were varied and reflected the different backgrounds of the people: low trained vines, alberate in the South and using trees for support in the North.

Between the V and III century BC, following the great victories that led to Rome dominating the



Mediterranean, the Roman rural economy began to radically change: grain and wheat prices dropped significantly due to imports from abroad and so the growing need for landowners to make money meant that wine growing became increasingly important.

Winegrowing techniques were continuously developing with the introduction of Greek and Asiatic slaves. Once again we can see the competence of the Romans as recorded in the writings on agriculture in "De re rustica" of Columella and the "Storia Naturale" of Pliny the Elder.

The best grapes were chosen, crushed with feet in the "calcatorium", pressed in the "turbularium" and



then the must was poured into the "dolia", large amphoras of terracotta which were suited for the fermentation. The most sought after wines were Felernum, Caecubum, Surrentinum (Campania), Albanum from the hills around Rome, Lunense, Cesenaticum and the sweet Passum.

It was the Romans who introduced wine and wine growing into France, Germany and Austria.

The excesses of the cult of wine drinking during the lavish Imperial period is personified in the worshipping of the God Bacchus to whom the Romans dedicated parties (Bacchanali) that reached such a stage of debauchery that they were banned by law in 186 BC. The widespread drinking of wine all over the Empire forced Domiziano to issue an edict in 92 AD which banned the planting of new vines in Italy and halved them in the provinces; this edict had the twofold aim of increasing the value of grain but also to protect Italian vines.

The edict wasn't revoked until 280 AD by the Emperor Probo. In the 2nd century AD there began a period of general decline in agriculture, wine growing included, to such an extent that with the civil wars, plagues,

famines and the abandoning of the land that followed the fall of the Western Empire it seemed as even this was destined to disappear.

The fact that the decadence of this period did not cause the total disappearance of winegrowing was thanks to the spread of the new Christian religion: wine was essential for the celebration of the Holy Mass.

This led to the various religious orders dedicating special care to the cultivation of the grape. Around the year 1000 wine began to appear again and be consumed in quantity, to such an extent that it became necessary to issue severe measures against drunkenness (declared a "serious crime" in 1215 by Pope Innocent III).

Over and above the wines imported from the East (Malvasia was very popular at the time) Italian wines such as Ribolla, Trebbiano, Greco and Vernaccia (even mentioned by Dante) began to gain a certain reputation. At the time of the commons new measures were taken to favour the spread of winegrowing. In this period the famous "Ruralium Commodorum libri duodecim" by Pier de' Crescenzi of Bologna (1303) appeared with 45 chapters dedicated to the practice of winegrowing.



## RURALIUM COMMODORUM

The great journeys and explorations that characterised the end of the XV century and the beginning of the XVI century increased the size of the known world and made wine known all over the world. In 1524 Cortez, governor of the New Spain (now Mexico), ordered the Spanish colonisers to plant vines in the territories they were given; in 1550 Charles V declared a sizeable prize to the first person who produced a wine in South America that could be used to celebrate Mass and so the first vines appeared in the >River Plate region; in 1577 vines were introduced into Chile, in 1655 the Governor of the harbour of the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa planted the first vine shoots and about 20 years later the vineyard of Costantia became a future model for South African winegrowing; in 1769 Father Serra introduced grapevines into California and in 1788 they were planted in Australia.

In the year 600 wine consumption was high (100 litres per person a year) and various problems began to appear such as alcoholism and the production of low quality, adulterated wines. In this period wine also had competition from a series of new drinks: in the first place water, which had become purer and more drinkable but also with gin and acquavita, refreshing beer from Holland and also tea, coffee and chocolate. This prompted wine producers to offer higher quality products: the use of sulphur, it was learnt that in always full barrels the wine does not acidify, glass bottles began to be used and cork reappeared (forgotten after the Romans).

Contextually one can outline a map with the better known winegrowing areas and highlighting those of high quality production: the Bordeaux area, with a port of easy access which already from XIII century onwards supplied the ships with what the British called "claret", a light rosè wine which was consumed in vast quantities. In 1668 the Benedictine monk Dom Pérignon, the cellarer at Hautville Abbey in the Champagne area, invented sparkling wine, even though for some the real inventor was the doctor Francesco Scacchi from Fabriano, who had already talked about it 46 years previously.

In the second half of the 1800s three serious diseases imported from America put the very existence of the grapevine at risk: in 1845 powdery mildew, in 1863 phylloxera and in 1878 downy mildew. For each of these science came up with adequate remedies but the whole picture of European winegrowing was radically transformed: the centuries old cultural norms

were by now no longer sufficient and the new wine growing techniques had to rely more on the biological and physiochemical sciences.

Profound changes also took place at the beginning of the last century: the period, in which it was maintained that chemistry would have resolved any problem in the vineyard and the cellar, had been overcome. Even more so after the Second World War when new realities appeared on the market characterised by advanced technologies and innovative ideas both on the ground and in the cellars, backed up with close attention to the image and a noticeable entrepreneurial and commercial capacity: so began the era of Californian wines.



It was the moment of Cabernet and Chardonnay, of the use oak (barrique) that were to show the way in all emerging wine producing countries like Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

The oenology of today is divided in two: on the one hand Europe with its quality wines which are inextricably tied to the land and production techniques inspired by tradition, and on the other the powerful emerging wine producing nations which adopt the maximum possible freedom in both the vineyard and the cellars in order to construct flavours and styles linked to precise commercial objectives.

### *Bibliographic references:*

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