

## Try a Little Tenderness

**L**oazzolo, Italy—Standing next to Giovanni “Gianni” Scaglione, 43, while he caressed the two draft horses that do all the plowing in his vineyard, I couldn’t help but think about a recent column of mine praising producers creating wines informed by a “culture of tenderness.”

When I wrote that, I wasn’t thinking about horse whispering. But visiting Scaglione’s Forteto della Luja estate brought home to me forcefully just how important and powerful this culture of tenderness is in today’s most refined wines.

With its centuries-old traditional Piedmontese house and a stone cellar dating to 1700, Forteto della Luja, perched about 20 miles west of Alba, is dreamy, in every sense. It’s so untouched that the World Wildlife Federation has designated it as a “biodiversity oasis.”

“We’re totally organic, really probably beyond that,” Scaglione said. “Everything is all natural. Even the electricity for the winery is entirely solar-generated.”

When asked if his vineyard is biodynamic (it sure sounds like it is), he said no. “I’ve never investigated these philosophies, although I’ve heard about them. We simply do what we believe is the most natural way possible to grow grapes and make wine.”

The wines of Forteto della Luja somehow convey a sense of not having been manhandled. What I call “tenderness” comes not from one particular philosophy, but rather from a larger sensibility of deference.

Wines grown with this sensibility almost never seem excessive—not too oaky, not too tannic, not too anything that might come from a muscular interventionism. Shorn of calculation, their stylistic vulnerability makes them seem tender.

As we descended into the tiny cellar (population eight barrels) that enshrines the winery’s signature Moscato *passito*, the conversation turned to winemaking. “The Moscato Bianco grapes start to be picked at the end of September, and the harvest continues until mid-November,” said Scaglione. “We’re looking for grapes that show the beginnings of noble rot. As you can imagine, the yields are very low.” About 15 percent of these grapes are further concentrated by drying on canvas sheets in a naturally ventilated shed, what’s known as the *passito* process.

Because the juice is so sugar-rich, fermentation is a drawn-out

process. “We use only wild yeasts that have adapted to this wine,” said Scaglione, pulling the bung from a barrel. “Listen to the wine.”

In the stillness of the ancient stone cellar, I could hear a faint, languid burbling. “That’s the fermentation,” he explained. “It takes two years for it to complete, because of the richness of the juice and the coldness of the cellar.”

The resulting wine, designated Loazzolo DOC, is memorable.

Medium yellow-gold, it offers an intense almond scent suffused with apricot and peach. Barrel-aging adds a pleasing hint of vanilla. The acidity is superb, bracing the palate and balancing the sweet richness. It’s an almost irresistible wine. (The alcohol, by the way, is only 12 percent.) Little more than 230 cases are made annually from a 3.2-acre vineyard.

This wine alone would be the feather in any producer’s cap. But Forteto della Luja offers two other wines of exceptional grace. One, a red called Le Grive (the thrushes), is an improbable blend of Barbera (80 percent) and Pinot Noir (20 percent) made from a 9.1-acre vineyard creating about 1,600 cases of wine.

Barbera makes sense. It’s the grape of the Astigiana area, which is very close to Loazzolo. But Pinot Noir? “Actually, Pinot Noir has been in the area for over a century,” said Scaglione. “In Canelli [a large town a few miles away], you had the big spumante producers. And in the late

1800s, they were making sparkling wine in the French fashion using Pinot Noir. So we’ve had it here a long time.” With the Pinot offering its classic berryish scent and Barbera adding flavor impact and structure, Le Grive is surprisingly seamless. It also ages beautifully, emerging over time as a stylish, even elegant red wine.

His most idiosyncratic (and arguably most original) offering is Brachetto *passito*. Today, Brachetto is an antique variety, but in the 1800s it was prized as a red sparkling wine. Forteto della Luja’s version is like no other. The fermenting juice sees only 24 hours of skin contact. The resulting wine is delicate in both color and flavor: a pale garnet with scents of rose petal and strawberry allied to a slight sweetness and a refreshing, faint bitterness in the finish. Here, too, little is made: about 140 cases from a 1.5-acre vineyard.

You won’t be surprised at the name of the Brachetto vineyard. It’s Pian dei Sogni—field of dreams.

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