

CHACRA

PATAGONIA ~ RIO NEGRO

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By Sorrel Moseley-Williams

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From: Tuscany, Italy

Lives: Rio Negro

Education: Economics degree at Pepperdine University, Masters Hospitality and Management Masters at NYU

Profession: Owner, Investor, PR, sales and grape harvester at Bodega Chacra

Currently reading: Elon Musk by Ashlee Vance, The Birth of the Byodynamic Method by Rudolf Steiner, Life by Keith Richards

Currently watching: Weeds

Gadget: French wine barrels

While Piero Incisa della Rocchetta has the good fortune to come from one Tuscany's most prestigious wine-making families, making wine in Argentina, let alone in Patagonia, was never on the cards until he tried an Argentine Pinot Noir from Patagonia 12 years ago. Now the Italian winemaker, who wears "a lot of hats" at Bodega Chacra, divides his time between Rio Negro, New York City and Tuscany.

Piero says: "About 12 years ago, I went to a blind tasting at my cousin's house and he served me a Pinot Noir. I thought it was from Bourgogne as it had some characteristics that in my opinion are closer to the Bourgogne style than one from a warmer climate country that produces over-ripe fruit—that was my association with Argentina."

"He uncovered the Humberto Canale Pinot Noir, which didn't necessarily scream sexiness but showed some intrinsic characteristics typical to the grape. It came from a place called Rion Negro in Patagonia: I thought Patagonia was a brand of clothing! I also thought there were penguins in Patagonia, not grapes".

FURTHER INVESTIGATION

A couple of years earlier in 2001, Piero's cousin Countess Noemi Marone Cinzano had started up a small winery in the same province and intrigued by her project as well as the Pinot Noir he'd sampled, Piero decided to investigate further.

He says: "I came to visit Bodega Noemia and looked down from the plane thinking, "this is a joke" because all I could see was desert. The luminosity was very intense, it looked very hot and it wasn't what I would have commonly associated with Pinot Noir.

"What I didn't realize was that this valley, being a desert, has a climate that's very conducive to farming. The challenge of a desert is the lack of water and it's difficult to farm without that. It's dry, with no pests, disease or bacteria, plus the luminosity means good grape maturity. Deserts are very clean environments as no one lives in them, so there's no pollution. They are also quite windy, and that naturally removes any pests".

RENTING VINES

Further intrigued, Piero decided to rent, rather than purchase, a vineyard and soon came across a project that suited his needs on a trial basis. "I rented a vineyard that had been planted in 1932 by an Italian immigrant, who sold it on to another Italian immigrant. That guy was going to rip out the Pinot Noir vines and create an orchard because he said "the plants were very old and produced very little". But everything he said was very attractive to me. He sold grapes by the kilo didn't make fine wine so while it seemed like a losing proposition, it was actually something I was looking for".

With a simple handshake, the Italian-born winemaker and the son of Italian migrants struck a deal. That was in 2003, and while yields and production remain small in comparison with other wineries at around 100,000 bottles a vintage, Piero's Bodega Chacra has earned itself a steady reputation. His Chacra Treinta y Dos Pinot Noir 2012—named after the original vineyard and which he calls a team effort—picked up glowing ratings from wine experts James Suckling and Tim Atkins last month, while Luis Gutierrez from the Wine Advocate recently visited for an on-site tasting session.

Piero adds: "I rented the vines, showed up and we had our first trial in 2004, which yielded 1,330 bottles. That's how it all started.

A few journalists visited my cousin's winery and tried the Pinot, and we sold all the production before it was even finished. We gave it a second go the following year and yielded very good results, and so production went up to 2,770 bottles. That was when I realized it was something of interest".

UPHILL STRUGGLE

That success of that second harvest led to Piero's purchasing the vineyard, but turning it into a fully functioning winery was another story. He says: "Nothing has been easy and it's been an incredible undertaking-this is the most difficult thing I've done in my life. I knew then what I know now, I'm not sure I would have done it. Because it's been all uphill.

"I could give you 300 different reasons as to why this was a very hard project: The fact that Argentina is known for Malbec and not Pinot Noir; the fact that we are in what's considered to be the New World; the fact that the New World Pinot is usually discarded and not taken seriously by Pinot lovers; the fact that we are in South America.

"But the most challenging part wasn't dealing with nature and the microclimate but building a team. Chacra is located in an agricultural valley but only a handful of wineries are located here. It's not like being in Tuscany where you have access to specialized labour. We had to start from scratch and this is a team that has learnt from our guidelines.

"Equally, the highlight of this journey has been coloured by incredible human experiences, and working with a team that's been so motivated," he adds.

Besides the complications of installing infrastructure as well as building a winery and four houses, 12 years on and the upshot is that Piero's winery now produces certified organic and biodynamic wine.

"We installed an electric grid on site and brought water from the closest place: everything was difficult. However, there was no time to complain or to think-we just had to execute everything in order to create this opportunity. I think my masochistic side really took over! That said, it's been extremely rewarding because nature is something else. The climate has allowed us to start different types of farming-byodynamic and organic methods-that didn't exist in Argentina although we needed to make all our own preparations. However, within five years we received certification for both methods".

Although Piero divides his time between Italy, New York City and Argentina, he spends half of it in Patagonia. He adds: "I come here three weeks prior to harvest and leave once it's in the barrel. Then I come back for pruning, which I do with my guys then I return again for racking and barreling, three weeks over for Christmas, then it's harvest time again. I spend about half the year in Rio Negro. I live on the farm: I built the winery and four houses, which includes one for me. They are more like bungalows than houses

really, they are beautiful but small. I like having small house as the sky is endless in Patagonia:you feel like a midget in the land of giants so it's nice living a smaller house.

"I also have an organic vegetable garden where I grow 12 different types of tomatoes, plus I have animals such as chickens and ducks. We also hunt quail, pigeon and hare, and everything is free range.We're very independent it's unbelievable.I never want to leave the place but I have to sell the wine plus I have some obligations to my family's vineyard and that means I have to travel".

Given That he spends prolonged periods in remote Rio Negro, Piero tends to bring some provisions with him."I bring some pasta from Italy, rice for risotto and fish eggs as well as all sorts of dry spices but otherwise we are self-reliant.Wild animals such as hare and pigeons roam here,so we eat pigeons that have been raised eating grapes and when it's grown up we eat the pigeon. Accompanied by our own wine-it's a full circle".

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