

It is surely the most well known Italian brand in the world. But, Ferrari is not only a fantastic company that pumps out dream cars. It is also the brand name of the Italian sparkling wine that has challenged, in Europe

# I am a Ferrari, too, and always in pole position

BEST IN ITALY

edited by Cristina Giuliano

and around the world, the historic leadership of Champagne. As told in this interview with Gino Lunelli, spirit and spokesperson for the family that controls the Trentino region winery.

“That Segnana grappa could even have reached the Kremlin. If Vladimir Putin had paid the customs duty. But, he didn't, and the case remained at the Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow.” Gino Lunelli smiles while telling the anecdote. He doesn't seem sorry. Or perhaps only for the Russian president who, because of a bureaucratic hitch, wasn't able to taste the spirit made from the dregs of the Ferrari Spumante grapes.

As a rule, however, the Lunelli family bubbly gets to the right place. Like the last big European event, the signing of the constitutional treaty in Rome: 75 big names, between heads of State and government leaders. And a Riserva Giulio Ferrari was on the table.

“When we entered the business, the company made 10,000 bottles. But, over the years we have succeeded in becoming the top classic sparkling wine producer with 28% of the Italian market. A first-rate success. Based on the quality of the product, obviously, and on a marketing strategy that does not include billboards or TV commercials, only sponsorships. My motto is: match the product to the right man. Each year we choose a different sport: the Off Shore, the Americas

Cup, Formula One. I have had a lot of support from Mr. Ferrari. He took a liking to us: he's Ferrari, we're Ferrari.

## Sports, but also high level politics...

One of our successes was entering the Quirinale, the Italian Embassies and all of the important summits like the G7 and G8. Not only with our sparkling wine, but also with our Surgiva mineral water and our Segnana grappa. We have tried to penetrate the circles that count. People want to emulate others: a lawyer (Gianni Agnelli, *editor's note*) who celebrates with our product is worth more than 10 TV appearances. Because our point of reference is a high level group of consumers, very elite, but very unfaithful: they switch from one brand to another easily.

## Grappa seems instead to be a product more for the common man. How have you been able to lift it up so high?

At the G8 in Genoa, the German foreign minister Joschka Fisher tasted it with great care. He said, “Good, good!” Which set off a chain reaction: the Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, wanted to give the other premiers six bottles of grappa each. Then Romano Prodi called me. We have known



\_Mauro, Franco and Gino Lunelli (on the far right) in the Ferrari winery in Trento

each other for a long time and even go skiing together. He was the one who wanted to send the grappa to Putin. I sent everything off, together with a letter written in Russian and English. Twenty days later I received a message: the addressee had not paid the customs duty. That just goes to show you the strength of bureaucracy in Russia.

**You have a certain amount of experience in that region...**

Ah, yes. In 1987, I opened the first "Osteria Ferrari" restaurant in Moscow. After six months I fled in despair: the bureaucracy was suffocating. Much to the chagrin of my employees who had found Easy Street there: they felt like little kings with a few thousand dollars a month and a foreign passport. "Home!" I said, "Pack everything up." And, after all, I had achieved what I wanted: to end up in all the newspapers around the world. From the *Corriere della Sera* to the *New York Times* to the *Wall Street Journal*: the first European restaurant, two cooks, four waiters and all Italian products.

**How do you convince your spokespeople, your Prodis, Berlusconi, Agnellis, the leaders of Europe, that it's better to toast with Spumante Ferrari?**

You have to promote something valid. If you have a piece of rubbish, you can market it once, but not a second or third time. First of all, we make an exceptional product. For 102 years it has always been at the top: not just because of the year or by luck. We don't chase after the market or the money. You sacrifice everything, even sales, for quality. In this respect, the environment of a family company is a bonus: you have the experience of generations. We make a sparkling wine in the classic way using only grapes from the Trentino region, from a small area high in the hills. Never leave that area, because even though you might find a good product, it wouldn't be typical. Never alternate high quality with medium or low quality. Never buy grape must: I handle the grapes after I have seen them grow and my eight wine-makers are in the vineyards spring and summer to advise the farmers. In short, typicality, super-specialisation, obsessive pursuit of quality, consistency from the soil to the table. Add in the bonus of family management to produce something poetic and noble product. Because making something good is an art. Like making something beautiful.

**Art, by the way, is one of the promotional vehicles that you have chosen recently.**

That's right. Arnaldo Pomodoro is going to make a winery for us in Umbria, after making the sculpture "Centenarium Ferrari" for us. He is the greatest living sculptor. And, as I see it, the beautiful and the good must go together. Superfluous one, superfluous the other. Both fruit of the same human longing. For well-being.

**How can a company run by five siblings survive the enticements of an increasingly global market?**

There isn't one system. Each of us is the result of national, local and family education. In our family we have tried to cultivate a passion for making wine. And as long as I find others in my family who think like I do, there's no reason to sell or list on the stock market. My father said, "I have four sons (Franco, Giorgio, Gino, Mauro, plus a daughter, Carla, *editor's note*). They are like

the towers of a castle. If just one tower collapses, the whole castle will fall down.”

**You don't even want to discuss delocalisation. But, what are the reasons for your 'anti-globalism'?**

Vineyards have roots. And the roots are in Trento, they don't move. The relationship with the Trentino region is the only one we have. We made a choice. A product can only become great thanks to its typicality. Italy discovered this late. The French got it much sooner.

**But, bottles don't have roots. They can be transported.**

The Anglo-Saxon world has been drinking French for 300 years and we are not called Champagne. If you think about it, the English Navy created all the great wines there: in the 1800s, their sea routes passed by Cognac, Bordeaux, Madera and Port. They also touched Marsala, which was where the only great Italian wine of that time came from. Today it has almost completely disappeared, like Cyprian wine, as well, because the routes have changed.

**And the Americans, what kind of drinkers are they?**

They don't make independent judgements, they haven't been drinking wine long. They choose indirectly and if they've read that Bordeaux is good, then they buy that.

**Northern Europe?**

The German market, a long-time consumer of ours, is now stuck: the slump in Germany is worse than ours and it terrifies them.

**All that remains is to go East?**

In fact, our second largest client has become Japan: economically revived and more open to Italian products. Eating and drinking Italian-style is fashionable there. And since Tokyo represents first class in Asia, it's beginning to set an example and we are seeing Korea and Singapore show interest, too. But, true internationalisation of classic Italian sparkling wine is a long way off. Because it is overwhelmed by the champagne 'monster'. It is going to be a long, hard battle. We will hand the struggle down to our grandchildren: they will continue it.

**Will it be a European civil war?**

Champagne, Trento D.O.C. and Franciacorta are the only methods that have something to say to the world about classic sparkling wine-making. As equals. The Spaniards make many products, but price is their only weapon. However, in Italy there still isn't a sparkling wine culture. People think it's good for celebrations, just to pop the cork. While, actually, it's at the forefront of wine-making. It's not just for New Year. The French know it: they produce 260 million bottles of Champagne a year, of which 155 million are consumed in France alone. Italian sparkling wine, instead, has very different statistics: we consume 22 million bottles, but of these, 7 million are French champagne.

**So, why not look beyond Italy?**

In '87, we were the first to go to Moscow. In '88 we were the first European company, together with Pierre Cardin, to enter the Chinese friendship shops. All of this was only useful for the media attention. Recently, we reached an agreement with a large German company that distributes tens of millions of bottles and was among the first to arrive in Prague and Warsaw. We would have liked to expand in the East through them. But then they showed us what they export: ridiculous stuff. They sold a total of 100,000 bottles in Poland, 10,000 in the Czech Republic. Which is when I said, thanks and good-bye! If they had a hard time penetrating the market with a cheap product, then imagine with ours. It's bad timing. Like in Russia in the '80s.

**Is now the right time for Moscow?**

Maybe. But not for Hungary or Poland. I know they are possible markets. But, as long as the spending capacity is so limited, why should I go there? There are few rich people and no luxury hotels. The only possibility is to have an export manager sound out the area. But that's a waste. And expensive.

**How much?**

An export department? Hundreds of thousands of euros, just in travel. We are waiting for Belorussia and the Czech Republic to grow. It's pointless to rack up nine years of expenses, to say in ten years: I'm already there. Anyway, we are thinking about it.



\_Bruno Lunelli with his sons Gino and Mauro in the company wineries in the late 1960s. Below, the sculpture by Arnaldo Pomodoro

## A STAR ABOVE CHAMPAGNES

*What is the best classic method in the world? The experts from Weinwelt, the most authoritative and popular German wine magazine, have no doubts: it is the Giulio Ferrari method. No one, say the Germans, can equal it, not even Dom Perignon, the champagne legend. The 'verdict' was made by judges in a blind tasting, and the results were published in the magazine's most recent issue. Thirty-six classic method champagnes and sparkling wines were tasted, those known to be the best in France, Italy, Germany and Spain, the four countries in the world that create the most bubbles using the traditional method. At the end of the tasting, the highest score, five stars, went to the Giulio Ferrari. That was one more star than Dom Perignon received and at least two more than all the other contenders.*

*This is the second time that the Giulio Ferrari has been compared to Dom Perignon in a blind tasting. On the previous occasion, a few years ago, the cru wine created by Mauro Lunelli in 1972, which matures in its own yeast for ten years, and the best known French champagne in the world were judged by Gambero Rosso, a monthly magazine with the same authoritativeness in Italy as Weinwelt has in Germany and Austria. At that time, after a blind tasting of ten vintages, the comparison ended in a tie.*

## With diversification, why not invest in new markets, like Australia and Chile?

Thirty years ago we had to take the company from 50,000 bottles to 5 million, but we had the pasture here in front of us and we had no interest in going elsewhere. Now that we are the national leader, we could actually bet on new markets. But at 65, I admit, you no longer have the enthusiasm or the right incentive. You manage... perhaps my grandchildren... To do it right, you would have to take an aeroplane, move the family and take a chance. But, there's a 'but': 260 million hectolitres of wine (50 million in Italy alone) are produced around the world, but consumption remains between 220-230 million. That means that every year at least 30 million are surplus. And I ask myself, 'why is it that beer, cola and fizzy drinks are exported around the world, even in Uzbekistan and New Zealand, but wine is not?'

## Perhaps because the product is not synonymous with modernity, in the way that a can of Coca Cola might be?

I don't agree. In my opinion, the weakness is in the production: wine-making is too splintered. In Italy alone there are 130,000 companies. We lack a large 'monster' multinational to promote it and sell it around the world. And besides, beer, in equal quantities, costs more.

## What future do you imagine for Ferrari Spumante?

Let me repeat, my generation has won the battle in Italy. Now it's my grandchildren's turn to win it in Europe and around the world. They have gone to university. They have taken part in the Erasmus program. They have the tools and the strength to reach the East and the Far East. I took an aeroplane for the first time when I was 28. I landed in Amsterdam and I felt like the Archangel Gabriel.

## And the Ferrari Commandments: will those change, too?

No, those remain: typicality, super-specialisation, obsessive pursuit of quality, consistency . . . There is no compromise on those. Like for the Catholic church: there can be a fatter or a thinner Pope, but the 10 commandments are always the same. ■