

Anson on Thursday: The Prada of vineyard pruning

 Jane Anson  December 10, 2015  0 Comments



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They are known from Bordeaux to Champagne to Napa; Jane Anson meets the duo leading a team of Italian vineyard pruners who have been helping fine wine estates around the world to refine their skills.



Old vines at Château Haut-Bailly in Bordeaux Credit: Château Haut-Bailly

Proving that there is no corner of wine too humble to receive a makeover, step forward Simonit & Sirch, the Italian duo who are taking the art of vineyard pruning to a whole new level.

This is pruning plucked from obscurity. Pruning reimagined for the socially aware 21st Century vintner.

Viticulturists **Marco Simonit** and **Pierpaolo Sirch** joined forces 25 years ago in their home region of Friuli, northwest Italy.

Today they work from **Piedmont** to **Puglia**, have subsidiaries in Austria and France and 130 clients across Germany, Switzerland, California, Argentina and South Africa.

They head up a team of 20, all of them Italian and as far as I can see all effortlessly able to convey that unmistakable Italian sense of style (or 'spirit of simplicity and sharing' as it was described to me by one of the team) and use it to shine a light on this most unenviable and yet crucial of vineyard tasks.

Meeting at Château Haut-Bailly

I first heard about 'the Italians' a year or so ago over lunch at **Haut-Bailly**, and how they were introducing pruning techniques that promised healthier, longer-living plants across some of the best estates in **Bordeaux**.

Their names later came up in conversation at various places from **Champagne** to **Napa**.

I was intrigued, but wanted to wait until pruning season was underway to meet up with them. For much of France, that means between now and March. By December, the harvest is in, the leaves have almost entirely dropped from the vines, and in vineyards everywhere you begin to see solitary figures hunched over rows, removing the horizontal arms that bore the fruit in summer.

Prompted by the changing season, I arranged to meet Massimo Giudici, head of the French branch of the company, during one of his regular visits to Haut-Bailly.

I don't have any trouble identifying him on arrival. Unloading a large black bag from a station wagon is a tall man with jeans and a denim shirt, silvering hair pulled into a quiff, hipster stubble just a few days old, well worn work boots and a gentle tan showing a love of the outdoors.

'We are counsellors'

The image, the website design (ask yourself while you're admiring it how many others pruners you know with their own site?), the sheer handsomeness on display – it all makes it way too easy to dismiss the Simonit & Sirch Method as style over substance. They describe their work as 'counselling' and there's even a 300-page coffee table book. But it doesn't take long to be drawn into their world.

'We have chosen to concentrate on just one thing alone, and to do it well,' Giudici tells me as we head inside (despite the glorious winter sunshine making a practical tour of the vines highly appealing) to one of the meeting rooms upstairs at Haut-Bailly.

This is the same room where the château's team of pruners has assembled at the start of every season for the past four years for an introduction to the Italian school of vine pruning.

The black bag comes with us, and out of it Giudici brings not secateurs but an artist's sketchpad, pencils, and a host of different shaped sections of vines. A lap-top stands ready to deepen the discussion, but almost every point is accompanied by clear drawings rather than powerpoint.

When particularly impassioned, he crouches down in the middle of the room and waves his arms around to demonstrate how the vine – a climbing plant after all – would keep extending itself indefinitely if it wasn't tamed by man. It feels like I am in discussion with part architect, part performance artist.

A response to Esca

'Our approach grew out as a response to the serious vine disease Esca that we identified in Friuli several decades ago, and that is now widespread globally,' he continues. 'Esca can enter the vine through the cuts left behind by pruning, and repeated careless pruning will weaken the wood fatally. Our method offers natural protection, without chemicals, by working with the flow of the sap instead of against it.'

Esca is a word that you increasingly hear around vineyards these days. In Bordeaux **Cabernet Sauvignon**, **Cabernet Franc** and **Sauvignon Blanc** are particularly affected, while in Burgundy **Chardonnay** is taking a bigger hit than **Pinot Noir**.

Some estimate that vineyards are losing between 10% and 20% of their stock annually to the disease. Even if that is reduced to a highly conservative 5% per year there remains a huge financial impact. Imagine you are an estate with 10,000 vines per hectare, the usual density in the **Médoc**.

Losing 500 vines per year equals roughly 500 bottles of wine for every hectare. In a big estate that can add up quickly – and the effect is even more devastating when you consider that **Esca** tends to kill off the older vine stock at around 25 or 30 years of age, just precisely when the plant should be hitting its stride and producing its best, most complex grapes.

High profile clients

Package all this up with some Italian flair, and it's hardly surprising that Simonit&Sirch counts among its clients Châteaux Latour, Lynch-Bages, Batailley, Domaine de Chevalier, Ausone, Giscours, Pape Clement, Yquem, and all the Denis Dubourdieu properties (it was Dubourdieu who first introduced them to Bordeaux, after meeting them at a conference on sauvignon blanc).

Further afield, the company works with Moët & Chandon, Roederer and Domaine Leroy in Burgundy – where Lalou Bize-Leroy at 83 years old spends hours out with Guidici selecting adapting the methods to each section of the vineyard before any instructions are passed on to the pruning team.

'I start with a new client by selecting example vines from their own estate, to ensure my words are relevant to the team in front of me,' Guidici says.

'And I always work alongside them in the vineyards. I have to show that I am not just a teacher but a skilled pruner. I have to be better than their best team member. A lot of what we impart is done not through words but just by getting on with the team, keeping things simple and efficient, letting the results speak for themselves.

'At the end of the day, vines are an estate's most precious asset and yet too often the pruners are untrained and not given the respect they deserve. Our job is simply to raise awareness of that, and to help people understand how to prune with their eyes, not just with their hands.'