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ROBERT CAMUTO MEETS...

The Sultan of Sap

How Italian master pruner Marco Simonit changed viticulture



A sketchpad is as indispensable to Marco Simonit's work as pruning shears, as he uses drawings to understand how vines should grow. (Robert Camuto)



By Robert Camuto

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Marco Simonit's time has come.

The 53-year-old Italian agronomist offers a terrific example of what an individual can achieve in viticulture—if you think smartly and obsessively.

Having only a high school-level agriculture diploma, some university study and great instincts, Simonit has, over nearly two decades, changed the way the wine world thinks about, trains and prunes vines—both for longevity and to avoid devastating diseases. His clients include elite wine producers in Italy and France, and his influence has reached Australia and California's Napa Valley.

Now the wine world's foremost pruning guru and vine whisperer, his rise has come from his stunningly simple observation: that severe pruning used in modern, high-density vineyards weakens vines by blocking the flow of their life-giving sap, thereby making them susceptible to disease and premature death.

"The vine has trouble healing itself," he explains. "Every big cut you make hurts the plant."

In 2003, Simonit partnered with his childhood friend and fellow agronomist Pierpaolo Sirch to launch

Simonit & Sirch, specializing in the niche of training vineyard crews. Their method of softer, sustainable pruning focuses on smaller cuts that respect the flow of plant sap and account for future growth.

“Our idea has been to share our knowledge with the crews who do the work in the vines,” he says. “When you prune a vine, you have to not look at it today, but where it will be in 20 years.”

The duo—with Sirch mostly focused on administration and personnel and Simonit on vineyards and training—has vaulted the unglamorous work of pruning to an artisanal craft, one even taught at institutes of higher learning. In 2016, Simonit & Sirch partnered with the University of Bordeaux’s Institute of Vine and Wine Science to create the world’s first university diploma course in pruning, a month-long session. This year, they launched a two-day course in conjunction with Napa Valley College.

I spent a day early this summer with Simonit in northern Italy’s Alto Adige region, and I was immediately taken with his persona of half-farmer, half-artist. A slight man with a gnomish white beard and a shock of white hair that explodes out of the top of his head like an unruly shrub, he wore his trademark flannel shirt and rolled jeans. He always carries with

him two essential tools (with which I am inept): pruning shears and a drawing pad.

Simonit has always liked to draw. It's his way of understanding plant life. As a kid, he sketched on his grandparents' farm. Later, during a decade as an agronomist for the Collio wine consortium, he drew vines. That led to his obsession with gnarly, century-old survivors.

"I was searching for something," he says. "I wanted to understand why old vines grew old and others died."

That morning, Simonit drives me to a 100-year-old vineyard of Carmenère and other red varieties trained high on pergolas

[\https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?

[page=1&submitted=Y&word=pergola\]](https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?). He kneels

below the canopy of one vine resembling an old tree and points out the small scars along the arms of the vine that lead up to its new growth today.

"You see, it's like a building with each floor built on the last," he enthuses. "It has lived 100 years because it had space. This is the biggest problem in the world of viticulture—finding space."



Marco Simonit points out where to correctly make small cuts to support future growth. (Robert Camuto)

Over the course of the morning, he took out his pad a half-dozen times, fluidly drawing vine shapes to illustrate his point.

Simonit doesn't prescribe any one vineyard planting or training system. But, he insists, "What is important is to always have a sense of constant growth. If you don't, you will have infinite problems with dry wood, disease and stressed plants."

He has even worked with producers who use mechanical pruners for spur pruning on [cordon-trained](https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?page=1&submitted=Y&word=cordon) [<https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?page=1&submitted=Y&word=cordon>], vines, though he says the machine cuts need to be carefully raised every year, or—even better—used for pre-pruning, with final cuts made by humans.

“The problem is 95 percent of the guys running the machines cut the vines in the same position every year. That’s a disaster,” he says.

In their early years, Simonit and Sirch were hired by forward-thinking Italian producers, including Angelo Gaja, Josko Gravner and the Lunelli family of Ferrari sparkling wines. In 2011, another world opened up after French enology professor and consultant Denis Dubourdieu asked Simonit to come to Bordeaux, where vineyards were being ravaged by the fungal disease [esca](#)

[\[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/a-dire-threat-to-grapevines-51972\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/a-dire-threat-to-grapevines-51972). Some growers in France were blaming the disease’s 21st-century comeback on the country’s 2001 ban on sodium arsenite, an antifungal treatment that is also a powerful carcinogen, which had been used to combat esca for a century.

“It is a problem all over the world,” says Simonit. “Eight to 10 percent of the Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc in Bordeaux was dying every year because of esca.”

Because the disease enters vine trunks through pruning wounds, Dubourdieu wanted Simonit to help craft a solution.

After months of studying vineyards in the region, Simonit revealed to Bordeaux vigneronns that their biggest problem was the large “return cuts” made when lateral arms of vines grew too long and began overlapping neighboring vines. The cuts resulted in dead wood and gaping entry points for the disease.

“It wasn’t that the vines were badly pruned. The problem is they lacked space,” says Simonit, who maintained a close friendship with Dubourdieu until the Frenchman’s [early death in 2016](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/bordeauxs-denis-dubourdieu-dies-at-67) [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/bordeauxs-denis-dubourdieu-dies-at-67>].

Simonit proposed two fixes for making vines more resistant: a pruning technique that fostered slower horizontal growth and the conversion of double guyot-trained vines (meaning they have two fruit-bearing canes, or arms, growing in opposite directions) to single guyot training, with only one fruit-bearing cane, which takes up half the space. Top-growth châteaux, including Latour, Yquem and Ausone, brought him on as a consultant. Soon after, estates from across France were calling, including Champagne’s Louis Roederer and Burgundy’s Domaine Leroy.



Supplementing hands-on demonstrations of pruning technique, Marco Simonit also relies on illustrations to explain, for example, how vines need sufficient space to prevent the spread of disease. (Robert Camuto)

In each region he has worked, Simonit has crafted different solutions. At Leroy, Simonit convinced owner Lalou Bize-Leroy to allow vines to grow taller and to replace all vineyard posts with ones that could hold higher training wires—a daring move in an Old World region where change often moves slower than escargots.

Simonit's findings later received backing from academic researchers, as recently published decade-long studies in Europe confirmed that pruning methods do have an impact on vine susceptibility to esca and other diseases. And his real-world results soon attracted attention from farther afield.

About six years ago, the influential [Terlato family](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/a-life-in-wine-10776) [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/a-life-in-wine-10776>], American wine importers, marketers and California winery owners, sought to produce a new high-end Pinot Grigio in Friuli. They turned to Simonit & Sirch to oversee the vineyards and have used the Sirch family winery for production. Terlato Wine Group CEO Bill Terlato then brought Simonit to California to train workers in the family's Napa vineyards.

“Agriculture today is not just about having strong arms,” reflects Simonit, who now oversees a team of about 25 master pruners around the world. “It’s about using your mind and observation and experience.”