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VINS ET EXPÉRIENCES

# GIACOMO FENOCCHIO



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**THE VIEW FROM THE TERRAZZA AT THE FENOCCHIO FAMILY'S WINERY PERCHED JUST ABOVE THEIR VINES IN BUSSIA SOTTANA IS ONE THAT IS DIFFICULT TO IGNORE.**

In the foreground, the vines descend the hillside as a rippling carpet; on either side the walls of the amphitheatre are formed by two opposing ridges with their own slopes falling towards the valley floor; beyond these ridges, further dips and rises yield vineyards on all points of the compass. In the far distance, the spectacular backdrop of the soaring, snow-capped Alps themselves. Even for energetic and talkative locals, it is a place that commands silence and contemplation.

Given such natural beauty, it's not difficult to discern the source of the attachment that the Fenocchio family has to this corner of the Langhe.

Vine growers for five generations since 1864, it was Claudio's father, Giacomo whose ambitions moved the family from selling their wines in bulk locally to bottling and exporting, with their first labels appearing in 1946. In 1979, Giacomo produced the family's first single-vineyard wines having decided to separate Bussia and Cannubi. Yet when he passed away in 1989, a young and inexperienced Claudio took over at a pivotal moment in Piedmont's wine history. The fashion of the day, most notably and noisily promoted by the so-called 'Barolo boys', was to move away from long *élevage* and skin contact towards faster, deeper extraction and shorter *élevage* in newer, smaller barrels.

As these *modernista* wines stole the headlines and garnered attention in important markets, it must have been tremendously tempting to jump aboard.

Instead, Claudio poured his energies into the vineyards and, he says, perhaps taking guidance from above, stayed true to the traditions of the family. Inspired by the splendour that greeted him every day when he unlatched his shutters, he was convinced that healthy vineyards, rather than tricks in the winery, held the keys to long-term success. He has also been able to carefully expand the estate, from the initial 6-7 hectares that he inherited to around 14 hectares today.

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The historic heart of the estate is Bussia, specifically the Bussia Sottana where the family grows Dolcetto, Freisa, Barbera and, of course, Nebbiolo. The Bussia holding has increased from 4ha in 1989 to 10ha today, with Nebbiolo (and therefore Barolo) accounting for 60%. Their Bussia vines fall under the commune of Montforte d'Alba, whereas the crus of Cannubi (purchased 1976) and Castellero (purchased 1952) come under Barolo itself while Villero (purchased 1995) falls under Castiglione Falletto.

So far, so easy...yet this is Italy, where complexity and character is never far away. Each parcel of vines comprises a mixture of vine ages and, for Nebbiolo, different sub-types. Claudio is convinced that having a mixture of Nebbiolo Michet, Rosé and Lampia adds to the complexity of his wines as well as enabling him to retain diversity in his vineyards.

In the winery, which has been recently updated and extended, old Slavonian *botte* of varying sizes dominate the scene. However, there is stainless steel too and increasingly concrete eggs and amphorae. Here is an active mind open to questions and looking for ways to refine and push quality even higher.

A tasting here is likely to start with a white wine. These are still comparatively rare in Piedmont and certainly not part of the traditions of the Barolo zone. However, Claudio often found his restaurant clients asking for one, particularly in export markets and therefore he made a rare excursion across the Tanaro to the Roero some years ago, purchasing 1.5 hectares which he planted with the local variety, **Arneis**.

Looking for a clean, zippy, fresh style of white, Claudio elects to vinify in stainless steel and after decanting off the gross lees, he continues to age it in both steel tank and glass before releasing onto the market between six and twelve months after harvest.

Claudio's range of varietal reds are important to him, not just because of the heritage that they represent but as a way of introducing his wines into markets that can find Nebbiolo a little too confronting at first. Perhaps the easiest to understand is the **Dolcetto**, a fragrant, soft, pliable red coming from vines within Bussia on west-facing slopes. It receives a short 10-day fermentation in stainless steel and then, as with the Arneis, a further six months in tank and bottle before release.



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Its direct, friendly style with bright, cherry and violet-laden fruit that is soft in tannin is impossible to dislike.

More unusual is the **Freisa**, a curio of a grape, higher in acidity, paler in colour and thought to include both Nebbiolo and Viognier in its genetic lineage. Claudio has barely 0.5 hectares of it and he ferments it for just 8 days in stainless steel. After six months in tank, he transfers it to an old oak *botte* with the intent of rounding out the tannins. It offers a different set of flavours, more wild strawberry and herbal in tone and is perfect with *salume*.

His **Barbera** is sourced from 2.5ha of west-facing vineyards all within the commune of Montforte d'Alba. Late-ripening yet with high natural acidity and depth of colour, Barbera gives a winemaker a number of stylistic options.

Claudio typically chooses a 10-day fermentation in stainless steel, six months in steel followed by six months in old wood but often a further period in bottle before release, subject to vintage. With its high acidity, it has good ageing potential and normally a couple of years in bottle tends to bring out a greater range of flavours to enjoy at table.

From this point onwards, everything is about Nebbiolo, the senior grape which accounts for around two-thirds of the family's production. The entry-point is the delicious **Langhe Nebbiolo**, sourced from younger vines on east-facing slopes and given a shorter *élevage* than would be permitted for Barolo. Next up is the **Barolo normale**, a small production from Nebbiolo Michet and Nebbiolo Lampia vines of around 20 years of age on east-facing slopes higher up in the commune of Montforte d'Alba.



The step up is clear, with the 40 day fermentation followed by six further months in steel and then a full 30 months in old wood for bottling. The result has considerable richness and depth of colour while the aromatics bring in the spices and balsamic notes from the extended wood ageing.

Arriving at the Barolo crus, Claudio will normally present the Barolo **Cannubi** first. The vineyard is arguably the most famous in Italy, cited as the first vineyard to be individually named on a label as long ago as 1752, way before single-vineyard designation became more commonplace. It is thought of as one of the most refined crus of Barolo and typically allows earlier drinking compared to some of the more structured, muscular sites. Claudio's father purchased 0.5ha on a south-east facing exposure in the sub-zone Cannubi Boschis, replanting with a mixture of the three Nebbiolo sub-types. Vinification is exactly as for the Barolo *normale* and the finesse in the tannins and sense of power without weight mark this out.

**Castellero** is right on the border of the communes of Barolo and Montforte, touching both Cannubi and Bussia. It therefore makes a logical bridge between the two, blending the lighter, more fragrant top notes of the former with a little more of the darker, tarry bass notes of the latter. The holding at Fenocchio is 0.7ha and it wasn't until 2011 that the family decided to do a separate bottling. The little note of licquorice is particularly characteristic as well as the easy balance that the wine finds.







We then move into **Bussia**. This is an enormous vineyard, far too large to be able to find any logical generalisations that can link every part of it. It is fully 6km from one end to the other, covering a change in altitude from 220m up to 460m, virtually all points of the compass and almost 300ha in total. However, it is a magical name in the area, considered as the heart of Barolo by many, including Claudio's father and very much where the family flies its flag too. Their holdings are divided between a south-west and west exposure, meaning that they will often do two harvests. All three sub-types of Nebbiolo are once again present.

The iron-rich clay and limestone soils contrast however with the sandier Cannubi and Castellerò and this sense of muscle, energy and strength is immediately apparent yet at no point at the sacrifice of subtlety and complexity.

The **Bussia Riserva** receives an additional year in wood and, since 2009, has reverted to the 90-day (90 di) long fermentation practised historically. Claudio explains that he was curious to try the techniques practised by his grandfather but with the benefit of modern equipment.

The slow and very gentle release of the noble substances contained in the skins enhances both aromatic complexity and the silkiness of the tannins. This is a savoury wine, playing on notes of truffle, leather and game which comes into its own in the colder months. It is not made every year but when it does appear, there is normally just one *botte* of it, producing at most the equivalent of 5000 bottles.

Last but not least is **Villero**, a celebrated cru falling under the commune of Castiglione Falletto that descends the ridge running from Montforte to Castiglione Falletto.

The vines came from Claudio's in-laws, totalling around a hectare on a south-west exposition comprising the oldest vines on the Fenocchio estate. It is a wine that you have to go to rather than one that gushes out of the glass. Once it has captured your attention, however, then watch out: it seems to have a bit of everything, from flowers, to rich black fruits and deep, tarry notes; spices, leather and underbrush and fantastic energy, lift and length.

It is a great pleasure to have seen Claudio's star rise in recent years: such an honest, hardworking man of great integrity and authenticity fully deserves his recognition and success.

