



LIVING THE DREAM

BEAUTIFUL TUSCANY, shrouded in fog. (Photos: Courtesy Terra di Seta Winery)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Literally, a marriage made in heaven. She led him to wine. He led her to the Jewish world of kashrut. This is a story about land, a family, wine and food, not rare in Tuscany but with a Jewish undertone that is virtually unique.

Tuscany, situated in the center of Italy, has one foot in heaven. It is such a beautiful area of old stone buildings, forests, hills, valleys shrouded in deep mists, with a smorgasbord of vineyards, olive groves decorated with slim, upright, optimistic-looking Cypress trees.

The “She” in this story is Maria Pellegrini. She is a third-generation winemaker. Her father and grandfather made wine in the Morellino di Scansano region of southwest Tuscany. She has her feet deep in the Tuscan culture of family, food and wine, which are interwoven and inseparable. Her family were also restaurateurs and sommeliers. In her case, the apple did not fall far from the tree.

The “He” is Daniele Della Seta. He is an academic, a tall cerebral character with a noble patrician look. He was a biology professor, increasingly frustrated by the lack of funding for research. The Della Setas are an ancient family with deep roots in the Jewish community of Rome.

The catalyst for their new life in dreamland arose when Daniele was posted to the University of Siena. Touching base with Tuscany inspired them to search for *la dolce vita*. They bought a small estate in the Castelnuovo Berardenga area in the southern part of the Chianti Classico region. It was a 400-year-old organic farm set on a hill at 500 meters above sea level, not far from the beautiful city of Siena.

In one of those curious coincidences of fate, when Daniele’s uncle visited, he immediately said “I know this place.” It turned he was hidden in the very same house as young Jewish child during the Second World War. The estate had 40 hectares (approximately 100 acres) of grapes. Initially they sold the grapes to other wineries. In 2007 they made wine, and in 2008 they decided to convert the building used by the previous owner to breed rabbits into a modern winery.

There is no lack of wineries in Tuscany. They all have the same long history of family and share a new search for quality. All are part of the newly revitalized Tuscany. Daniele and Maria’s farm was already organic, so they decided to go kosher to give themselves a niche market.

They called the winery Terra di Seta. Terra means soil and Seta, the family name, means silk. As well as kosher wine, olive oil and honey, they run a strictly kosher kitchen and offer accommodations in the fine tradition of Italian agritourism. This is tourism with a difference because they specialize in kosher tourism, but you don’t have to be Jewish to be stunned by the beauty of the place or to appreciate the quality of the wines.

In truth, there are great French, Spanish, French, Californian and Israeli kosher wines, but Italy has always been lacking at the top end. Of course, in terms of sales the Italian-produced Bartenura Moscato beats all comers, but apart from Ricardo Cotarella’s kosher cuvees, Italy has been a desert of kosher wines of real quality.

TO BECOME kosher is no mean feat in a place with few Jews and without a kosher infrastructure. That they have succeeded is due to Daniele’s Jewish pride and his and Maria’s determination to go whole hog. This is a couple not used to doing

things by half measures. Daniele's sister lives in Israel. In 2007 he decided to tour Israeli wine country, visiting the Golan Heights Winery and Domaine du Castel. He brought in the kosher authorities to guide him, and the journey – from rabbits to rabbis – was complete.

Astonishingly, considering how much kosher wine is made, there are only three wholly kosher wineries in Europe. These are Clos Mesorah in Montsant, Spain, and Cantina Guliano and Terra di Seta in Tuscany. Terra di Seta is the largest of the three, but still remains, in our terms, a boutique winery. It is also an estate winery, growing all its own grapes. Their goal is to produce a Chianti with quality and typicity, to show Sangiovese as it should be, with all its points and edges, and to make wine that just happens to be kosher.

You drive up a narrow gravel lane into a forest where oak trees abound. In no time you arrive at an estate with stone buildings, a panoramic amphitheater of vines and an olive grove. Tuscany is always stunningly beautiful. At every moment of the day, it has its own unique light and shade.

I wandered around the vineyards that feature a southern exposure and was shown the characteristic Galestro and Alberese rocky soils. I noticed the heavy work going on to prepare the land for new plantings. I saw the new fence put up by necessity, to keep out the deer and wild boar who love gorging on the ripe Sangiovese grapes. One year they decimated the crop.

Wandering through the olive grove I met a horse, which turned to look at me lugubriously, as if to say, "This is my home. What are you doing here?" By the side of the path were wild Mediterranean herbs. Rosemary and lavender lined the path. The lemon trees have been moved to survive the winter. They were lined up like soldiers in pots, waiting to be replanted in the spring.

The winery, which you can peer at through a glass partition, is very state-of-the-art. Daniele explained that necessity is the mother of invention. They have pioneered new technology in search of ways to reduce any problematic effects of the kosher restrictions.

In most countries in Europe, kosher wine is made in regular wineries. Barrel bungs and stainless steel tanks are protected by reams of masking tape indicating this as a "no touch" area. Producers of masking tape must love kosher wineries. Signs scream "Kosher Don't Touch!" At Terra di Seta all is different. The winery is under lock and key. Paradoxically, the only sign outside the winery announced "Not Kosher" for an experimental Sangiovese being fermented in an open-top barrel.

We finished wandering about the estate, and then in a jiffy, with no fanfare or bells, Maria had prepared a beautifully presented Tuscan lunch, which was basic, yet stylish and wonderful.

FOR MARIA, cooking is like breathing. Tuscan cuisine is peasant food: simple, nourishing and using only local ingredients. The tomatoes and herbs were picked from the garden just seconds before use. The pasta was homemade by Maria. The bread was baked that same morning by Daniele. The olive oil you drizzle on it comes from the olive grove alongside the vineyard, from four different varieties.

I love olive oil, but I have never had the experience of using an olive oil made from olive groves I had walked through minutes earlier. And so on. Everything is domestic and homemade. When you say local, you are referring not to Tuscany, but to this particular estate. Not only is the experience authentically Tuscan, but everything is made strictly according to kashrut. Their accommodation has a dreamy swimming pool overlooking the vines, so the kosher wine-lover can also visit Tuscany, eat, sleep and drink wine like a king.

What is not hands-on is the winemaking. Here the *mashgiach*, or kashrut supervisor, is essential to Daniele. He needs to touch and feel the wine through the hands of his helpers. I met Ian Schnarl, an American Israeli with a long

history in wine. He worked with legendary winemaker Peter Stern at the Herzog Wine Cellars back in the 1990s. We reminisced about wines like the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1984 and 1985 and the award-winning Herzog varietals from those days. There are not many people around I can talk to who share these memories. Amusing that the place I did so was not in California or Israel, but in Chianti-shire!

Daniele is the one involved in the winery. He says his scientific background definitely helps. Maria takes responsibility for the vineyards, where vineyard activity is rigorously managed. All is organically grown, and they use the services of a well-known organic specialist as a consultant.

The winemaker is the well-known Enrico Paternoster. He is in charge of the winery and the Agricultural Institute of San Michele all'Adige, the most important Italian wine school and wine research center. His involvement also shows the seriousness of the endeavor.

They have a stylish new tasting room, which will in time overlook the barrel room. There I tasted the wines. I could have been tasting at any leading quality producer. The rosé called Meshi (Hebrew for silk) is enchanting. The Chianti Classico 2017 was the perfect drinking wine with a meal. A sour cherry nose, angular taste and a refreshing finish. I loved it.

I tasted three vintages of the Riserva. The 2010 proved to me that this is a wine that can age. It was still youthful, with a sublime delicate aroma. Actually, it was quite tannic on the finish. Their Assai Chianti Classico Gran Selezione was altogether a bigger, more serious wine. The 2011 still shows beautifully. It was well balanced, with well-integrated oak and intriguing complexity. What delighted me was not just the quality, but the respect for the Sangiovese grape. These were not wines masked with new oak in a New World style.

Daniele and Maria may be living the dream, but they work very hard to do so. To be organic and kosher are by no means the easiest routes. Tuscany represents not only history, art and landscape, but also food and wine, and a way of life. If you don't believe me, take a visit to Terra di Seta. ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammonte-fiore.com



THEY ARE a team in all they do: Maria and Daniele at the Prowein Wine Exhibition in Dusseldorf.



A BEAUTIFULLY clean, bright winery.