

HEARING ON CMO WINE REFORM

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Speech made by **Carla Capalbo**

THE WORLD MARKET: EUROPE'S UNIQUE STATUS

There is a good reason why Italian wines were America's biggest wine import in 2006, capturing over 30% of this prime market, ahead even of Australia. The dynamic large cooperatives of the northern regions, Trentino and Veneto, whose Pinot Grigios sell in vast quantities, or the Lambruscos that are particularly popular with young drinkers, are perceived by the Americans as being part of a winemaking pyramid whose pinnacle reaches names of recognized excellence such as Barolo, Brunello di Montalcino, or Chianti Classico. Their affordable, drinkable Pinots may be minor cousins of these more noble wines, but they are in the same family nonetheless.

In an international market flooded with mediocre wine, much of it coming from the New World, where irrigation and mass production of the so-called 'international' varieties has caused a glut of cheap, characterless wine, wine-drinkers look to the Old World to satisfy their desires for a plus-factor when they drink. In the world market, Europe holds a unique status. Italian (and other European countries') wine represent history, culture and a desirable lifestyle. They are perceived as hand-made, quality products reflecting the diversity of the Old Continent. And they are seen as openings into a fascinating world of wine, to work one's way into and discover. In this, Europe has no equals, for it offers the Old World sensibilities and tastes to which so much of the developing world aspires. One has only to think of the very rapid expansion of the markets of China, India and Japan to see the potential here for real economic development. European wines must continue to offer these unique qualities if they want to remain desirable.

The market has peaked and subsided from the seemingly unquenchable thirst it had in recent years for oaky Chardonnays and chewy, wood-soaked Merlots – wherever they came from. Tastes are shifting, and the trend is towards the wines of character that Europe excels in. Who else can claim to have thousands of grape varieties growing in an infinite range of terroirs? It makes more sense to invest in the future of these unique, place-specific wines than to produce ocean-liners full of what has already been coined 'Europlonk': anonymous, inexpensive mass-market wines from no particular place or culture.

SUGAR VERSUS MUST

The Mediterranean countries of southern Europe find themselves in a paradoxical situation today. In winemaking terms, they are extremely rich in culture and history – after all it was the Greeks who spread the art of viticulture to the rest of Europe. They are also rich in what today's wine market wants: interesting terroirs able to produce wines from unique grape varieties, well ripened by the sun.

At the same time, as we know, they suffer from having for too long been undervalued by the rest of Europe. In some areas, rural districts have been abandoned, and the younger generations have found little to sustain them. They are also the zones most seriously affected by climate change.

One exception to this has been in the production of grapes. Large tracts of southern Italy, especially Sicily, Puglia and parts of Campania and Lazio, have traditionally

been sustained by the growing of grapes for use as must to ship to northern countries – including Austria, Germany and France – to enrich northern wines whose sugar, and therefore alcohol contents needed boosting. The result of allowing sugar to replace must in these northern countries has led to areas of overproduction of grapes which are now costing the EU _____ per year to distil.

It would make sense, instead of allowing the importation of must from foreign countries, to ban the use of sugar – itself an extraneous ingredient in wines purportedly made of grapes – and return to using these southern musts in their place. We know where they come from and what goes into them. If this were to happen, there would be no problem with overproduction from these areas. They would be self-sufficient, and could once again maintain the jobs that depend on them.

Of course, another way to reduce over-production (assuming that there really IS a problem of over-production) is to simply reduce the quantity of grapes being produced by those same vineyards, which instantly improves the quality of the grapes, and consequently, the wines they go into. This has been at the basis of the ‘wine revolution’ of the past 20 years, not only in Italy but also in France and Spain. By reducing yields, and being more attentive in the vinification and cellaring stages, much better and more reliable wine can be made, which in turn commands higher prices.

TO GRUB UP OR NOT TO GRUB UP

It seems that undoubtedly some vineyards in Europe will be grubbed up over the next few years. But which? Who is going to decide, and with what criteria?

There is a serious risk that the vineyards most likely to be ripped out will be in places where the vine still has a lot to give. In many areas, both coastal and mountainous, vines were planted over the centuries not only because good wine was found to be made there, but also to stop erosion and the abandon of the terrain. The vines were often planted on terraces contained by walls – these too were effective against erosion. As has all too tragically been apparent this summer, with the forest fires in southern Europe, we can’t afford to let the less accessible parts of these arid lands be abandoned. Vineyards, like pastureland, keep the highly flammable scrub at bay, and keep the people who work them vigilant, therefore reducing the risk of desertification, and of fire.

In recent years – really, in the last 5 to 15 years – a very encouraging pattern has evolved in areas such as these. On the volcanic island of Ischia, near Naples; in high coastal areas of the Cinque Terre, in Liguria; on the Amalfi Coast in Campania; on the northern slopes of Mount Etna, in Sicily; but also in the upper valleys of the Alto Adige, near the Austrian border, educated, committed winemakers have set about reclaiming what once were fruitful viticultural areas that had fallen into disuse and abandon. These, and many other places like them, were once prized for the wines that were made there. On Etna, for example, it has been the recent rediscovery of the superb quality of a native grape, Nerello Mascalese, that has brought about this revolution. Worked with integrity, this grape has been compared to fine Burgundies and Barolos. The ancient vineyards there have been repruned, and are giving great fruit again. Many young Sicilians, encouraged by seeing the success of these experiences, are following suit. All it takes is a handful of people to apply good modern viticultural practise, both in the vineyards and in the cellars, to produce wine of quality, potential and personality, and then to communicate them to a specialized

press sector (which likes nothing better than this kind of discovery) for a wine, a group of producers, and from there a whole district to be reclaimed and relaunched.

It takes time to make wine. It takes time to plant a vineyard, or experiment and rediscover grape varieties that may have fallen into disuse. Had a decision been taken to grub up vineyards ten years ago, I'm quite sure many of those I have mentioned would have been condemned, as would their local communities.

Some of Italy's most interesting – and often prize-winning – wines – including Sicily's Nero d'Avola, Umbria's Sagrantino, Campania's Fiano di Avellino...to mention but a few – are now some of Europe's most sought after, and all have been relaunched recently by small groups of producers who believed in them.

We have two choices here. One is to grub up – to pay to condemn lands like these to future abandonment, because once the vines are gone, nothing else will ever be grown there. Nothing else will grow in the poor soils favoured by the vine. If grubbing up it has to be, then it is imperative, in any campaign to reduce vineyards by ripping out vines, that the decisions be taken locally, on a regional or provincial level, by people who are experts in the field who will be able to carefully decide which areas are worth investing in, and which are unsuitable to vine-growing. Low-quality terroirs are not worth investing in.

INVESTING IN A FUTURE

The other, more constructive, option is to sponsor young local people keen to start out as wine producers, or wanting to expand an already established winery. They can be taught how to improve their vineyards and cellars – how to make better wine – and how to target their communications to fit the demands of markets such as the American or British, who are particularly appreciative of situations such as these. As has been proven in areas like the Cinque Terre, if a single producer cannot cope with the costs of all stages of the winemaking process, portable bottling plants can be bought cooperatively and shared, as can the costs of marketing the wines overseas. In some cases all that's required is a monorail to help bring the harvest down from high vineyards, or the financing of the rebuilding of dry-stone walls which are an integral part of the landscape patrimony – and therefore beneficial both to the environment and to tourism.

The EU, with all its qualified graduates and experts, could use the money it would have paid on a one-time grubbing-up programme to invest in improving those same vineyards, and to offer a future to young people in these often underdeveloped areas. There is so much knowledge available now in this field that could be offered to help these areas to grow, making quality wines out of a wide range of grape varieties for a future that is both economically and environmentally positive. If we don't help them now, before the big industrial producers rush to plant in 2014, they'll never get started.

To conclude: contrary to the fears of over-production, it would seem that Europe consumes as much wine as it produces. In addition, the large, trend-setting US market is clamoring for hand-made wines of quality, character, and diversity – as well as for organic wines. There is room for Europe to grow into these kinds of demands. There will always be a market for high quality grapes, and for high quality wines, so let's not be too anxious to rip out the fruits of generations of care and labour, by opting for

what appear to be the easy solutions of mass-production of low-quality products, which all too often have revealed themselves to have been short-sighted.