



A GARDEN IN TORCELLO, THE SOURCE OF DORONA.

# DORONA

| by Alan Tardi

*The latest creature from the Venice Lagoon*

Italy has over 3,000 indigenous grape varieties—and the list is still growing. Prosecco producer Gianluca Bisol added one in 2002, while showing friends around the island of Torcello in the Venetian Lagoon. When he stepped out of the Byzantine Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta (Venice’s oldest), he saw a lush garden with statues, trees, flowers and, most noticeably, grapevines. “This really caught my attention,” he said, “because I didn’t know grapevines even grew in the lagoon.” He rang the doorbell of the adjacent house to get a closer look.

Behind the gate, the small vineyard of mixed vines included one he had never heard of before; according to the *signora* who had inherited the garden from her father, it was called “dorona” (from the Italian word for gold). Intrigued, Bisol asked a Venetian historian-friend to investigate. As it turns out, there is a long history of viticulture in the lagoon and reference to a grape called dorona going back to 1300. Subsequent analysis determined the vine was, in fact, a unique variety genetically related to garganega. That fall, Bisol collected dorona grapes from the signora’s vineyard and other tiny sites scattered throughout the islands to do a micro-fermentation. One taste and Bisol was hooked.

Along with his enologist brother, Desidero, he enlisted the help of Montalcino-based “wine archeologist” Roberto Cipresso and, in 2005, they planted one acre of dorona on the island of Mazzorbo in a long-abandoned walled enclosure that once belonged to a convent. “We are at the limit here,” said Cipresso. “The flat, sea-level terrain; loose, silty soil surrounded by salt water; and diffuse light filtered through mist puts stress on the vines.”

They kept yields extremely low (about 400 grams per vine) and let the juice macerate for a month on the skins. The first edition of Venissa, as the wine is called—4,480 500-ml bottles and 88 magnums—was released in the spring of 2012.

The bottle, made of hand-blown Murano glass from the studio of Carlo Moretti with a sheet of gold leaf encased just beneath the surface, is extraordinary. And the wine inside is extraordinary too, in the true sense of the word. I must admit that when I first tasted it, I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Amber-gold with a brown tinge, it smelled of varnish and sea salt and felt soft and waxy on the tongue with a burnt



caramel flavor, an almost tannic astringency and a quick, bitter finish. It reminded me of a very dry Sherry.

Several weeks later I opened another. While I detected a few more pleasant details—floral hints, some lemon rind, bitter almond and roasted peach—my impressions were pretty much the same as the first time. Then I had an idea: I went to the kitchen and pulled out a hunk of aged Parmigiano-Reggiano, a few slices of salami and some dried figs.

Like a fairy-tale kiss, the cheese transformed the frog into a prince: The saltiness and lactic fattiness brought out hidden fruit, making the wine rounder and more complete; the astringency of the wine helped it stand up to the salami’s spice; and the oxidation made it lovely with the dried figs (where were those toasted hazelnuts?). Now it seemed elegant, understated and intense. I could imagine it going quite nicely with a runny Vacherin, roast boar with juniper, or braised pheasant with dried peaches.

In the end, this unusual wine from a long-lost grape variety offered two worthwhile lessons: first, while most wines are even better when paired with food, some absolutely require it in order for them to make any sense at all. And second, the more particular the wine, the more specific these pairings must be if they are to have the desired effect. (Perhaps there’s a third lesson here too: Sometimes the book *does*, in fact, live up to what the cover promises.)

The Venissa project continues. As the vines mature—they were only five years old for this first bottling—the quality will likely improve, though the yields will remain low. Cipresso, who will continue to vinify the wine in his Montalcino winery for the time being in order to carefully monitor the process, is experimenting with refining the wine in porcelain vessels instead of glass. In the future, they plan to build a winery on Mazzorbo or one of the nearby islands and plant dorona in appropriate sites throughout the northern lagoon. “We would like to make a simpler, more conventional, less expensive dorona in larger quantities,” said Bisol, “but Venissa will always remain Venissa.” ■