

Clos Santa Ana

Interview

This interview with Alessio Zenato took place on Skype in March, 2020.

How did Clos Santa Ana come to be?

There are two owners: Luiz Antonio de Gracia Allegretti is half Italian and half Brazilian and Roberto Ibarra García is Chilean and currently resides in Lima as the ambassador of Chile to Peru. Luiz lives here on the estate and Roberto comes about once a month. Roberto knew about the Colchagua Valley, but originally they searched all over Europe, particularly in Italy and Croatia. Eventually it was agreed to do it in Chile.

They purchased the house and the the land in 2003. It's a patrimonial house that is almost 300 years old. They began restoring it as well as the soil, since for many years it had been planted in rice. It was much too hard to plant vines. They immediately hired Lydia and Claude Bourguignon, whom many regard as the most important contemporary soil technicians. For many years we planted legumes to re-stabilize the micro-organisms of the soil, bringing it back to life.

This continued until 2012, when the first vines were planted. We have Malbec, Carménère, Cabernet Franc, Viognier and Chardonnay. Until 2019, we were buying some organic grapes to supplement production. But from 2019 forward the wines will come exclusively from our land. The first vintage to be released was 2015.

How big is the property and how many hectares of vines were planted?

The property is about 35 hectares and we've planted just 1.3 hectares of vines. We do not want to grow much more than this. We currently produce 8000 bottles annually and our goal is to reach 10 000. But we don't want to do more because the goal is for everything to be hand-made with no modern technology. We will only be able to do this with small volumes.

We intentionally planted the vineyard in the middle of the whole property. It is completely surrounded by native plants, trees and wild animals (we also own a lot of animals). These were already there. We'd have to rip them out to plant more vines and we do not want to.

Is there anything else produced on the property?

The biggest part of the business is receiving guests who stay for extended periods of time. It's certainly not a hotel, but it's a very nice, relaxing experience. We also have a very well regarded private art collection that draws visitors.

There is also a vegetable garden but this is for our personal consumption.

And what is your role at the estate?

I'm in charge mostly of vinification and selling the wines to outside markets. But we are truly a team here with Luiz and we do everything together: managing all the aspects of the winery: tourism,

receiving guests, marketing, selling to the Chilean market, taking care of the animals... Everyone can and does everything when they need to!

Who is making the wine?

We have assistance from two winemakers who come to give us some directions, Jose Miguel Sotomayor and Luca Hodgkinson. But Luiz and I are responsible for the winemaking itself. We also get many volunteers from all over the world who help us at various stages. It's great to be together with such an international group; some stay a month, others longer. Whatever we need, they are there.

How did you end up at Clos Santa Ana?

I came on a tour a few years ago. I'd heard of the project but it was so inspiring that I changed the entire course of my life and decided to stay. I immediately hit it off with the owners and originally stayed to help with pruning. I could see there were many responsibilities at the farm, and I offered them my help. They said yes! I've been here for two years now and it's been great.

What was Luiz doing before this project?

Luiz studied economy in Italy, then studied art in Munich. He worked and lived as an artist for 20 years. Eventually he grew tired of the art world; taking inspiration from his Tuscan roots, he decided he wanted to start a winery. He's been living in Chile for 17 years now, since they bought the house.

And you?

I used to have a restaurant near Venice and worked as a sommelier. I fell in love with natural wines about seven years ago and never looked back.

Usually when a project of this nature is created, the motivations tend to not be as philosophical as Clos Santa Ana's. Where does the dedication to organic viticulture, working without modern technology or any enological products come from?

The answer starts with how much we care about and care for nature here. Luiz loves history and is very knowledgeable: he always speaks about life a thousand years ago! And this includes wine. He wanted to go back to what he deemed sensible work, to eschew the trappings of modernity. From the beginning, the goal was to respect nature. You cannot use chemicals when you feel this way. To be honest, we do not see any other way to make wine. This is the only expression that could be made here.

This is why I instantly fell in love with the project: a pure expression of Chilean terroir.

You mentioned your love of natural wine. Was the goal to produce "naturally" from the beginning or is this simply an extension of the work in the vineyards? Did Luiz and Roberto have a pre-existing concept of this category?

Everything started with the love of nature. It was also a rejection of new world winemaking. The vast majority of Chilean winemakers work conventionally. When they were just starting, they had to seek outside counsel. Fortunately they met Jose Miguel Sotomayor and Luca Hodgkinson. Luiz and Roberto explained what they were setting out to do and that was the start.

The beautiful part is that Jose Miguel and Luca were working at big industrial wineries at the time and working with Clos Santa Ana completely changed their lives. They stopped all of their conventional contracts, have started their own project working naturally and will only consult if people want to go in this direction.

Can you describe the terroirs of the area?

The Colchagua valley is 55km from the ocean coast of Pichilemu. We are very much isolated in the countryside. Our soils are alluvial with volcanic influences from an eruption dating back to 50 million years ago. We also have a lot of clay. It's not the easiest soils to work, but we are very happy with the results we get. The vines are trained partly in "espaldera" for the Carménère (a classic training system in Chile for the grape), the rest in goblet. It's very hot during the summer, so this training system really helps to create a micro climate for each plant.

The vineyard is quite wild, with lots of plants, herbs and fruit trees co-existing with the vines. As I mentioned earlier, the vines are surrounded by plants and trees, including some old olive trees. We also have our own water reserves, which is useful because in Chile you need to own the rights to the water you use or else you need to get the owner's consent. They are completely dry this year, as we are going through a terrible drought. But we do use them to irrigate the vineyards.

Let's talk about the wines you are making.

The grapes we have the most of are Carménère and Cabernet Franc. We have very little Malbec and the Chardonnay and Viognier are very young plantations. From this we make three wines: *Velo*, *Sirios* and *Aralez*. We also make two other reds that are exclusively for consumption at the winery. There is also a sparkling wine that will be released in two years.

Everything is fermented in very old Chilean oak foudres. We also use Chilean amphoras; some are 140 years old. We have some old French barrels as well. But I think the most important thing is the quality of our cellar. It was covered up when Luiz and Roberto bought the property, they had no idea it was there. It's underground and as old as the house, and the walls are covered in unique forms of mold. We actually have a friend who is an expert on fungus coming to take DNA samples to see if there is a correlation with colonialism or Jesuit occupation. We did find Jesuit ruins behind the house so we are very curious. It's also very interesting for the development of the flor on the barrels of our white wine *Velo*. It's definitely affected by the fungus on the walls.

For the reds, we do a two week maceration and press them with a manual press and keep each varietal separate. Each ages for 15 to 18 months in barrel. When we make the blend, we then keep the wine in bottle 10 months before releasing the wines.