

Robert Camuto: Letter From Europe

Unfinished Business

Long after learning from a master, Zymè's founder still reaches for new heights in Valpolicella



Photo by: Robert Camuto

Celestino Gaspari blends extremes of tradition and modernity.

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Celestino Gaspari is standing in the entry of his architecturally avant-garde winery, dug into a centuries-old sandstone quarry outside Verona, in northeastern Italy. He greets me with these words: "I am not a normal man. I don't like to live easy."

At 53, Gaspari is certifiably not "normal." He is a rare perfectionist who is both a devout adherent to tradition and a restless experimenter. "I start one project and, just before I am finished, I start another," he explains.

His Zymè wine label, founded in his home garage in 1999, is regarded as a regional leader of quality and innovation, with two divergent lines of wines: One with staunchly traditional Valpolicellas and Amarones and another featuring peripatetic experiments and cult wines from unusual combinations of local and international wine grapes.

"I don't want to repeat the same things others do," laughs Gaspari, a smallish, compact man with graying hair and lively blue eyes. "I am a protagonist to myself."

Gaspari grew up in a poor farming family and studied agriculture. At 20 years old, he was a manager of a large commercial livestock operation near Verona when he met his future wife—the youngest daughter of legendary winemaker Giuseppe Quintarelli.

Gaspari learned painstaking winemaking from his father-in-law (who died in 2012 at 84) and the art of blending from Robert Chadderdon, Quintarelli's New York importer at the time.

"The secret of Quintarelli wines was the selection [of grapes] and the blend," says Gaspari, who today bottles around 6,500 cases, only about half of the wine he produces. The rest he sells off in bulk to other wineries.

For a decade, beginning in 1987, Gaspari was Quintarelli's partner and winemaker. "The important thing is to have a traditional base," Gaspari says. "If your feet are on the ground, you can try anything."

But he also felt straitjacketed by Quintarelli's strictly traditional approach. To broaden his experience, Gaspari became a consultant for a new wave of producers growing in the Veneto. He helped launch more than a dozen wineries and learned to work with modern options, from temperature-controlled steel fermentors to Bordeaux *barriques*.

In 1997, he split with Quintarelli to focus on wine consulting. Two years later, he founded Zymè (Greek for "yeast"). His first idea was to hand-select some of the best grapes from he could get from the area and blend them into one wine. The result, called Harlequin, includes 11 red and four white varieties, from the local assortment that goes into Valpolicella blends to other native northern Italian grapes to Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese and Chardonnay. The most recent vintage, 2008, scored 93 points (\$380).

Next, Gaspari focused on making a wine from pure Oseleta, a Veronese blending variety, with a ruby color and high acidity, that had been largely abandoned because of its tiny berries.

More recently, he created a white, called From Black to White (2014, 86 points, \$30), from an albino genetic mutation of the red blending grape Rondinella that he discovered and propagated.

Today, Gaspari produces 10 wines—across a wide range of prices—from about 70 acres he farms both his own vineyards and leases sites organically.

The sleek, pentagon-shaped Zymè winery, completed in 2014, blends technology—like Gaspari's patented, robotized, programmable fermenting tank called the "Zymetank," which he uses in his entry-level wines—with tradition.

When vintages are good enough to produce his long and elegant Valpolicella and Amarone (like his benchmark Zymè Amarone della Valpolicella Classico la Mattonara Riserva 2003, 94 points, \$350), he makes them as he learned from his father-in-law: fermented with wild yeast in old-fashioned cement tanks and aged in large Slovenian oak barrels.

Yet Gaspari admits he is still learning.

That's symbolized on the labels of his Amarone and Valpolicella, on which a paintbrush appears to be spelling out those wine classifications, beginning with the letters "Am" and "Val."

Gaspari said he left the labels incomplete because the wines are still a work in progress.

"The idea I have of these wines in my mind is a little different," he says. "Only when I arrive at that result I have in mind will I write 'Valpolicella' or 'Amarone.'"
