



THE PHILOSOPHY AT MASSETO

Axel Heinz – In His Own Words

Winemaking at Masseto is at the same time an adventure and a continuous discovery.

A place where intuition prevails, where no one could be sure that the fragile Merlot could succeed, even if the presence of blue clay from the Pliocene gave a hint.

An experiment with such a striking result that we quickly realized that it had to be a wine on its own, so strong was its unmistakable character from the very first harvest back in 1986. A rare combination of lush ripeness and lavish concentration which somehow manages to preserve its complexity and freshness.

Making Masseto is a balancing act, one feels like a tightrope dancer always on the edge of a precipice. The clayish soils in themselves represent all the contradictions. A capacity to store great amounts of water, and to release it very gently. A soil that is cold and wet in a rainy year but gets hard as a rock during a dry summer, creating a shear physical barrier to the roots that struggle to go deep down into the subsoil. A soil in which, with a low planting density, a level of vigor is achieved that would normally be expected from a high-density vineyard.

The vines of Masseto seem to be continuously struggling with the elements, frequently at the limit of collapse but somehow always able to resist and develop fruit of incredible concentration and flavor.

A vineyard which in a wet year can be one of the latest ripening sites for Merlot, with harvest stretching way into the end of September and occasionally the first days of October, whereas in a hot and dry year, requires picking at the end of August.

Such a place must be carefully managed by man's hand, to sustain it without adding any further stress. Careful green work is required to adjust the number of shoots to the number of grape clusters in order to find the right balance, which should not be too low to avoid excessively quick ripening, and not too high to prevent the vines from suffering severe stress in a dry year. The dilemma of sufficiently protecting the grapes from the scorching summer sun also needs to be addressed, while ensuring that they get enough light exposure to fully ripen their skin. All these elements must be cared for by the experienced hand of a vineyard worker, able to observe and analyze each single vine and adjust his operations to each individual need.

Considered originally as one single vineyard, we have learned with time to identify different areas which significantly distinguish themselves from one another. The hilltop made of shallow, gravelly sand, the central slope where the blue clay abounds and the foot of the hill with deeper colluvial soils. A patchwork of different terroirs that allow to capture a kaleidoscope of expressions of Merlot, but only if each plot is treated as an individual. Indeed, the differences in ripening time for the different sections lead to quite different picking dates, and the harvest frequently lasts for 3 to 4 weeks, although the various plots lie very close to each other.

In the winery, minimum intervention is the keyword. The extraordinarily concentrated grapes need no sophisticated winemaking but simple operations. Soft infusion rather than aggressive extraction, to help express the richness without heaviness or roughness. Everything in the winery has been designed for that purpose - gentle transfer of the grapes without any pumps, taking advantage of the natural gravity flow, and tanks shaped to favor efficient maceration without the need for aggressive extraction. Using our taste

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buds is the main tool to take daily decisions, and our winemaking philosophy is more about accompanying rather than forcing the process.

The ageing of the wines has been a long and steady learning process too. Quite naturally, given the type of wine, small barriques of French oak seemed an obvious choice. Throughout the years we have continuously worked on finetuning the “*élevage*” that ought to be a means to exalt the wine’s quality, stabilizing, polishing and refining the tannic structure just as one would polish a rough diamond. Calibrating the proportion of new oak is another balancing act. Its rich and toasty aromas should support rather than stay in the foreground, adding a touch of complexity, while preserving the transparency and purity of the fruit, and ultimately perfectly blend into the complexity of the wine’s bouquet when it has come of age.

In the first years when the vineyards were still young, we had to be more careful and kept the proportion of new oak and the duration of the ageing relatively low. But as we became more experienced and confident, letting the wine guide us, we realized that Masseto could easily cope with new barrels and found its perfect balance after 24 months of ageing. While these parameters have become the norm, we have not refrained from shortening the stay in barrel or lowering the amount of new oak when the vintage required it.

The discipline to keep all lots separate at the beginning, although it might seem easier to put a blended wine into barrel, opens up a whole set of perspectives. We are able to follow the wine of each single plot through its upbringing, see how each of them develops, and understand the personality of each single terroir from one vintage to another. The power and almost intimidating tannic structure of *‘Masseto Centrale’*, the firmer and trimmer texture of *‘Masseto Alto’*, and the softer character of the lower part of the vineyard which we like to call *‘Masseto Junior’*. The newly planted vineyards take a few vintages to reveal their intimate nature and terroir character, but what a fascinating moment when suddenly in a tasting a new facet of Masseto reveals itself. It is again about learning and studying all the different expressions of Masseto and later uniting them in the blend, trying to find the perfect formula that allows to take advantage of each wine’s strengths to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Lastly there is the fascinating discovery every time we uncork an older vintage of Masseto. Here again each time we take a sip, we learn something new. How the wines we have brought up with patience and care, evolve. How they change. How each individual vintage expresses its unmistakable Masseto character, but with a slightly different interpretation - just as a masterpiece of music will sound differently according to the artist who plays it. A discovery that gives way to pure emotion in that special moment every wine lover is seeking. The time when we are able to capture the wine at the peak of its maturity.

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