

Fontanafredda, wine tourism: a space for relationships, social growth, and democratic access to wine

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Fontanafredda COO Roberto Bruno details the winery's evolution into a benchmark for Italian wine tourism. He explains how a thirty-year strategy of hospitality, cultural events, and accessibility has created a "narrating village" that transcends commerce. Bruno also discusses market diversification, simplifying the communication of biodiversity, and building a resilient, globally-recognized brand.

Fontanafredda is not only one of the most historic and iconic wineries in Piedmont, but it also stands today as a benchmark

for the entire Italian wine sector, especially regarding wine tourism and strategic vision for international markets.

In this interview with Roberto Bruno, the company's COO, a clear and coherent perspective emerges on many of the major themes currently affecting the sector: from the need to diversify export strategies to the enhancement of Italian biodiversity, from the (still underestimated) role of hospitality to the communication challenge of denominations.

The Fontanafredda case shows that truly opening the winery's doors—physically and culturally—means redefining the very concept of hospitality, moving beyond a commercial logic to become a space for relationships, social growth, and democratic access to wine. But behind the success of the “narrating village” of the Langhe, there is much more than a beautiful vision: there is thirty years of investment and a strong idea of what an international wine company should be today.

Bruno describes, without rhetoric, how wine tourism can be a bridge between cultures, a lever of economic resilience against geopolitical uncertainties (like US tariffs), and an identity-building tool for territories that know how to speak the language of authenticity.

It is an interview that not only captures the evolution of a company but also offers real, concrete, and replicable insights for businesses in the sector that wish to evolve without losing their identity.

How much does exporting to the United States weigh on your company in terms of value and volume? Have you already considered what strategies you intend to

adopt to counter the sudden changes in direction of the US administration on the issue of tariffs?

For us, the American market accounts for 6% by volume and 8% by value; it is our third-largest export market. **In recent weeks, the winds of tariffs were already blowing, and we began to anticipate and talk about market diversification.** However, these are dynamics we have been internalizing for years. We know very well that too much concentration in a few markets is too risky, considering how the wine world moves today. Diversification has always been a strategy we have adopted. For example, our top market is Canada. Paradoxically, thanks to US tariffs on Canadian exports, we have gained a greater advantage, as Canadian stores have removed American wines from their shelves for over a month and a half. Looking at sales over the last month, most of the replacement has occurred with varieties similar to what Americans can offer, such as Cabernet, Merlot, and Syrah. Evidently, Italy is not very strong in these varieties, so the countries that have benefited most from this situation have been the New World producers. However, Italy and France are also seeing a positive trend. **Therefore, I do not believe that the feared Trump tariffs represent a dramatic threat to us.**

Looking at the glass half full, is it possible that the US tariffs—temporarily suspended—could force the sector to move closer to the BRICS countries and break some of the certainties on which the industry has relied for many years?

I agree with you and see it as a concrete possibility. Our predisposition to work with culturally similar markets has always been strong. Wine is closely linked to cultural

factors, so in countries that share a similar culture to ours, our approach is simpler and more natural. We do not have to make great efforts to adapt our commercial, promotional, and communication strategies. Until now, we have focused on culturally similar markets because they are the ones that give us the most satisfaction and do not require us to overhaul our approach. **But now this situation could push us to delve deeper into markets that we have only touched upon, like India.** So far, we have only put down “markers,” saying, “We also sell in India,” without really understanding the consumption dynamics or studying how to communicate with the end consumer. Now, I believe we will have to invest more in these markets, addressing local dynamics and adapting our communication strategies. The partial isolation of the United States encourages us to get closer to other countries, creating an almost natural alliance with all nations affected by the same policies. **We find ourselves in the same situation, so the idea of intensifying relationships with the rest of the world becomes more attractive.**

Italy has a unique wine biodiversity, with 545 native wine grape varieties and 182 table grape varieties. Is the Italian wine sector adequately leveraging this heritage internationally? What policies could help enhance this uniqueness?

Yes, I believe that wine biodiversity is one of our country's most extraordinary strengths and should definitely be enhanced. In our case, we operate mainly in Piedmont, which accounts for 80% of our turnover, and I think an interesting example can be applied right here. **Italian biodiversity is immense, but the big problem is how to communicate this richness in a simple and effective way.** The complexity of our viticulture is often a communication challenge because so many

grape varieties, so many variations, and small denominations can confuse the consumer, especially abroad. In Piedmont, for example, we are trying to promote a communication simplification strategy, with the aim of gradually moving away from the single-variety logic that has characterized our tradition. Wine, often associated with a single grape variety, is no longer sufficient to effectively tell the story of our territory. **Diversity must be valued in a broader vision, with geographical denominations that can include multiple varieties.** In Piedmont, we are focusing on the Langhe denomination, which brings together not only Nebbiolo but also other local and international varieties. The priority is the territory, which must be the main protagonist of the story.

341 DOC wines, 78 DOCG, and 120 IGT: these are the numbers of our denominations. The 25 largest account for over 65% of the volume and over 75% of the value. Do you think there are too many and they should be downsized, or do they represent the diversity and richness of Italian wine?

The Langhe denomination, in our vision, should be the container where all the smaller denominations converge which, although rich in tradition, risk losing relevance in the international market. **When you focus too much on small, fragmented denominations, the communicative power is dispersed.** France has done an extraordinary job of consolidating and promoting its geographical denominations. **We should aim for an aggregation that does not sacrifice specificity but, at the same time, gives more coherence and visibility to our territory.** We must establish a broad but coherent territorial denomination that has homogeneous pedoclimatic, cultural, and varietal characteristics.

How would you address the problem of overproduction in some areas, where the wine produced does not find adequate market outlets? Is vine removal plausible in Italy, as has already happened in France?

In Italy, before resorting to drastic solutions like vine removal, it is possible to adopt more gradual measures such as containment and yield reduction. **In Piedmont, for example, the balance between supply and demand can be achieved by managing yields.** I believe that dynamic control of production can be the most reasonable solution to prevent some wine-growing areas from suffering from overproduction.

The idea of opening wineries and attracting more consumers is shared by many, especially to attract young people. However, “it’s easier said than done,” and few wineries are open on weekends and consistently offer aperitifs or events. What are the reasons, in your opinion?

You are knocking on an open door; ours was the first Piedmontese company to open its cellars to the public. We were pioneers, but I must admit it has been a long and, in some ways, challenging journey. Our founder, Victor Emmanuel II, had already foreseen the importance of opening the winery to the public in 1890. This is evidenced by our old visitor’s book, dating back to that period, where you can read dedications from those who visited the winery and left their thoughts. **For us, sharing our heritage—not just our wine but also our cultural and landscape heritage—with the public has always been a fundamental value.**

This choice was a real cultural challenge, especially in a context like Piedmont, which has always been characterized by a more introspective and reserved approach. We are not Sicilian, Neapolitan, or Tuscan. **Traditionally, our roots were not tied to hospitality as a widespread social value.** However, wine and gastronomy have allowed us to make an incredible cultural leap, and today Fontanafredda is an example of how the wine sector can become a driver of social and cultural change for an entire region. In 1989, we decided to open our first restaurant inside the winery, a step that marked the beginning of a journey that today includes four restaurants, three hotels, a conference center, and an outdoor bar that offers bar service and aperitifs seven days a week throughout the summer. **With the acquisition by Oscar Farinetti in 2008, our vision changed further.**

Oscar declared that “This gate must always remain open,” with the intention of making Fontanafredda not just a place of production, but a public landmark, accessible to anyone, even just to enjoy the landscape. Our doors have always been open to everyone. On Sundays, in fact, we see families stopping for picnics by the lake, walking in the woods, without anyone asking them who they are or why they are there.

Our philosophy is that anyone can enter and enjoy the experience, without the pressure of having to buy something or participate in a guided tour. Our strategy is to break down barriers and ensure that wine comes naturally, without being forced. Furthermore, we offer a wide range of cultural activities through the Mirafiore Foundation.

Every weekend, we host cultural events ranging from book presentations to meetings with personalities from the world of culture, art, music, and journalism. These events are free and attract an average of 400 to 500 people every weekend. Most of these people do not come to the winery with the intention of doing a tasting or a tour, but are engaged by a cultural experience that inevitably leads them to connect with our

wine. In total, we welcome 85,000 paying visitors each year, but what interests us is not just the number, but the quality of the experience we offer.

It is not just about selling a bottle of wine, but about building a complete experience where the winery becomes a place for meeting, exchange, and cultural growth. Our vision of hospitality was built over time, and today, twenty years after that first step, the Langhe has become one of the most sought-after and appreciated food and wine destinations in the world, precisely thanks to a level of hospitality that has been able to integrate wine with food, culture, and the landscape in a unique and unrepeatable way.

Key points

- **Diversifying export markets** is crucial for economic resilience.
- **Simplifying communication is key** to promoting Italy's biodiversity.
- **Hospitality transforms a winery into a public cultural destination.**
- **An “always open” philosophy** fosters genuine community connection.
- **Long-term investment is vital** for a successful wine tourism model.