The solitude of optimism

scritto da Fabio Piccoli | 21 Agosto 2024



More and more often in recent months, I feel like that character in the joke who's driving the wrong way on the highway and hears on the radio: "A madman is driving the wrong way on the highway," and he thinks to himself… "One? There must be thousands!"

A humorous way to highlight how I feel alone, isolated in my **optimism**, in believing that the wine sector, despite the complexities of the moment, still has plenty of room for development, plenty of new opportunities.

I've realized that rattling off numbers doesn't help because these days, they don't even serve to reassure the many wine entrepreneurs and managers who are dealing with problems and fears they've never experienced in their professional lives.

I listen to them, I understand them, just as I listen to and

understand many in the trade who explain to me how **wine sales** aren’t moving like they used to.

“Fabio, an era has ended,” this is the phrase that briefly sums up the mood of many operators I meet and listen to daily.

So how can I still be optimistic?

I’d need a book to explain it, but I’ll try to be concise.

The first reason for my optimism is that when I ask those who are scared about the situation what worries them the most, only a few can give me a precise answer. The majority rely on feelings but don’t have a shred of accurate data to provide.

The other day, regarding this, I was talking to a producer from Emilia-Romagna who was telling me that he lost 20% of his export to the USA in the first six months of the year.

I asked him where he was exporting to in the USA, and he replied: “I only have one importer in the USA, for the State of New York. For ten years, they guaranteed me a couple of pallets a year, but this year, for the first time, they significantly reduced their imports.” Certainly, an important loss, but if we reflect, after ten years, it’s possible to see a reduction in your export if it’s limited to a single state in the USA, and moreover, the most crowded one in the largest market in the world.

I understand the objections: it’s just a small example that doesn’t count. But it absolutely does count because there are many wine businesses in our country that don’t have a serious organization for their export; let’s not kid ourselves. For a long time, their “disorganization” was enough to keep things afloat, but unfortunately, not anymore.

This shouldn’t be discouraging but should help us understand that our strength, the **competitiveness** of a business, is linked not only to market dynamics but, I’d say, much more to

its own structure, its ability to manage sales, to have a strong and recognizable **brand**.

This applies to everyone, even to **Wine Meridian**, which is a player in this complex wine chain that grows only if it’s able to have **credibility**, **authority**, the right people in the right place, the appropriate services.

And since I’m talking about us, I’ll also point out that every day I notice new opportunities that, often with regret, we fail to seize because we’re not ready, we don’t have an adequate structure for everything.

Certainly, this can generate regret, but at the same time, it means that opportunities in the market are constantly being generated, oh yes, but you need the tools to know how to seize them.

I love football, so I’ll use football metaphors: how many of the Italian wine companies that are struggling today are like those teams that score little despite having dozens of scoring opportunities in every match? Very few, in my opinion, because the real problem is that many, too many businesses don’t “get in front of the goal,” they stop well before entering the penalty area. And when you don’t create scoring opportunities, it becomes impossible to win any match, even against weak opponents.

So what does it mean to “enter the area” for a wine business? It means, first and foremost, having a **visible brand**. And forgive me, but I feel like crying when I hear the objection today: “But we don’t have the resources to invest in communication and marketing.” But why? Have you ever invested in communication and marketing? Never. So what are we talking about then? Sure, it’s true, for many years it was possible to have a decent market presence even while being invisible, but today this is no longer possible.

Is this bad news? Maybe, but for many economic sectors, it’s

been known for decades.

So we've also been fortunate in the wine world because for a long time we were able to stay afloat without even being forced to announce our existence.

Using more football metaphors, many companies don't have a "decent" striker to score goals. They say they want a salesperson, but then they're not willing to pay them, to put them in the conditions to score.

It's equally true that in the meantime, **wine salespeople** are becoming like Bengal tigers, seemingly on the verge of total extinction. This is indeed a dramatic emergency, but who is to blame for the extinction of sales figures in the wine world?

There are many reasons, but I believe there are two main macro responsibilities: one is represented by that sea of businesses and entrepreneurs who have always sown the (wrong) idea that good wine sells itself and therefore there was no need to employ and pay a salesperson; the second is attributable to the complete absence of the subject of "sales" (the real one, not the theoretical one) in all the training paths of our schools, universities, master's programs, etc., etc.

Sales, perhaps still due to a **Catholic-Communist** legacy, are seen as Satan by many of those approaching the wine world.

I receive dozens of emails a week from those who want to work in the wine world, but the leitmotif is always the same: "I'm willing to do anything except sell."

But how can one not be optimistic if, despite all this, our sector is still standing? If we didn't need to communicate and have salespeople until recently, we should be grateful to life.

Today things have changed, let's acknowledge that, but let's not make a drama out of it; we still have time to recover, the

meteor isn’t that close to earth, don’t worry.