



SO THESE three Europeans, an Italian, a Frenchman and a Dutchman, go into business together making wine. It sounds like the continental beginning of a once-funny joke franchise that will, inevitably, turn into a mountain of stereotypes.

However, this triumvirate calling themselves The Wine People have a focused and serious plan to establish a credible branded presence in the European and US markets by delivering market-specific Italian wines, using native grapes and covering major regions from Sicily to Veneto.

Furthermore, in the process of giving value and quality to the consumer, it is hoped that some value will be given back to the growers involved in the supply of grapes, fuelling a cycle of ever-improving quality within the Italian grape-growing system.

This sounds like an awful lot to achieve, still less to hope for, but Stefano Girelli, managing director of The Wine People, former head of Casa Girelli – and the Italian of the three – is convinced that it is not only the best way of going about doing business, but really the only way.

He believes that with the overall quality of wine on the up and consumers becoming ever more educated on what is available to them, they are getting better and better value for their money.

However, as Girelli points out, “this is not good for growers”. Indeed, the drive to deliver value and quality is taking its toll on growers due to unprofitable and ultimately unsustainable profit margins. Indeed, in some Italian regions it has become so bad that reports have surfaced of growers who cannot harvest a substantial part of their crop. It’s less expensive to let the grapes rot than hire help to pick them and get a risible price per kilo.

Faced with this situation and thinking about starting a new project, Girelli recalls asking himself: “How can I make a difference? And I decided to bring back to production what the market wants.”

SQUARING the circle

Stefano Girelli’s new venture has an ambitious aim: satisfy the consumer while rewarding growers.
He spoke to **Rupert Millar**

So, with Frenchman Philippe Marx and Dutchman Peter Kosten, he set up The Wine People, a group "with an intimate knowledge of the market and aware of its needs". Girelli is convinced that a wine business must be market-oriented and capable of following trends closely, from red to white or oak to no oak. "Bringing the market to production and production to the market," as Girelli calls it.

Not that he intends to sit back and then catch up with the trend once it's washed over him. Rather, he will be proactive, constantly pre-empting the coming change and putting in place the measures deemed necessary to meet it; whether it be exchanging one variety that suits oak for one that needs less, or putting in orders with his growers for a greater proportion of white grapes from the next crop.

The second side to the business aims to provide some sort of return to the growers. One way of doing this has been to centralise logistics. Girelli reports that they have cut out a great deal of middlemen and extra costs by concentrating their operations in one place. It's a similar story when it comes to bottling. Wherever possible, the bottling is centralised because Girelli believes that, unless one is accredited, "it's not worth it". Simply put, bottling on site is "not added value any more".

How, though, will all these things come

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to pass? Alongside what Girelli considers decent propositions for both ends of the spectrum – consumer and grower – will be the wines themselves. Wine is so commonplace now that "good value means you have to over-deliver. Consumers are careful about how they spend", says Girelli.

His native Italy, with its plethora of indigenous varieties, "has grapes to satisfy all potential trends and the future in Italy is for indigenous varieties. There is no need for an Italian Chardonnay". Not that international varieties are out completely, because that would defeat the object of catering to all tastes.

But, by being uniquely Italian and with different flavour profiles, native varieties offer a point of difference and can help build the reputation and perception of a reliable Italian brand. And the brand, if you're looking to build one, has to be the first thing. Gallo, whatever one's opinions, says everything with its name and sells whatever it wants, wherever it wants, on the back of that.

But although Girelli is after success, he knows that to achieve what he wants, especially in giving back to producers, he can't be driven solely by a desire to be competitive.

He states: "To be competitive you have no margins, you need deep pockets." Something he doesn't have. Therefore, he is both unafraid and keen to work in the £5-6 and £10+ brackets, believing that his wines "over-deliver" in that sphere. It's a tricky part of the market, neither fish nor fowl, without the entry-level or premium tags that consumers often cling to, but Girelli is confident that as a result it's the perfect place because "there is still space to expand in the UK".

He is also a particular fan of organic and, at the very least, sustainable viticulture, because he says it "delivers better quality, which ultimately is what we want – good wine".

The producers The Wine People work with have all been carefully selected because of their "dedication to quality and passion for winemaking", and Girelli has also called upon the services of an old friend,

winemaker Andrea Valentinuzzi, to help with the production process.

It should be noted that Girelli is not interested in producing mass-market, "international" wines when he talks of bringing market demands to winemaking. Rather he has found producers he knows and trusts with

a broad range of varieties both native and international. Then, according to market tastes, he and Valentinuzzi can pick the right varieties that will suit the vinification that, in turn, matches their intended market.

So far there are 25 different products in the range and, since launching in June 2009, 16 countries now import the wines.

Girelli finally points out that Italy has a history of being very successful in bringing products to market. Pinot Grigio is one of the latest, although Girelli laments that it has become "almost a cash cow, a commodity". To him it has become too product-oriented with not enough of an eye on the market and where it could go next.

Prosecco is operating in a better way, he believes. It has, in his view, a tighter rein on its marketing, distribution and production, which could do it a lot of good in the long run with image and pricing, and encourages better results from its growers, keeping quality up.

Overall, it's a bold business plan with a great many merits in what it seeks to achieve. How far it can really go in upping the game of producers to produce better grapes and get in on the act by becoming part of the brand remains to be seen; but Girelli is effortlessly confident about the potential of the brand and what is being achieved already. He and his team sound dynamic, energetic and are part of a streamlined operation. Girelli estimates that there are about eight people involved in the business in total. And while the plan may sound a little crusading, it is straightforward and unflinching in its focus. The successes to date in distributing the wines will hopefully be the precursor for even more. *db*