



DALLA CIA

Legend in the making

From distiller to qualified winemaker and back again; from Italy to South Africa; from pioneer to patriarch... Giorgio Dalla Cia talks about his journey (so far)

Your family had a grappa distillery in Friuli, Italy. Why did you decide to go into wine?

Our distillery was our home, our living, our thinking, our EVERYTHING since 1923! However, as a youngster, I spent two summers in Cap d'Antibes on the French Riviera to improve my French and to show off with my girlfriends at good restaurants. I didn't know much about French wine, coming from Friuli, and the only way to know if I was getting the best wine was by ordering only the wines listed with 4 or 5 stars. I was surprised and impressed, and to this day I adore French wines because of their quality and their tradition.

When I went to oenology school, all the books for winemaking were Italian with Italian technology, whereas the Bordeaux University books showed a completely different approach. When I finished all my studies, I almost had this double personality, one Italian and one French! I also had this double life: as a winemaker looking at how to make a better grappa, and as a distiller looking at how to make a better wine.

I only managed to get 100% into wine after I moved to South Africa, because in Italy I was looking after the distillery seven days a week, nine months a year. The moment I moved away from there and switched to winemaking, I started to rediscover myself.

What was it like for you, as a young man, coming to South Africa?

I had really thought that South Africa was similar to Algeria in North Africa, so I was surprised that there was no desert! In those days Stellenbosch was this little *dorpie*, almost a little heaven, so beautiful with mountains, forests and vineyards. It was incredible.

How did your wife, Simonetta, feel about it?

She didn't think twice, even though she was the only daughter of a single mother, being left behind, and we already had two little kids, with George arriving right on time in Stellenbosch. Without Simonetta, I wouldn't have achieved anything. We grew up together, we studied together and then eventually we fell in love and she is still my best friend.

What were the biggest challenges in those early days?

We couldn't get a decent olive oil, we couldn't get spaghetti, we couldn't even get prosciutto as the political situation of SA meant all imports were cut off. It was rather depressing.

Also, most of the people we met were Afrikaans-speaking – their English was worse than mine! Fortunately one of our neighbours had spent some time in Tuscany as a student and was very fluent in Italian. She became immediately the best friend of Simonetta. Meanwhile, when the Afrikaners invited us to their barbeques, I soon discovered that after four or five bottles of wine, everybody was speaking half Italian, half English, half Afrikaans and there was no problem communicating.

What was your first impression of South African wine?

The Cabernet Sauvignon and some of the white wines were very impressive – a little raw but with great potential! I recognised that with this quality, one could improve on the technology and make a better wine.



DALLA CIA

In those days, Stellenbosch University and Elsenburg College were very involved with Geisenheim University in Germany – they looked at the Germans almost as their gods! For this reason they applied the German idea of fermentation for white wines (i.e. as cool as possible in order to retain the aromas) to their red wines when actually if you don't ferment red wines warm enough, you cannot extract colour, you cannot extract tannin, you cannot make a good red wine.

Which brings us to Meerlust...

When I arrived at Meerlust in 1978, Nico Myburgh had this fantastic vision: to break away from the mentality of the farmer producers who were selling in bulk to the co-op. His dream was to go on his own and make a great wine, and he followed that dream and I followed with him.

For starters, he told me he wanted to emulate the Bordeaux blend. For me it was natural because in Friuli we'd had Cabernet Franc and Merlot for over 100 years, so I grew up with these grapes and knew how to handle them. That's where the whole great Rubicon vision started.

In the following years we made some experiments, using all the great Chateaux as a reference. The first idea was blending a third of each component, but the final decision was to blend 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot and 10% Cabernet Franc. The idea was basically not to destroy the aroma and characteristic of Cabernet Sauvignon but to add some complexity: that is the secret of the Bordeaux-style blend.

In what other ways was Nico ahead of his time?

He gave me carte blanche to use as many French barrels as I needed. Small barrels were accessible because SA was importing a lot of barrels for brandy, but a lot of wine producers in those days were scared of using them because they were expensive. My aim was to follow the French tradition and invest in quality wood.

Another thing was that Nico had already planted Pinot Noir at Meerlust – and he had a few hundred bottles of top Burgundy for tasting and drinking! After a couple of experimental vintages, our first commercial release was the 1981, although we got very little recognition for it in SA because people in SA didn't even know what Pinot Noir was supposed to look like. I remember the agricultural department rejecting mine because it was too brown and too light in colour with a "funny smell". Thank God, the same wine was nominated by *Decanter* magazine as being much better than a Burgundy from the same vintage – I had to use that magazine to show the agricultural department that they had been completely wrong.

At Meerlust, I also inherited Chardonnay when everybody else was going for Sauvignon Blanc, and the interesting thing is that Nico basically allowed me to experiment for seven years before going into full production. Every year the technology improved here, improved there, and that gave me the most fantastic opportunity to go to Burgundy regularly, not only to taste Pinot Noir but also to drink the best possible Chardonnays. Thank God Nico had this kind of vision, because eventually we got results – not only big prizes here but also big international recognition in Paris and London.

It sounds as though Nico and you made a great team – Nico the visionary; you the oenologist, perfectionist and philosopher?

Great things were happening, yes, it was very satisfying. I was always tasting and drinking great French wines, and I bought as many French books as possible, trying to compare my philosophy to their philosophy, and to adapt what was good there to be good here.

My own idea, which Nico understood very well, was not to produce too many wines, just as the great French Chateaux only have three or four, otherwise you cannot concentrate and you cannot make a good wine. So we pulled out the Pinotage, we pulled out the Shiraz...



DALLA CIA

And the decision to go back to your roots and produce grappa?

I saw all these beautiful skins being thrown back in the vineyards and I told Nico, you know, we could make such a great grappa, and then of course he said, 'Why don't we make it instead of brandy, which everyone makes?' So we planned and schemed for 10 years, waiting for it to become legal to produce grappa. When that happened, Hannes was in charge and he followed our dream, Nico's dream, my dream – and now of course also my youngest son George's dream.

So once again you have a family business!

Yes, I had the most fantastic opportunity to produce grappa on a smaller scale, to follow again our family tradition, and George was prepared to follow me on this journey when he was just 19.

George has learned a lot from me. Even when he was just a little boy and I was working long hours in the winery, especially on a Saturday and Sunday, he was always there helping me, switching on and off the pumps, asking questions, etc. In a way he was shadowing me, which has always been my family tradition, to literally grow up in the family business. When the time came in 1996, he did not hesitate to follow me in the new grappa venture.

Today, I'm proud to call him my associate and companion. We share ideas and resolve challenges together – and, over and above the technical side, I have been able to mould him into a gentleman. This, as a father, is one of the best things that can happen to you.

My 42-year experience of living in South Africa... For me, it's still almost like a dream, but so far I couldn't dream of anything better!

For more information visit: <http://dallacia.com/Heritage/The-Living-Legend-Award.aspx>

Contact Us

DALLA CIA

7A Lower Dorp Street

Bosman's Crossing

Stellenbosch

Western Cape, South Africa

+27 (0)21 888 4120

info@dallacia.com