

AZIENDA AGRICOLA **Gravner**

The quest for essence as a way of life

I am sitting at winemaker Joško Gravner's living room table in Oslavia, Friuli Venezia Giulia. He is seated at the head of the table to my left. Opposite me are the other characters of my story: Mateja, Joško's daughter, and Gregor, Mateja's son. Holding a glass in my hands, I have just drunk their Ribolla Gialla, made with Oslavia's native vine par excellence. Thoughts and images simmer within me and my mind's eye takes me back to my visits to Oslavia, to the village of Lenzuolo Bianco. It is strange how this name, which derives from considerable war efforts in this tormented land, could be interpreted as premonitory since Joško has written on a blank sheet several times, only to start over. He often says "I was wrong, I hadn't understood" and that awareness led him to metamorphoses, even when the world demanded those wines that no longer corresponded to his new vision

Joško comes from the land, his ancestors were farmers and winegrowers: if that is the place where you grew up, you can move away, but your origins, if you know how to listen to them, will bring you back to the fold. Grandfather Franc was already producing wine in 1901 on his two hectares; father Jozef knew the traditions and how to tell the difference between a piece of land suitable for vines ("you have to see it in winter when it's bare", he told Joško), from one suitable for planting fruit trees. And if it rained? As soon as it stopped, he would go into the vineyard to tidy up with his hoe; he had grown up with the land and knew exactly what it needed.

After three years of vocational school, at the age of seventeen, Joško started working full-time in the fa-



mily business, which in those days, also included fruit trees, livestock and more besides. But what Joško really wanted was to devote himself exclusively to viticulture. His father cautioned him: "not too much but good, and hope it all goes well. Wine is always ready to trick you." It was the 1970s and Joško introduced steel into the cellar. A few years later, he began with barriques.

In 1982, Luigi Veronelli, Italy's first and most important wine and food critic, went to visit Joško Gravner, of Slovenian origin, born in a borderland, but really a

citizen of the world. It was the start of a good relationship: the Oslavian visited the Bergamo-born critic on other occasions and it was during one of those meetings that he heard about Georgia and was impressed. Veronelli fought for local native grape varieties. Joško took everything in, like the famous phrase "A farmer's worst wine is better than the best that industry can produce." It would take him time to metabolise.

Those who are a little acquainted with this honest and revolutionary man, know that some of his absolute stances derive from subversive but meditated actions, and that in his silences, in his way of observing reality, in his incessant research, there is also a great deal of intuition, an ability to always question himself, even if he does not let it show, because his is an inner world, the refuge of an ancestral heritage that enables him to feel and see what few others can. There are several milestones in his life: 1987, the year of his trip to California, which had such an effect that, on his return, he abandoned the path he had taken up to that point. Yet his wines were successful and in such demand that they soon ran out, and Joško had become a recognised and respected winemaker in Italy and abroad. In Napa Valley, he saw the circus of industry, fashion, fiction and how the land was being poisoned. And on his return, it was precisely on the land that he focused his thoughts. He realised that fertilisation impoverished the earth and made it barren, depriving it of the micro-organisms that kept it alive. He began to plant trees.

"Trees are fundamental. They improve and enrich the soil." In the winery, he went back to the typical big barrels of tradition, he stopped filtering and no longer clarified.





He retraced his steps because the path he had taken would have led him away from the essence. He made a fresh start.

Another key episode: in 1996 two hailstorms, one from the north and the other from the south, destroyed around 95% of the harvest. And while Joško was cursing, his wise uncle Franz told him: "Nature gives you everything, every now and then it takes it back." Joško understood that he had a business without a roof and that he must be prepared to accept it without intervention. "We are the ones who have to adapt to nature and not the other way around, that's our job." His never tame and experimental nature led him, for the first time, to try to macerate the skins, both with indigenous and selected yeasts, with and without sulphites and sulphur. He chose indigenous yeasts, sulphur and sulphites, the latter being considered necessary in minimal quantities. He embarked upon yet another path.

The following vintage, 1997, marked a turning point: he started macerating the skins for his white wines. But it was also an important year for another reason: a German friend working in Georgia gave him his first amphora. Joško began to experiment: "My heart kept skipping beats. During fermentation I could feel the life in that amphora. The grapes had come from the earth and returned to the earth, enclosed and protected in the darkness of the earthenware." A perfect cycle. Amphoras have been around for five thousand years and were the first containers for wine. In Joško's mind it meant "going back to the source, to clean water", to the beginning of everything, to the origin of wine, to the oldest model.

In 2000, he left for Georgia. He wanted to see and understand if he was on the right path. The farmers were very poor and the language difference made it hard to understand each other, but Joško observed, in silence. He tasted the wine, he liked it. Joško was certain that this was the best way for him to make wine too.

He visited a monastery in Tbilisi where he was offered wine in a cup. He was so struck by this gesture of sharing that he would later create his own stemless Gravner glasses from which to drink his wine.

He searched for craftsmen to supply him with amphoras (kvevris in Georgian) and then bury them in the classic manner of the Kakheti area of Georgia. A painstaking task as it appeared that nobody made them any more, especially considering that an amphora can last up to 500 years. In this respect, Joško contributed to reviving a dying craft and in 2001, the

first amphoras finally arrived in Oslavia.

2003 was the year in which all his white wines went into amphoras (the reds from 2006). A revolution that was initially unfathomable and even those critics who usually praised him were scathing in their comments. He took no notice and continued along his path.

His courageous rejection of classical winemaking had an enormous influence not only in Italy but throughout the world. Joško would never admit to this, for him it has simply been his own journey among ideas, certainties, failures and new beginnings. He was actually the first non-Georgian winemaker in the world to adopt the kvevri vinification method and among the first to introduce the world to amber wines (as Joško likes to call them instead of orange), macerated on the skins. And the newly found success of his wines has been imitated and pursued by many others. "Amphoras intensify the characteristics of the grape, especially the defects. You cannot improvise, you cannot bluff. The grapes must be perfect, that's why we do so much work in the vineyard, we have to look after them constantly."

The amphora room is a mystical place. Built beneath the house, it is like descending even further into the bowels of the earth. Silence, round eyes scattered over the cobbles, stone, wood, semi-darkness. A simple wooden chair on a raised block. A strange reversal of reality: underground life where skins and must boil inside the amphoras. Above, emptiness. No technology, no special effects.

I saw Miha, Joško's son, who died at the age of twenty-seven in a motorbike accident in 2009, there for the first time. He was in the process of fulling the wine and greeted me with a determined smile. I look into Joško's eyes now and I can still see that emptiness, that absence that can never be refilled. I can sense his eternal pain and know that serenity is still a very long way off. A tragedy that bent him but did not break him. Joško has had a hard life, but he has never lost that gentle smile, respectful demeanour and manner that comes from real nobility of spirit. Joško is truly an upstanding man, consistent with himself to the core. No tricks, no deception, and in the world of wine, people like that are few and far between. Personal ethics and work ethics are one and the same.

Joško goes on experimenting, step by step, undeterred. In 2014, he bottled his 2007 vintage, deciding to let the wine in that vintage spend a good seven years maturing (one in amphora and six in large barrels). Such lengthy ageing greatly increases the risk of

something going wrong: once again, the answer lies in the vineyard and grape selection and processing must be meticulous.

Seven is a "magical" companion for Joško, a number that has come knocking at his door more than once. It is no coincidence that the 2007 vintage was chosen for a change of pace. The biological regeneration of the human being occurs in cycles of 7 years, might it not be the same for wine? Who knows! The fact remains that, according to the ancients, 7 was the number par excellence of the mystical quest because it represented every form of discovery and new knowledge. Seven are the notes for composing a melody and producing wines in amphoras is like amplifying music: if there are flaws, the sound will grind and become irritating. Conversely, by respecting the earth and its fruit, the melody of gestation will be sublime. We are in the Runk vineyard in Oslavia, about eight hectares. With the vineyards of Hum and Dredno in Slovenia, there are a total 18 hectares under vine, of which 15 are currently productive (2.7 hectares were planted in 2021) out of a total of 32 hectares of land producing approximately twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand bottles. It was here that Joško first incorporated a pond into the landscape, which was later reproduced in the other vineyards. "Life comes from water, it is a lure for plants, animals and insects that come back to populate the vineyard." Joško smiles, thinking of how his mongrel dog Pepe (who follows him everywhere, together with the young and lively Arco, a grey hunting dog with eyes of ice) loves to dive in and play among the water lilies and mosquito fish.

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