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ON THE SLOPES OF A VOLCANO

Mount Etna might not seem the most conducive place to grow fine wine, but Tom Hyland meets a passionate perfectionist there who proves that it can have pretty spectacular results

Frunk Cornelissen may just be the most driven, ardent, zealous, perfection-oriented winemaker in the world. Then again, he may not be, since there might be some individual hiding out in some remote hillside enclave. But until that mystery man emerges, Cornelissen has a strong grasp on the title.

Now don't get me wrong. The 50-year-old Cornelissen is not some sort of mad genius making wines that stand out for their eccentricities. Rather, as he has proven over the past decade, he is one of the world's most brilliant vintners. Working with indigenous varieties on Etna, he is one of only a handful of producers that have awakened the world to the amazing viticultural potential of this small zone in Sicily; in the process, he has crafted offerings that are among the most sought-after cult wines in Italy. Oh, and one other thing: He's about as nice and outgoing a person as you'll find in the wine industry.

Like many vintners, Cornelissen, a native of Belgium, experienced premium wines at a relatively early age. "I grew up in a family that ate well every Sunday," he recalls. "There was a choice of bottles to accompany this dish or another. I owe this to my parents, but after this, it was my own choice to produce wine."

Cornelissen loved French wines, but since he knew little about Italian wines in his youth, he began to accompany his family on trips to Italy, eventually falling in love with the wines of Piedmont. Soon after discovering a few favorites, he began importing these products into Belgium and, by necessity, would return to Italy three times a year to learn all he could about this diverse wine industry. When he tasted an Etna wine he represented, he realized he knew little about this area, so he would revisit as often as he could. He soon decided he wanted to try his hand at winemaking, so he took up his "hobby/activity," as he called it, producing fewer than 1,000 bottles from his first vintage in 2001. "I learned while working," he reveals.



All photography courtesy of Frank Cornelissen

Snow-capped mountains serve as a reminder that the higher slopes of Mount Etna can be cold, though as a former alpine climber, Frank Cornelissen is undeterred

Volcanic vintner

Because of Cornelissen's fondness for the local wines, it was always likely that he would choose Etna as his base. He was an alpine mountain climber from the age of 18 until he was 35, so the extreme characteristics of the Etna landscape—with vineyards created from lava flow—must certainly have appealed to him. "The reason I'm here," he calmly explains, "is that I suffered enough in a period when I was an alpine climber, so I know what it is like to sit out with zero equipment, in cold of -20° Celsius [-4° F], in a blizzard, stuck on the ledge of a mountain. So that makes this easier."

This, for Cornelissen, means managing 11ha (27 acres) of vines, between 650m and 1,000m (2,100–3,280ft) above sea level on the north side of Mount Etna. One of the

vineyards, Monte Colla, is so steep that Cornelissen refers to it as the "Hermitage of Etna." At this site, planted in 1946, he works with several white varieties, including Carricante, Grecanico Dorato, and Coda di Volpe, which are used for his white wine MunJebel Bianco. (Munjebel is an old name for Mount Etna.) Red varieties from this vineyard include the indigenous Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio used in two of his red wines, Contadino and MunJebel Rosso.

The most important site Cornelissen farms is called Barbabecchi, an ungrafted centenarian vineyard. The soil here is pure lava rock, and the vines are in the classic *alberello* system, where the free-standing plants reach only a few feet above the ground. This site is given over mostly to Nerello Mascalese, which is used for his signature red,

Magma. Yields are minuscule at a few hundred grams (less than one pound) per vine, as you might expect from hard pruning to two or three stems per vine and small bunches. This lends exceptional quality to the fruit. In fact, he took cuttings from this vineyard and planted them ungrafted at a new nearby site in 2003.

The philosophy: maximum territorial expression

How Cornelissen farms these vineyards and crafts the wines has everything to do with his philosophy of making wines that are as natural as possible; thus, he does not add sulfites to the wines. "From the start, I had a clear view and idea of producing wines with the maximum territorial expression and, therefore, without any products added."



Cornelissen meticulously tending his old, *alberello* vines on Etna's steep terraces, where low yields are achieved by severe pruning and occasional crop-thinning

One might think that a wine without added sulfites might not be stable; Cornelissen politely explains his rationale. "Well, wines are never stable. My wines are not meant to be stable. My wines should grow. Stable wine is what a winery that produces more than half a million bottles makes; otherwise, it has too great a risk of recall. They have to sell to department stores and bigger shops. Now we're up to 18,000, [maybe even] 22,000 to 25,000 bottles, sold throughout the world, with the right people. I can't complain.

"I'm not searching for stability; I'm searching for profoundness. I don't want the wines to be totally off, but I want my wines to evolve. If I'm looking for stable wines, they won't evolve—they will be born dead. I don't want to abort my wines. I want them to have a life, and the end depends on the individual wine. I'm not looking for that perfect German-engineered stability. It doesn't make any sense to me."

Keeping with his belief in purity, Cornelissen uses very particular equipment to craft his wines. Most notable are the high-density polyethylene tanks, used for decanting after the grapes have been pressed, along with amphorae for the maturation of MunJebel and Magma Rosso. There are no stainless-steel tanks or oak casks in his cellar. He opts for polyethylene tanks because, in his words, "they are great for decanting, since they have a warm feel, not cold like steel, so they do not create reduction of the wine, are perfectly cleanable, and do not exchange oxygen." Similarly, he points out that with amphorae, "since they are baked at 900–980°C [1,650–1,795°F], they are inert, both mechanically

and chemically, and thus do not exchange any tastes." To fight the heat of the Sicilian summer, he buries these amphorae in the cellar floor.

The wines: Contadino, MunJebel, and Magma

Tasting through the Cornelissen wines—all currently labeled as *Vino da Tavola* with both vintage and edition number indicated—gives one a sense of the meticulous work performed by the vintner. The MunJebel Bianco has a bright amber-gold/orange color, the result of anything from four to ten weeks on the skins. "Everybody knows that the skins contain all the flavor, so I don't want to take them off," he notes. "So, no, my white wine does not taste like a standard white wine." There is a slight cloudiness in the appearance, because the wine is not filtered. This information is listed on the bottle, along with a comment that the wine will throw a slight deposit.

The wine displays a complex series of aromas such as apricot, golden raisins, and orange zest, as well as notes of heather and even a light smokiness. Medium-full and offering marvelous texture, the MunJebel Bianco 7 (with grapes from the 2010 vintage) has excellent persistence, lively acidity, and the structure to improve for up to ten years.

The basic red, Contadino—meaning "country or peasant farmer"—is, appropriately, a field blend of several varieties, including white (Minella and Inzolia) and red (Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio, Sangiovese, Uva Francesca, etc); of this last variety, Cornelissen laughingly says, "Nobody really knows what the hell this is supposed to be."

Medium-bodied, this has a Grenache-like quality, with its red-cherry-and-nutmeg flavors, and a delicately spicy finish with moderate tannins. Ready for consumption over the next three to five years, Contadino 8 (the eighth offering of this wine, with grapes from the 2010 vintage) is a beautiful introduction to the finesse and complexity that define all of Cornelissen's wines.

The MunJebel Rosso (current release MunJebel 7, with grapes from 2009 and 2010) is an impressive wine; the perfumes of this 100 percent Nerello Mascalese are more intense than those of the Contadino and offer up a wider array of aromas—from rhubarb, to currant, to tobacco seed. Medium-full, with excellent persistence and very good acidity, this wine has a profile that shifts from Rhône-like to more Burgundian, especially in its texture, and a graceful finish with its polished tannins. Yet thanks to the uniqueness of Nerello Mascalese, the wine has an Etna character, with strong spicy notes of oregano, cinnamon, and paprika. Look for this wine to peak in another seven to ten years, though it will most assuredly drink well for a few more years after that.

Cornelissen's most remarkable wine so far has been his Magma, a 100 percent Nerello Mascalese from his beloved Barbabecchi vineyard; the wine is produced only in the finest growing seasons. The current offering, Magma 8VA (VA meaning *Vigne Alte*, the grapes from 2009), has a deep garnet tint with a slight cloudiness. The aromas are quite complex—this is a wine that definitely needs to be decanted, since the perfumes change dramatically over the course of 30 minutes, moving from Bing cherry, marmalade, and fig, to Asian spice, clove, and tar. The fruit is bright, ripe, and delicious, and the finish is quite long, with silky tannins. The acidity here is more focused, more tart than in the other reds, and the mid-palate is more defined and pronounced. Notes of bacon and coriander sneak up on you in the finish; overall, the wine has marvelous complexity, all the time coming across as an offering of great finesse and broad texture, much like a grand cru Burgundy, but again with the distinctive spice and sensuality of the Nerello Mascalese variety. This particular bottling should evolve and drink beautifully for 15–20 years, conservatively speaking. Summing up his insights about Magma, Cornelissen remarks, "I find myself and the territory in that wine, and I always try to reflect it, hopefully in a cool vintage." (No Magma will be produced from the 2010 vintage, since Cornelissen believes that "while the vineyard character is there, I am missing an element of density for a great wine.")

Small yields, cluster-thinning, and cutting the bottom off some of the bunches mean that Cornelissen has only a small amount of fruit to work with for his wines; for the Magma 8VA, that total was only 1,433lb (650kg) of grapes from 5,400 vines. From this, he ultimately had the potential to produce 800 bottles, but after tasting the wine, he decided that some of the product in the smaller amphorae was not up to his quality standard, so he declassified a total of 300 bottles and used that wine in the MunJebel Rosso offering. As a result, Cornelissen produced fewer than 500 bottles of

Magma 8VA—430 standard 75cl bottles and 30 magnums. Given this minute amount of wine, it is easy to understand the price of this wine, roughly on a par with a few of the finest Barolo crus.

Moving back from the edge

Having started as an Etna newcomer, Cornelissen is now a veteran after ten demanding years there. Experience has been a significant reason for the improvement of his wines, but he admits that a change in his own outlook has also helped him reach new levels of quality. "I'm a much more tranquil person now than I used to be five years ago, when everything was on the cutting edge, if not one note beyond. I'd say I'm now about 2mm within the cutting edge, which is still close to the cutting edge. I used to be 1mm beyond it, but now I'm within the edge. I've moved 3mm, which is a lot!"

While Cornelissen has performed brilliantly in many areas, he realizes that he needs to continue learning about the entire process if he is to improve his winemaking skills. "The timing of bottling is critical—it's got everything to do with the taste of the wine. The understanding of how your tannins are involved—that's something that, chemically, has been difficult to master so far. Also, you have to understand the mineral compound of your wine, since this is a very important factor for the longevity of the wine."

No way back

Always looking for the ultimate expression in Etna terroir, Cornelissen is constantly producing new wines, often variations on a theme. Two new bottlings of MunJebel Rosso (one from the Monte Colla vineyard, the other from higher-altitude plantings) have just been introduced, and he plans one day to produce a Magma Bianco; since he only started planting vines for this wine in 2005, however, he does not know whether "you will taste it with my children or me."

Summing up his first decade on Etna, Cornelissen believes there are several reasons for his success, as well as for scholarly attention from others. "It's a combination, I think. I've been here in this place through intuition, through knowledge, through my wine bottles having traveled the world. Usually what I do when I make a decision is, I don't have a reverse. For me personally, there is no way back. I only know ahead." ■

CONTACT INFORMATION & PRICES FOR RECENT VINTAGES

/// Contadino /// MunJebel Rosso
/// MunJebel Bianco /// Magma

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