

Life Lessons with Benjamin Franchetti of Tenuta di Trinoro

The son and heir of Andrea Franchetti on the art and science in winemaking, preserving his father's iconic Super Tuscan and fond memories of Rome



That every man comes to resemble his father is a truism; often the most fascinating people are the ones who take a long and winding route to fulfilling that destiny. That seems to be the case with Andrea and Benjamin Franchetti. In the early 1990s, the elder – Andrea – famously, and against all advice, planted Bordeaux varieties in southern Tuscany, in a scrubby corner of Val d’Orcia that had never been planted before because the heavy clay soils, high rainfall and intense summer heat made it highly unsuitable for vines. Tenuta di Trinoro, as he called his estate, is now one of the feted wines of Tuscany. ‘Andrea knew instinctively that Trinoro would be a fabulous site both in its geographical positioning and in its soil, which is rich in marine deposits and, under his stewardship, so it has proved,’ the fine wine merchant Corney & Barrow says.

Franchetti died at the age of 72 in 2021, leaving his son Benjamin, who has a PhD in engineering and who set up Agricola Moderna, one of the world’s leading agricultural engineering specialists, to carry the torch. He now runs both companies – they are just building a new €14m facility at Agricola Moderna – and he sees many opportunities for technological crossover between the two operations. Vini Franchetti has two other domaines, in Passopisciaro on Mount Etna and Sancaba near Siena, a Toscana IGT run by Andrea’s cousin Carlo Franchetti.



Franchetti is wrestling with how to preserve iconic Tuscan wine in the face of climate change. At Trinoro, the 2023 vintage will be Benjamin's and oenologist Lorenzo Fornaini's third without his father. 'I miss him most in the blending sessions,' Benjamin says. 'That's when he came most energised, when his artistic side came out.' Andrea planted Cabernet Franc and Merlot and added Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot to produce a flagship Bordeaux blend and a series of single-vineyard varietal bottlings – Campo di Tenaglia, Campo di Magnacosta, Campo di Camagi among others – that are considered some of the finest (and most idiosyncratic) of the Super Tuscans.

At first sight, Franchetti the younger is very different from his father. Andrea was intuitive, maverick, artistic – any profile of him mentions that he was closely related to the American abstract impressionist Cy Twombly, that his parents knew Hemingway, and that Andrea once cycled and hitch-hiked to Afghanistan – while words like 'optimise' and 'systematic' and 'correlation' pepper Benjamin's conversation.

'I take a very numerical approach to how I tackle things, to add innovation and technology as much as possible to the making of wine,' he tells me. But he also stresses that in no way is he moving away from his father's vision: he's just doing things more efficiently. For example, Andrea used intuition to decide where to plant. 'And he got a lot of things right but he got a lot of things wrong as well. So it's more systematic now, we've been mapping and analysing the soil throughout the estate, to see which soil performs best and why, and correlating it with the climate.'

Winemaking is a craft, Franchetti believes, in that you achieve excellence by doing the same thing better each time. He has no patience for the view that taking a rigorous approach is somehow denying its 'artistic' side. 'The best wine is not necessarily the most artisanal – the best wine is made by people that are really, really good at doing their job.'



Andrea Franchetti died in 2021 aged 72, leaving his son Benjamin to carry the torch

It's a bracingly practical approach and Benjamin has no doubt Andrea would have welcomed it. 'He would be super happy about it – it wasn't that he was against any of this. It was just that it wasn't going through his thought processes'. But I also get the impression of a young team spreading their wings (Franchetti is 36, Fornaini in his early 30s). There's obviously a strong urge to explore (that's the father's blood coming out): 'I'd like to do something completely new somewhere else,' Franchetti says, adding this might be Abruzzo or Le Marche to plant white varieties.

Meanwhile, the focus is on Val d'Orcia. The vines are over 30 years old now and Tuscany is getting warmer, so the winemaking has to change in order to remain true to Andrea's vision, which was that the essence of Tenuta di Trinoro is its inconsistency, 'the variety between vintages'. This was amply borne out by at tasting at the domaine – you see changes in fruit intensity and texture between vintages but also as the years progress and Andrea's winemaking style matured towards more elegance and structure. Benjamin is wrestling with this; how to preserve 'an iconic Tuscan wine, which reflects both the soul of the winemaker, which for a very long time was my father, and the year.'

That's also the contrast between art and science, two disciplines which really do seem to be nicely balanced in the younger Franchetti. He might talk like a boffin but he slips into

aesthetics just as easily (he reveres Hemingway). In searching out new vineyards, he says, 'I was looking for that kind of beauty. The aura of a place has influence over the winemaking process.' Which side is dominant, I wonder, the artist or the scientist? 'It goes back and forth. It's very refreshing – when I was less involved in winemaking there was a big hole in my life, and when I finally stepped into the winemaking, it felt very complete.'



A vineyard at Tinuta di Trinoro on a night in October 2020

What was your childhood ambition?

Writer of fiction or economist...

What do you know now that you wish you'd known when you were 21?

There is no rush.

What exercise do you do?

I swim regularly, two or three times a week, and I enjoy trekking. My father, brother and I used to spend a month trekking in the Dolomites every year.

What is the character trait you most wish you could change in yourself?

I struggle to keep my focus on one thing.

What is the most expensive thing you've ever bought (apart from property)?

Shares in Agricola Moderna.



The Tenuta di Trinoro estate, where Andrea Franchetti planted Cabernet Franc and Merlot followed by Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot to produce a flagship Bordeaux blend

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If you could live anywhere, where would it be and why?

Rome, the way I remember it when I was growing up. The yellow glow of the lamps, the silence in the streets, the feeling of solitude until you reached a bar where everyone would gather and spend endless hours doing nothing.

If you could do any other job what would it be and why?

I would have been an academic, a professor of geography perhaps. I have a PhD in engineering but I always thought I would have been better at one of the humanities...

What luxury item would you take with you to a desert island (apart from wine, whisky or spirits)?

A golden Kindle with a small solar panel, loaded with gigabytes of books.

What haven't you yet achieved that you want to?

Spending 10 days completely alone, doing nothing.

If you were king or queen of the world, what's the first law you would enact?

Make migration mostly legal.

Who would you invite to your fantasy dinner party – and why?

Some one from the very past, to know how different we have become. Maybe Hadrian or the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II.



The Val d'Orcia area had never been planted before because of its clay soils, high rainfall and summer heat

What's your guilty pleasure?

Very hot baths.

What's your secret talent?

Mediating.

When were you happiest?

There are moments when I am together with my daughter and wife, which give me a sense of happiness and joy I reach only when intoxicated (and without the hangover). I was very happy during my late teenage years in Rome. I had a sense of freedom I've never really experienced since. I work to achieve that feeling again.

Who do you most admire?

Probably my mother for her resilience and endurance. She still spends 20 hours a day doing what she loves most

Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

'In theory' (teoricamente) and 'probably' (probabilmente).

What's your greatest regret?

Having rushed into everything in my 20s – university, PhD, my first job. I never really paused to think. I am better now.



The essence of Tenuta di Trinoro remains the variety between its vintages

What album, boxset or podcast would you listen to on a night in alone on the sofa?

Mostly Opera – Don Giovanni.

What time do you go to bed?

11pm most nights.

What's your favourite restaurant?

Trattoria del Pescatore in Milan. Our wedding lunch was there.

What's your favourite item in your wardrobe?

Right now, in 40C temperatures, my new set of ultra-light shorts and Crocs.