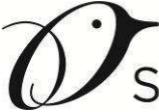


THE REDISCOVERY OF  **O S E L E T A**[®]

The Oseleta grape is an ancient Veronese variety “rediscovered” by Masi in the 1980s when its use had long been abandoned, mainly due to its extremely low yields. In fact, it was Sandro Boscaini who discovered it when he came across a red wine of the same weight as Amarone made by a small producer called Ubaldo Lanza in the Pescantina area. The wine impressed him for its complexity, colour and structure and he suspected at once that the producer had used grapes from the hills in the blend. After all, Pescantina is at the very south of the Valpolicella region in an area that is neither famous for its Amarone nor for making any structured wines! His curiosity was roused even further when the man said that he had produced no more than a few hundred bottles from four vines that were at least one hundred years old, and that he had no idea of the name of the vine type involved. He did know, however, how different it was, with its unusually small bunches of small-sized grapes with high acidity and tannin content, producing a wine which reflected these qualities and had a really opaque colour. Production was also very limited and the grapes were never ready before the beginning of November, late in the season.

Sandro duly waited until the next vintage and this time took away some sample grape bunches in a shoe box, which he used to take his new discovery to the Experimental Institute for Viticulture in Conegliano Veneto for examination by the then director, Professor Calò, and his research team. The grapes were duly identified as coming from the ancient Oseleta vine, which had been struck off the list of Italian grape varieties some time ago and declared extinct. In fact, given the difficulties involved in cultivation it had just not been considered for replanting post-phylloxera. Knowing that this grape was an integral part of Venetian viticultural history and knowing that its use would help maintain the biodiversity that makes the wines of the region so special, Sandro readily revealed where he had found the four vines and asked the Institute to make enquiries about other surviving parcels of the variety, asking if he could have priority in a supply of Oseleta rootstock for his own use once a health check had been run on samples planted in the Institute’s own experimental vineyard.

All this happened at the beginning of the 1980s. In 1985 Masi planted its first two hectares of Oseleta in three different vineyards, chosen for diversity of soil, orientation and microclimate in order to check on the vine’s performance. The rest is history, in the sense that Masi then planted further parcels of Oseleta in its own vineyards and in Serego Alghieri vineyards. Other producers began to take an interest too, especially after Masi used two of its technical seminars at Vinitaly to explore the theme of Oseleta.

The problem remaining was one of bureaucracy: always more complicated than Nature herself! How could you plant a vine that officially did not exist? The subject involved negotiations between local government (Venice), national government (Rome), and the EC (Brussels), with the supply of grape samples, chemical and organoleptic data about grapes and wine made with freshly-picked and semi-dried Oseleta delivered to all the competent authorities. Finally, the bureaucratic hurdles were surpassed in the year 2000

and Oseleta was reintroduced into the roll of Italian national grapes as a typical Venetian variety used for the improvement of red wine blends. It was then officially made part of the possible blend for the production of both Valpolicella and Amarone.

Where does the name Oseleta come from? It means “small bird”. Sandro was determined to leave nothing out in his research and talked to many of the older “contadini” of the Valpolicella region in an attempt to find out the significance of this curious name. Sante Aldrighetti, then more than ninety years old, told him how in Valpolicella at the time of the First World War (1915-1918) the Oseleta grapes were so late in ripening that when the little bunches were finally ready the leaves had already dropped off their vines and the misty November weather made them appear like flocks of little birds against the sky. Francesco Quintarelli told a similar story with a different twist: the name came from the delight taken in these grapes by birds on their way south to warmer climes – they were the last grapes still to be available for sustenance.

Today Oseleta is an interesting new factor in Veronese and Venetian winemaking, giving freshness and character to its wines. There is also a growing interest from outside the region, and recently the Masi Technical Group planned an Oseleta vineyard in Israel in collaboration with the technical staff from Tzora Vineyards, who were looking for something historic to make “the most modern wine in the Near East”.

Which Masi wines benefit from the use of Oseleta?

Toar, with its first vintage in 1990, was the first Masi wine to have a small percentage of Oseleta, to give it greater structure while maintaining the typicity of Corvina’s warm and approachable style. This was a revolutionary concept for Verona and the Veneto where the idea of quality being represented by drinkability for red wines made from freshly-picked grapes was superseded by a greater attention to complexity and structure. The force and strength of this wine is expressed by the name Toar, which describes the volcanic tufa soil of its vineyards of origin.

A few years later, with the first vintage in 1995, came **Osar** (first blended as 80% Oseleta softened with Corvina, but from the 2000 vintage 100% Oseleta only). A red wine made with freshly-picked grapes, Osar has good structure and surprising complexity. Osar stands out for its concentration, colour and tannin content and is a wholly modern and original creation in the history of Venetian winemaking. Its name is not only a reference to the grape variety but is a play on words: “osare” means “to risk or dare” in Italian, and therefore relates to the challenge Masi undertook in reviving cultivation of a secondary Veronese grape that had been abandoned for years, and it also has the same root as the word for “shouts of joy” in Veronese dialect, and therefore relates to the sense of victory that came from the Masi technicians when they tasted the results of the first vintage of this wine.

After this, Masi created its fifth Amarone, **Riserva di Costasera**, with a first vintage in 2003, as the apogee of its research into both grape ampelography and the technique of appassimento. It is Oseleta that gives defining character to this wine, used in addition to the classic Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara blend to make it more authoritative and



more complex. A longer appassimento period and longer ageing in a mix of new and older casks are other factors that contribute to the wine's character too.

Brolo Campofiorin Oro, withdrawn from the market after the 2009 vintage, will still benefit from the valuable contribution of this rich and characterful grape variety.

New replantings see the Masi vineyards enriched even more with parcels of this variety that the Masi Technical Group regard as most interesting when used as a complement to the classic Veronese blend, rather than as a monovarietal. Apart from anything else, Masi is well aware of the historical importance of Oseleta and of other local grapes, such as Forsellina and Dindarella, in giving personality to the wines of the Valpolicella, making them some of Italy's most famous wines abroad. Unfortunately, as often happens, production necessities tend to favour simplification, even if biodiversity is potentially the source for new inspiration and new formats.