



MARCO SIMONIT

A LESSON IN STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

All photography courtesy of Simonit & Sirch

Robin Lee tells the inspiring story of the charismatic viticultural revolutionary whose close study of vines is giving rise to radical new perspectives and techniques. Now adopted by leading producers worldwide, they are restoring dignity to the crucial task of pruning, as well as extending the life of vines and improving the quality of the wines

Looks can be deceiving. “The work of science,” wrote Ruskin, “is to substitute facts for appearances, and demonstrations for impressions.” Marked by a simple metal plaque, the head office of Simonit & Sirch Preparatoriuva is to be found in an unprepossessing suburban shopping mall in the town of Corno di Rosazzo in Friuli. There is no outward indication that a viticultural revolution is emanating from here.

My appointment with Marco Simonit was at gam, and he arrived soon after in his trademark plaid shirt, fitted jeans, and jaunty leather jacket. Simonit is something of a celebrity in Italy. He is famous for making pruning cool. He has appeared in Italian *Vogue* and on RAI television and has produced a series of eye-catching YouTube videos that feature not only his pruning techniques but also his unique brand of charisma and personal flair. He has an aura of mystery, being a little like the Andy Warhol of viticulture, with an intriguing combination of unexpected artistry, creativity, wisdom, and skill, which he applies exclusively to pruning—an arduous manual task that,

at least until he came along, was thought of, if at all, as the very opposite of glamorous.

Simonit (*pictured*) is of medium height and fashionably trim. His face is contoured by white stubble, and his shock of white hair is swept up in a vertiginous pompadour; he might be considered a hipster. He does not hide his emotions. At this, our first meeting, he talked at length about his heartbreak over his recent divorce and the custody battle over his three young children. He took several phone calls from his mother. He has a certain shyness and reserve that can seem studied and constrained, but when he smiles his eyes light up with a childlike candor.

From autodidact and autopsy, to authority

I first learned about Marco Simonit on a late winter visit to Valpolicella, from Simonit’s friend and long-standing client Andrea Lonardi, managing director at Bertani. Beneath the glorious neoclassical facade of the Villa Novare, one of Simonit’s dynamic young assistants explained Simonit’s techniques to me with a febrile energy that almost made me feel I was being inducted into a cult. It was not just a verbal explanation. He also showed me Simonit’s fascinating collection of bisected vines, which demonstrate with devastating clarity the evidence behind the theory.

With Simonit I went to visit the vineyards of Schiopetto in Friuli, which is where it all started. Simonit uses these as a “campus,” to train people who work for him and to show the long-term effects of his pruning techniques. Considering it is 40 years old, the vineyard we visit is exceptionally uniform, in terms of both vine age and the shape of the vines, which also means that ripening is more uniform. Another effect of Simonit’s pruning method is that, in terms of a decline in vigor, the vine becomes “old” much later than it would if it were pruned in the usual way.

Simonit grew up nearby, in the countryside, in Gradisca d’Isonzo in the province of Gorizia. His father died of a rare blood disease at the age of 27, when Simonit was less than two years old, and since his mother could not care for him, Simonit lived with his grandparents, who were farmers. As a child, he always wanted to be a veterinarian when he grew up, but after studying agriculture at the local college in Cividale in Friuli, he lacked the funds to continue his education. He ended up finding work at the Consorzio of the Collio DOC, and from 1988 to 1998 he was the technical adviser, responsible for giving the local growers up-to-date guidance on every aspect of viticulture.

“It was a whole new experience for me,” Simonit explains. “When I was younger, I never had any interest in working in the vineyard—I much preferred to stay and help my grandmother take care of the animals. I was not at all interested in cellar work or other aspects of agronomy, but I had always done a lot of drawing, especially of trees. At this time, I started drawing vines, especially old vines, and observing... looking at them. I became fascinated by the vine’s morphology, how the vine grows, how it is formed, how it has been domesticated and how it has adapted to being domesticated.

“I was curious about why some vines grew to be old,” continues Simonit. “Whenever I had some money, I would get a car and go look for old vines in places that had old traditions: Portugal, Spain, Croatia, the islands of Italy, Greece. Also Alsace and especially the south of France, where I spent a lot of time



working with the old *gobelet* vines, and in Priorat, where there were vines 70 or 80 years old. If I saw an old vineyard with old vines and there was someone working there, I would stop the car and offer to give a hand. Sometimes I would end up staying there a week, eating with the vine grower and learning how he took care of his vines. It was always an adventure.”

Schiopetto, a member of the *Collio consorzio*, allowed Simonit, who was full of new ideas, to use a part of his vineyard for practical experiments. “I remember Mario Schiopetto telling me, ‘Go and explain to the workers what they should do,’ and I told him I couldn’t explain something I didn’t understand. This was something I had to do myself. I needed to make a connection between my ideas and reality—and he gave me the chance to do that.”

“Meanwhile I continued collecting vines—especially all the examples I found that were dried up, sick, or dying,” continues Simonit. “I took them to a carpenter to have them sawn in half so that I could look inside. It was like an autopsy. I saw the wounds inside the vine and how they blocked the flow of the sap. It was incredible. So little wood was alive. It was all dead. It seemed so strange to me. I did a lot of bisections of vines I found in different places in order to understand the consequences of pruning wounds. This was not something that had ever been taught in school—never. I would seek out my former professors to ask questions, but I only got half-answers. No one was interested, and in fact most of them thought I was more than slightly mad to be going on about this, which was of no interest to anyone.”

Attilio Scienza, professor of viticulture at Milan University, was the noteworthy exception. Scienza, perfectly rotund, with a gentle humor and a wry expression, has mentored a generation of vine growers and has an inexhaustible interest in all things gastronomic and vinous. He is famous for his tireless activity in helping forge connections between the people and places that supply the table in Italy with its unmatched munificence. “In universities we snubbed pruning,” Scienza admits. “We didn’t

teach it until Marco Simonit put it at the center of attention.” Scienza met Simonit when he was working at the *consorzio*. “At the beginning he did not have scientific credibility, and people thought he was just a chatterer. I helped him prepare the technical materials.”

Keeping the sap flowing

The fundamental principle behind Simonit’s pruning method—which can be applied to any vine-training system and any grape variety—is the importance of following the flow of the sap. It is crucial to choose canes that have an uninterrupted flow of sap from the roots. This is because when a vine’s branch is cut or pruned, a dry cone of dead wood forms inside and extends inward to a length at least equivalent to the circumference of the cut. It is like a scar, but instead of being external it is internal. This dried and dead internal “dessication cone” blocks the flow of the sap inside the trunk of the vine. The sap can of course flow around the sides of this dry cone, but if there are many cuts made at random from all different sides—especially large cuts, as is often the case with traditional pruning methods—the dry cones inside the vine crisscross and, eventually, can completely block the flow of the sap, cutting off the vine’s nourishment. With Simonit’s method, the cuts are made only on one side of the vine, preserving the sap flow on the other side.

Another important principle is that the pruning cuts are not made flush against the trunk of the vine, to give a neat appearance, but instead are made at a distance from the trunk of the vine. This is especially important when making big cuts on wood that is more than two years old, where the “dessication cone” would be of a significant size and also an entry point for fungal disease, such as *esca*. With Simonit’s method, only wood less than two years old is cut, and therefore large cuts are mostly avoided. In cases where large cuts are absolutely necessary, the wood is cut at a distance proportional to the size of the cut to protect the permanent wood of the vine.

Simonit believes that high-density planting, when combined with incorrect pruning methods, creates conditions that cause many of the worst problems producers face today, including rampant vine-wood disease, premature vine death, and, most important, vineyards with a life expectancy of only 25–30 years before the vines die or their yields become uneconomical. “What I realized from traveling and from my experiments was that there was a common denominator,” remembers Simonit. “It was like a lightbulb in my head. Regardless of where they came from, the old vines, at least the healthy ones, were highly developed in their growth—and without amputated limbs. It began to dawn on me that the mania in Europe and the New World for dense planting does not generally allow enough space for the vine to grow old. The vine needs to grow, and this



growth must be managed—not prevented—by pruning. From the height of the posts and the wires, to the vine spacing and the width between rows, the thinking behind the modern way of planting is based on geometry, not on physiology. It is a logic that makes sense for machines but does not envisage the growth of the vines over time.”

Discovery and recovery

Eventually, after ten years in the job, Simonit left the *consorzio* and set up his company with an old friend from elementary school, Pierpaolo Sirch, who at the time was making wine at his small family holding. “Now it seems obvious—like the discovery of hot water,” says Sirch, “but we learned by bumping our noses.” Sirch is very different from Simonit: less urbane and more connected to the countryside and its traditions. “The question we had was, Which are the vines that live the longest? *Alberello* [Italian for *gobelet*] allows the vine to grow old and in good health. The branches come from below and grow upward. When you prune *alberello*, the cuts are small and never from the underside of the vine. Why can’t these principles be brought to the modern forms? The problem is that viticulture has totally transformed. People changed, and the vines changed—varieties, as well as training systems. The old methods and knowledge are mostly lost.”

Simonit & Sirch (S&S)’s first client was Josko Gravner, who called Simonit the day he left his job at the *consorzio*. “I would never have anything to do with any free assistance,” says Gravner hotly. “I only wanted Marco’s advice when it was possible to pay for it. I knew about his work from a conference with Professor Scienza, where I heard him speak. Even at 25 years old, he was very interesting to listen to; he had very clear ideas. He made these discoveries because he sees the plant and he understands it. This is something that comes from inside.”

Left: Bisected Simonit-pruned vines revealing high proportions of living (lighter) wood. Above and overleaf: Marco Simonit and key members of his team out in the vineyards.

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Gravner’s Ribolla vines are planted 31.5 in (80 cm) apart—a high density. So, to ensure that the vines had the growing space they needed, Simonit invented for his vineyard a new training system: *ventaglio* (“fan”). Gravner is still a client 20 years on.

When S&S was starting, Scienza helped out by making introductions. Simonit recalls how, on more than one occasion, he and Scienza would be visiting an estate where the estate manager was one of Scienza’s former students. The estate manager would say, “But Professor, that is not what you taught us!” And Scienza would reply, “I know—but now this is what I believe.” As Scienza concedes, “We need to be humble, to acknowledge our mistakes and to change the way we do things. Every plant is different and needs to be treated as an individual. Modern agriculture has lost the capacity to understand the plant.”

“Sicily is different from other parts of Italy because its rural tradition is still alive,” says Alessio Planeta, an early client. “These men have been pruning for seven generations and

consider pruning their craft. It was tricky to get them to listen to someone who speaks Italian with a Friuli accent and has his hair sticking up. Marco also does a kind of ‘casting’ for his assistants,” Planeta continues. “They have a ‘look,’ like Abercrombie, which couldn’t be more different from what pruners are usually like. Somehow, though, seeing these cool guys, and hearing that they really know what they are talking about, made the workers see themselves in a different way and start to think pruning can be young and fashionable.”

“It is as much about explaining why as explaining how,” agrees Angelo Gaja, who hired S&S in 2004. “Marco knows how to communicate. He knows how to involve people in learning, whether they are experts or unaware of the subject. He knows how to create enthusiasm, to create bonds in a group and to work together to reach a goal. Today we follow the pruning method we learned from S&S, which gives much more health and more life to the vines.”

As Sirch explains: “There is a tangible effect of our work that we never took into consideration at the start. It makes the workers feel important—very often for the first time—if only because the estate invests money in them and their work. There is a criticism to make with regard to most estates—at least in Italy. They have always spent a lot of money on technology in the cellar, on communications, on commercial aspects. In the vineyard they have invested in tractors and machines, but for the most part they have invested very little in people and training. Pruning is actually a vitally important, or even determinant, factor in terms of the lifespan and wellbeing of the vines. It is vital for the workers, the pruners, to feel that they are an important part of the estate.”

Longevity, quality, responsibility

The question remains whether or not all of this has any beneficial effect on the taste of the wine, which, for many involved in viticulture, is the only issue worth considering. Gaja is reserved on this point: “We produce wines that arrive at their peak only after 30 or 40 years. It is too early to say.”

However, Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, *chef de cave* at Champagne Louis Roederer, has been working with S&S for four years and is convinced: “I do believe this will make the wine better, but right now what is much more important is the difference this makes for my team. I told them, ‘This isn’t Italian pruning anymore—it’s Roederer pruning.’ For control experiments, I now have to bring people from outside to do the pruning in the ‘old’ way because our workers just can’t do it anymore. They have learned the value of their craft and that the pruner is important in the wine story. Before, it was just a matter of putting in the hours. Now they are proud of their job. When people are involved and engaged in this way, they start to



notice things. I hear about details that they would not have noticed before and that I would never see myself. I cannot be everywhere. The pruners now feel they are responsible, not just to the winemaker but for the long-term future of the vines. This recognition is an incredible management tool.”

Roederer has retained S&S not just for short-term consultation and training but is collaborating with them on major long-term objectives. One of these is more uniform ripening, eventually to eliminate the enormous costs and logistical complications caused by the need to harvest in multiple passages where individual vines have been replaced over the years and each vine is therefore at a slightly different stage of maturity. Since pruning according to the flow of the sap preserves and enhances the vine’s vitality and health, the vines will also be better able to fight off disease, reducing the number of dead vines, as well as the number of necessary treatments, which is better for the workers and also saves on costs. Finally, vines that live longer give improved quality. “Right now, our vines are productive up to 50 or 60 years of age, after which their yield is too low and there are too many dead vines,” says Lécaillon. “If I can bring this up even to a 60- to 70-year average lifespan, then economically that makes a huge difference for us, especially if you add to that the



improvement in the quality of the wine, since the best wines are from old vines, other things being equal.”

Simonit has studied the traditional training systems used in Champagne, and in the light of his advice Roederer has introduced some significant changes. Taking inspiration from unusual vine specimens that he has found in old vineyards (not only Roederer’s), Simonit has adapted the traditional *taille Chablis*, Champagne’s training system for Chardonnay, so that the permanent wood is allowed to grow slightly elongated instead of forming a round head, as is traditional. In the old method, cuts are made all around the head, but the S&S method is for cuts to be made only on one side of the permanent wood, to preserve the flow of the sap and not create dry and dead wood in the trunk, making the vine not only healthier, which helps it live longer, but also better able to resist winter freeze, since the vine’s reserves are contained in living, not dead, dry wood.

For Champagne’s traditional Pinot Noir training system, the *cordon de Royat*, Simonit, again taking inspiration from specimens found in the vineyards, has introduced a semi-permanent cordon. Traditional pruning requires the old cordon to be sawn off approximately every five years, which creates big pruning wounds that block the flow of the sap in the vine’s trunk, exposes the vine to esca, and also adversely affects the vitality of the cordon itself, because the replacement cordon requires space to form at the expense of the first few spurs of the old cordon. Since Simonit’s semi-permanent cordon lasts two and half times as long as a traditional cordon, the vine endures many fewer large cuts during its lifetime.

Simonit’s modifications to the traditional training systems anticipate growth as the vines grow older, reducing vine stress and increasing their lifespan and health, which, Simonit believes, improves the quality of the grapes, the juice, and, consequently, the wine. “The delicate aromas and ethereal finesse sought after in Champagne do not come from stressed and suffering vines,” insists Simonit. The same applies at Domaine Ott in Provence, partly owned by Roederer, where Simonit has introduced subtle modifications to the estate’s signature *palmette* training system, which is similar in principle to *gobelet*, though with the advantage that it is trained on wires. Simonit has introduced the idea of adjusting the wire height as the vines grow, starting at 16in (40cm) and gradually moving up to 28in (70cm) as the vines mature, rather than starting the vines at 28in and then needing to saw down the arms after a few years when they grow too high.

Seeing and doing things differently

“Great wines are made in the vineyard,” says Nicolas Glumineau, general manager at Château Pichon Lalande. Since taking over the estate in 2007, Roederer has introduced radical changes, including paying the pruners a monthly salary rather than according to the number of vines they prune, as is the custom in the Médoc, to encourage them to prune well and take their time. Cabernet Sauvignon is naturally a grape variety that is particularly sensitive to problems related to bad or good pruning. One modification to the traditional double Guyot training system that Simonit has introduced is a spur that curbs *acrotomie*, which is a tendency for overlong internodes and for buds at the very end of the canes to develop first, inhibiting the growth of the buds lower down the cane. *Acrotomie* causes a situation that can be seen everywhere in the Médoc, where there



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is empty space over each trunk, while at the ends of the long canes, all the leaves and fruit from the two neighboring vines are crowded together. These circumstances increase the risk of mildew and rot, as well as hindering ripening.

Until now, green-harvesting has been the only solution for thinning out the crowded bunches, but when yields are already perilously low, this is a waste of fruit, which in itself does not improve quality. The other problem is that eventually the canes get too long and crash into the neighboring vine and must be sawn off, creating large wounds, which block the flow of the sap and are also entry points for esca, to which Cabernet Sauvignon is particularly sensitive. Simonit attributes the prevalent pruning techniques in part to an aesthetic principle—devotion to geometry—and feels that a significant part of his job is to

Left: Giacomo Manzoni of S&S; a bisected poorly pruned vine, with dead (dark) wood. Above: Simonit at Château Latour, one of the top Bordeaux properties where he works.

change the idea of what looks good. According to Glumineau, the improvement is already evident in his 2014 vintage. “These changes can be seen in the wine. There is a velvet silkiness of the tannins that comes when the seeds are perfectly ripe, but at the same time the fruit is not overripe,” he explains. “This is the kind of wine I would like to make every year.” Also, since the grapes are not crowded on top of each other, less green-harvesting is necessary, resulting in more wine.

S&S has recently started working for Château Latour, which is endeavoring to increase yields and at the same time reduce esca, which causes the death of 5 percent of their vines every year. Unfortunately, these vine deaths are not spread evenly throughout the estate but occur disproportionately in the old vineyards. I visited Latour with Massimo Giudici, Simonit’s right-hand man, now also a partner in the business, who handles their increasing number of Bordeaux clients. We walked together through the oldest part of the Latour vineyard counting the number of old vines, and sadly those that survived had their arms sawn off. It was the middle of summer, and yellow- and brown-speckled leaves, the symptoms of esca, were clearly visible. Until recently, esca was treated with arsenic, which is now illegal. At Château Ausone in St-Emilion, another S&S client, esca causes the death of 15 percent of the vines annually in certain plots. Simonit has developed a surgical technique to treat vines affected by esca, which he compares to the way a dentist cleans out the dead and rotten material in a tooth and then fills or closes off the cavity. The process is, however, labor intensive and therefore expensive. Prevention is far better than cure.

“Marco showed me something that was always there but that I never saw,” concludes Lécaillon. “What he teaches is the opposite of everything we learned and did before. Marco observed, he read books, and he realized that something was wrong. What Marco teaches is respect for the vines and respect for what nature gives us. You cannot just twist nature to suit your own ends. This is about respecting life.” ■