

The *Decanter* interview

Pedro Parra & Alberto Antonini

The collaboration between winemaker Alberto Antonini and terroir specialist Pedro Parra has been influential in Chile and Argentina where, as consultants, they are inspiring more small-scale terroir-based wines. Peter Richards MW meets them

THERE'S A SCENE at the beginning of the film *Mr & Mrs Smith*, starring Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, in which the two protagonists are being interviewed by a marriage counsellor.

'We don't really need to be here,' says Pitt. 'See, we've been married for five years.' Jolie interrupts: 'Six.' Pitt, smiling wryly, continues: 'Five, six years...'

The essential premise of the movie is that, notwithstanding their superficial differences (they are secret assassins hiding their real identities from one another) Mr and Mrs Smith actually make an excellent team – with common interests, complementary skills and a healthy sense of fun.

I'm guessing it's not every day that Alberto Antonini and Pedro Parra are compared to Pitt and Jolie. And yet the Italian winemaker and the Chilean terroir specialist remind me of this magnificent Hollywood hyperbole when I quiz them about when they first met – and they both give different answers.

'It was 2006,' says Antonini, firmly but softly in a voice that is gravelly and engagingly melodic. '2007,' insists Parra bluntly. Like any good therapist, I don't press the issue, and move on.

What they don't differ on – and this is telling – is where they met, what they were doing at the time, and what they did afterwards. They were both consulting at Intriga, the Cabernet project by MontGras in Chile's Maipo Valley. They hit it off, sharing not just a passion (and similar visions) for wine, but also bonding over a mutual love of music. It was the start of a fertile and successful professional collaboration, one that is becoming increasingly influential in the global wine context. In short, if you like wine (especially New World and Italian wine) and are interested in how it's made and what its future might hold, you need to know these men.

Theirs was by no means a pre-destined association. Few would have matched the roving

Italian international consultant – urbane, charming, a man who strikes a uniquely statuesque pose when simply nosing his wine – with the rough-hewn boy from Concepción, earthy in language and fiery in temperament. Antonini's winemaking expertise had been honed in Tuscany before he moved onto the international consulting stage with an impressively broad client list.

At the time, Parra was not long out of his doctorate studies in France, having specialised in precision agriculture, and was working with a small but growing number of Chilean clients, finding his way in the field of wine. 'But when I met Alberto,' reflects Parra, 'everything changed.'

Complementary strengths

This is true of both men. As with any successful partnership, the influence has been mutual, the result communally beneficial. 'Alberto is great with people and ideas,' observes Parra. 'We're a good team because he's an expert in assessing projects and people, knowing where to focus our energies. I'm a bit more direct and can try to do too much. I learn a lot from him, but he's taught me a lot about wine tasting, too. And Alberto's also changed – he's a purist now, like me, working more naturally.'

Antonini concurs. 'I've worked with a lot of soil experts but very few know about wine, and that's useless for me. Pedro is one of the few to connect terroir with wine – with him I talk tannins, flavours, acidity, not just rocks. That connection is exactly what I need.'

When Antonini invited Parra to give a seminar to his clients in Argentina, Parra was offered several jobs on the spot. This has led to joint consultancy work, with clients as diverse as Tenuta Il Palagio in Tuscany (owned by the British musician Sting), Sogrape in Portugal, and Okanagan Crush Pad.

'Pedro is one of the very few soil experts to connect terroir with wine – with him I talk tannins, flavours, acidity, not just rocks'

Alberto Antonini

Above: Parra (left) and Antonini; a collaboration that is now becoming influential globally

There's even, *sotto voce*, talk of a potential project in China (though I'm warned to keep this quiet for fear of what the wives will say of yet more time on the road...). It also resulted in Parra becoming, in 2011, a joint partner in Altos las Hormigas in Mendoza, along with Antonini and Antonio Morescalchi. Parra has two further partnership projects in Chile – Aristos, with Vosne-Romanée producer Louis-Michel Liger-Belair and François Massoc; and Clos des Fous, with Massoc, Paco Leyton and Albert Cussen. Antonini, meanwhile, has his own Poggiotondo estate in Tuscany, together with a stake in Greenstone Vineyard, Australia.

Their work in Chile and Argentina has been particularly important. It is no overstatement to say that their attention to detail and sheer ambition for the potential of the terroirs and wines has been instructive for a generation of winemakers in these countries. In short, their ability to relate to and

inspire the people they work with has helped imbue a raft of ambitious winemakers on both sides of the Andes with the confidence and skills to craft increasingly elegant, refined and expressive wines. 'Less is more,' says Antonini, before adding, 'but in order to do less, you need to know more.'

Take their work on Altos las Hormigas. Detailed work on their various terroirs, soils and wines has led to a small-scale focus and a new series of terroir-based wines. 'Alberto and I are bringing a little bit of Piedmont to Mendoza,' chuckles Parra. 'No one was talking about the potential of calcareous soils in Altamira before we started our work; we've helped change the debate.'

Changing the mindset

'The first step is to be aware that you need to learn,' explains Antonini, 'and then set about gaining that knowledge. The historic Old World way was trial and error. But with my tasting experience and Pedro's analytical skills, we can work faster, to understand why we get certain styles from certain areas. Some people say there is no such thing as terroir in the New World; that's nonsense. It just hasn't been developed as much as in Europe. It's also a question of mentality and ambition. The New World will remain the New World until people stop thinking in a New World way.'

Parra makes a similar observation about Chile. 'For me, terroir is a mental process. There's a physical aspect, sure, but really it's a matter of interpretation, like music. And education. To make wines of character, you need to know what character is.'

'Some of Chile's best wines have come from almost zero viticulture – such as Carignans from the south or old Cabernet vintages from Alto Maipo. What does this tell you? That we've been getting it wrong lately. In Chile, the common attitude is: the bigger, the better – be it cars, houses or wine. We need to reverse that thinking.'

The 'less is more' mantra is central to both Parra and Antonini's philosophy. They encourage their clients to minimise viticultural and winemaking intervention, and tailor it to enable maximum terroir expression. Hence vineyard mapping, irrigation and management strategies, early harvests, using ambient not cultured yeasts, moving away from new oak barrels and excess extraction. They also encourage natural farming – organic and biodynamic included. 'I'm going more natural,' says Antonini. 'The best way to make a wine with a sense of place is to avoid anything that will negatively affect the place, such as chemicals and sterile, stainless-steel facilities. Do the best cheeses in the world come from ultra-hygienic places? No. A natural approach to viticulture and winemaking helps you to make wines with a better expression of origin. It's that simple.'

Common ground

Despite their different backgrounds, there are common features between the two men, which goes some way to explaining the compatibility. Neither seeks the limelight, yet both are multilingual, high achieving and highly qualified (Antonini studied at Florence, Bordeaux and Davis; Parra at Concepción, ➤



Above: Parra and Antonini's work at Altos las Hormigas has brought about a new series of terroir-focused wines



Alberto Antonini at a glance

Born 10 June 1959, Empoli, Italy

Family Wife: Alessandra;

children: Angelica (17), Margherita (10), Carlo (8)

Educated Florence University; Bordeaux University; UC Davis

Employment

Frescobaldi (assistant winemaker); Col d'Orcia, Antinori (head winemaker); consultant from 1997, with clients including E&J Gallo, Concha y Toro, Sogrape, Seghesio, Pizzini, Trapiche, Garzón (Uruguay), Okanagan Crush Pad

Desert island wine Barolo Riserva Monfortino from Giovanni Conterno

Montpellier and Paris Grignon, where he obtained his doctorate). Antonini's parents are teachers; Parra's lawyers. Their CVs are increasingly wide-ranging and impressive; their motivation is attributed, by both men, to an inherent and irresistible 'curiosity' – about the land, people, wine – and both seem possessed of a rare energy. Parra struggles to sit still, such is his innate enthusiasm. Antonini runs daily and gets away from it all by indulging his passion for classic British motorbikes.

Both, ultimately, are men of the land. Antonini relates how, having grown up on a Tuscan farm, he used to embarrass his parents by declaring that his ambition was to become a *contadino* (peasant farmer). Parra is fiercely proud of his roots in southern Chile. 'Concepción is terroir in people,' he says. 'We are independent and proud; all the country's revolutions started here. There's a creative, rebellious, intellectual streak to the local character. And we're not scared of the rain...'

And both like music. Parra's early ambition was to be a professional jazz saxophonist. He still plays, and when I ask him what one item he would save from his burning house (family excluded), he immediately retorts: 'My Selmer 1948 alto sax, which I bought in New York and which I played at Pancho's marriage.' (Pancho being François Massoc, Parra's long-time friend and now winemaking colleague in Aristos and Clos des Fous.)

Antonini recalls his early love of West Coast rock before moving on to blues, world music and, due to Parra's influence, jazz. 'Listening to this music on a CD is like drinking fine wine out of a polystyrene cup,' he says. 'Vinyl is the crystal-glass version: it's sexy, alive. Try transferring vinyl



Pedro Parra at a glance

Born 9 December 1969, Concepción, Chile

Family Wife: Camilla; children Diego (17), Felipe (8) and Colomba (7)

Educated Alliance Française and Universidad de Concepción (forestry); Montpellier University (masters in precision agriculture); PhD from Institut National Agronomique Paris-Grignon

Employment Doctorate studies at Don Melchor; has since consulted for De Martino, Matetic, Concha y Toro, Montes, Lapostolle, Intriga, Errázuriz, Luis Felipe Edwards, Zuccardi, Chakana, Benziger, Okanagan Crush Pad, Tenuta Il Palaggio and others. Joint partner in Altos las Hormigas (Argentina) and Chilean projects Aristos and Clos des Fous.

Desert island wine Domaine Leflaive Puligny-Montrachet Premier Cru Folatières 1999. 'Not as arrogant or expensive as Le Montrachet, but a special, steep slope: a very mineral wine.'

onto digital – it takes up so much space because the sound is so rich.'

Parra's conversion to the benefits of organic and biodynamic came when his son developed a debilitating condition. Conventional doctors proved ineffective and it was only by turning to an anthroposophical doctor (a branch of Rudolf Steiner's complementary medicine) on the advice of a winemaker friend that the illness was resolved. 'At that moment I understood that you can't see everything that's important,' Parra says. 'Biodynamics gives to terroir whatever you can't see in the soil pit. It's about energy: this is the fourth dimension in wine, in addition to climate, soil and man. It's important to work clean. That's how to make outstanding wine.'

As to what the future holds for Chile, Parra is enthusiastic but open-minded. 'I'm curious as to what Chile could and should be in the future. It's so complex. We need to undo mistakes of the past, like poorly planted vineyards. I want to make Clos des Fous one of the really key projects in Chile. Things

are changing – I get frustrated that it's not fast enough. But the new Chile is an exciting place.'

'Great wine is about emotion,' concludes Antonini. 'I believe more in the Burgundian concept – that, at a very high level, uniqueness is more important than perfection. Then you just have to educate people to appreciate what you do. That's what I'm working on,' he says, before pausing and adding: 'I like a challenge.'

It's a good thing, too. Because these men may end up changing the world of wine as we know it. **D**

Peter Richards MW is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Chile

