

Fattoria La Vialla's Experience.
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a. Antonio Lo Franco:

Rudolf Steiner's biodynamic doctrine is the most challenging to ask of an agricultural farmer. It is an excellent guide for personal motivation, for a logical way of thinking and for practical capabilities, qualities that, in the countryside, maybe more so than in other fields, are required. And it is the community, the social structure in which they may be cultivated. Be it a family, a group of friends an agricultural group or whatever else.

For us brothers, that community has been and still is, the family. The very existence of Fattoria La Vialla counts on this. From the family we have learned to live together, to respect each other, to work together as a team. Through the family we have inherited cultural roots, forged our characters and our motivation, learned the trade – that of personal relationships and the running of a business. In the family, we draw inspiration from our children for the future. Today, La Vialla is a reflection of these origins. When, in 1978, our parents Piero and Giuliana bought the first abandoned farmstead – Ca' dell'Oro – in the hills of Arezzo in the Valdarno area, they simply wanted to breathe some 'fresh' air and eat healthily - whatever came from the kitchen garden, the olive groves and vineyards around the house.

During many years of work La Vialla has converted land, and continues to do so, over 490 hectares to biodynamic methods – from abandoned or 'recovered' and leased or bought from nearby farmers. 250 hectares of vineyards of which 200 are biodynamically-run whilst the remaining are under conversion. 25,000 olive trees and over 200 hectares of arable and pasture land. The 600 hectares of woodland is the farm's lungs and 300 hectares are a provincial protected migratory oasis, the organic substance has increased on average, in the past five years, by 70%.

Without hiding basically any pride whatsoever, we present here a wonderful certificate: La Vialla is 'Organic Producer for 2015', recognition just received last week at the Mundusvini Biofach Competition in Nuremberg, Germany.

b. Bandino Lo Franco

8th January, 2015, during a biodynamic agricultural course at the 'small' school of La Vialla, we stayed back to have a little chat with Carlo Triarico and Marco Serventi. We were remembering the Fattoria's biodynamic conversion adventure between 1998 to 2005. Quite a long time, that was necessary due to the already complex set-up of the Farm, made up of many cultivations in different locations. And finally in 2005, the Demeter certificate for the first 200 hectares. Subsequently, the need to develop an agronomic model that would allow the conversion of other more distant plots of land, for growth in production. There wasn't a particular model that could be followed, La Vialla had to find its own way. Willpower, tenacity and the unity of purpose of a group of colleagues and friends has 'contaminated' with good biodynamic practice, all of those involved, the terrain and businesses nearby. For example, to be able to spray the preparations on the distant plots we created the 'Mobile Biodynamic Unity (MBU!)'. Today, there are five sites – amongst fixed and mobile, and just as many people responsible (Carlo, Gabriele, Simone, Donato, Steliano) who are managed by Alceo Orsini, Agronomist, present in the room. Donato Ciofini is the biodynamic specialist. And to increase the Chianti production? Or the Olive Oil? Or add a new label? It is not at all easy! Here, in the Tuscan countryside, sometimes a little 'narrow-minded', try and ask a neighbour to convert do

organic farming! The best answer you will get will be: “Organic what?” So the first steps are to approach using a language that they comprehend: offer to purchase. Goods for cash. For conventional means, it’s clear! A conventional product that is basically ‘rubbish’ for La Vialla. It does not reach the client. It is stuff that is kept in stock to eventually be sold to wholesalers. But, it is precisely this investment, the ‘playing around’ shall we say, that brings the initial contact and a ‘hand shake’ that leads to the collaboration. The ‘conversion’ starts: firstly to organic (3 years) and then biodynamic (1-3 years). The collaboration method may vary each time: a supply contract for several years; a partnership. Or the lease or purchase of the land, vineyard, olive orchard or farmhouse, whatever. So, layer after layer, over the years many methods of impromptu collaboration have been started. The most recent example is the purchase of a 29-hectare plot of conventional agricultural land in the Chianti region, 30 kms south of the Farm. The conversion, starting last year, is in the restoration phase, the semi-abandonment for over three years, from the analyses of the terrain and management of its conversion.

On the other hand, five years ago, between Civitella Paganico and Campagnatico, communes of Grosseto, we have started our Maremmana adventure. On the look out for fertile terrain and a temperate climate for olives and arable farming, but also on the look-out for DOC’s and different Chianti ‘scents’, to offer new experiences to the client, such as Montecucco. There we ‘pitched our tents’: Simone Luchini, agronomist, moved there permanently. Having defined the agronomic protocols most suited for each vineyard, we started the conversion process, firstly to organic and then to biodynamic.

The growth of partnerships and the addition of new farms, naturally need some organization and adaptation to the multifaceted company structure. The biodynamic methods, universal and adaptable to places and different terrains, are an excellent tool for rapid soil improvement and plant reinvigoration. The rest is team work. Five biodynamic sites, one of which is ‘moveable’ to oversee the basic principles of early intervention, according to a biodynamic calendar and weather conditions, in each of the areas to be observed (La Fattoria, Lucingnano-Valdarno, Siena, Maremma, Cortona). Systematic work is undertaken on the formation of each area with the intention of combining the agricultural individuality, the identity between people and the farms’ structure, good agricultural practices and productivity. Into the network go knowledge, experience, resources and people. The managers, in turn, come across partnerships which vary for each situation: on the one hand it could be the landlord who lends his machinery or labour, on the other to use workers via local contractors. Everyone must be taught and trained and converted. But, above all, with passion and loyalty.

This adaptive co-operation system, made up of diverse individual farms, connected and co-ordinated, our president, Triarico, has defined ‘Network Models’.

In April, 2009, in order to face the needs for which we are talking about, and channel the energy in the conversion of the new terrains, the ‘Lo Franco Foundation for the conversion to organic and biodynamic agriculture’, was set-up.

For a period of time we tried to convert the Istituto Tecnico Agrario (Agricultural Technical Institute), Capezzine (Cortona-AR) to biodynamic methods, proposing to run it. We deceived ourselves: the whole thing concluded in two year’s collaboration via the ‘School-Work’ programme, a couple of days, a few hours of work at La Vialla. The ministerial bureaucracy study protocols got the upper hand! The question remains: is it right to teach students, future agricultural technicians, that the practice of modern agriculture is spraying poison and using chemical fertilizers?

However, we continue pursuing our goal: to grow by respecting the model, in a harmonious and sustainable system from an ecological, economical, and social aspect, as my brother Gianni will now demonstrate in the following section.

c. Gianni Lo Franco

As my brothers have already mentioned, Fattoria La Vialla has tried, from the onset, to work, whilst at the same time respecting nature, creating a closed circuit inside the farm where the processing waste is reused and the refuse is differentiated.

One of the challenges we faced was to resolve the use of paper and cardboard for correspondence and packaging. It wasn't enough to use re-cycled, or recyclable paper and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council), but we wanted to take a step further in protecting the environment and reducing emissions.

So, since May, 2011, we began collaborating with natureOffice, a German company, which realize projects to offset carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions in a transparent and traceable manner. This is achieved through climate protection projects which are certified 'Gold Standard', such as the reforestation in Europe and Africa. Subsequently, the offsetting has been gradually expanded to include the packaging which is used to deliver our products.

Alongside the research into new ways of protecting the environment, we wanted to also take into account the work undertaken over the past years and we commissioned a study into the ecological footprint of the Farm. The company, La Fabbrica del Sole (= the Sun Factory), from Arezzo, in collaboration with the University of Siena conducted a study with particular attention made to the CO₂ absorption via organic and biodynamic cultivated terrain. Analyses done on the terrain in the phase of being converted from conventional agriculture to organic and biodynamic, showed, in brief, that for every hectare, the equivalent of 4.243 t CO₂ is trapped each year, thanks to the increase of organic substances. The last study on the ecological footprint at La Vialla, revealed, therefore, that the Farm absorbs much more CO₂ than it emits; 5,385.5 tonnes to be precise.

This more than positive result prompted natureOffice to contact the Farm to propose further collaboration. After careful evaluation of the ecological footprint study, firstly they awarded La Fattoria with the 'Climate Neutral' title and then did a 'case study' of the eco-sustainability of the Farm as a whole.

We are presently working on a project together with natureOffice and the Gold Standard Foundation on organic and biodynamic agriculture, which is called 'Climate Smart Agriculture'.

The project's aim is to increase the use and promote this type of farming by means of targeted courses aimed at conventional agricultural farmers to learn methods and increase their knowledge for the conversion of their plots of land.

Apart from this, La Vialla, based on its own experience, proposes to its non-agricultural suppliers, a free consultation to pinpoint structural intervention that can be applied to render the company more eco-sustainable, such as solar panels, insulation, irrigation systems to reduce consumption, improving logistics, etc.