

BODEGA CHACRA

PATAGONIA - RIO NEGRO

Hints of Hawthorn

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An Interview with Piero Incisa of Bodega Chacra



There are those wines that exist for simple and immediate pleasure – that bottle waiting for you in the fridge at the end of a long workday or that Sunday night pizza wine. Let's not minimize the importance of these cheap and cheerful friends, for if they didn't exist, perhaps neither would many of the world's flourishing wine regions.

Then there are those wines that come to the table with more than just a promise to quench our thirst. They inspire questions, stimulate conversations and enhance moments. They capture the feeling of a particular place and time and they tug on our heartstrings a little bit. These are the wines that prompt nerdy people like me to voluntarily

dedicate an entire Sunday to researching and writing about – well, an alcoholic beverage. For me, to just drink the wine is sometimes not enough – I need to meet its parents...

Let's take a journey to the end of the viticultural earth –Patagonia, Argentina. Here in the small sub-region of Rio Negro sits Bodega Chacra winery, dedicated to the production of world class Pinot Noir. Now, who would be crazy enough to venture to produce one of the world's most finicky grape varieties in an icy desert in the middle of nowhere? Piero Incisa della Rocchetta, grandson of the illustrious founder of Italy's famed Super Tuscan...Sassicaia.

I had the pleasure of chatting on the phone with Piero to learn more about his philosophies and fanatical dedication to biodynamic farming and non-interventionist winemaking. He sat in his garden overlooking the Bodega as he explained the terroir around him and the story of how he got there.

Piero was inspired to explore Patagonia after tasting a Burgundian-like Patagonian Pinot Noir at a New York restaurant. It was a wine made by the Oenologist at Argiano in Tuscany, Hans Vinding Diers, who started a project in Rio Negro called Bodega Noemia. Piero successfully pestered Hans into letting him go to Patagonia to help with the harvest.



"Hans knows and understands this terroir better than anyone alive. He is a soul brother, a mentor and a daily source of inspiration. Without him, this madness would not have been possible!"



After a vintage of mentorship under Hans, Piero started his experimentation and leased an abandoned Pinot Noir vineyard planted in 1932. This singular vineyard of gnarled vines, planted on their original rootstocks, produces very few bunches of small, concentrated berries. Piero returned to Rio Negro the second year with intentions to purchase the vineyard, only the owner was about to rip it out and replace it with apples and pears.

“He told me that he liked me too much to sell me the vineyard because it produces so little that it would leave me bankrupt. I brought over a bottle of my first wine made from his vineyard, and then he understood.”

Now as one of Rio Negro’s pioneers of premium wine, Piero speaks of the land with such passion as if he were born and raised there. “I am looking to maintain and capture the biodiversity and purity of this ecosystem in the wine” he says. “As humans, to maintain good health we must consider our entire bodies. We must take care of our eyes, feet, hands and heart. This is the same with a farm. It’s not only about the vineyard, it’s also about the trees and plants and animals all around it and this is how we restore and maintain the balance of the farm.”

I wonder if there is a certain freedom that comes along with cultivating a new wine region. Granted, the oldest winery in Rio Negro is 120 years old, but there are only a handful of other bodegas there. Piero describes some European producers as being trapped in a “golden cage”.

“There is a great deal of responsibility that comes along with producing wine from such important appellations where tradition is paramount. In Patagonia, we have the privilege of having access to these extremely old vineyards that are un-grafted and they convey a certain purity and incredible complexity, but we are not bound by such traditions and expectations.”

In the middle of our conversation, Piero walks into his kitchen to discover that there is a feast being made that could feed 20 Italian Marines, when there are only three people at the Bodega! “We are organic and biodynamic so we have everything here – goats, rabbits, lambs, fresh eggs, and vegetable gardens with 17 different types of tomatoes. We love to cook and we just go nuts”, he laughs.

But at Bodega Chacra, it’s not all organic feasts with garlands of fresh herbs and wild flowers – although there is a lot of that. I asked Piero if his drive and commitment to quality is inspired by his grandfather.

“I was forced to really think about that the first time that I was asked this question. This is the most difficult thing I have done in my life. It’s a lot of pressure to come from an organization that has such maniac precision, commitment and endless passion. I have spent the last ten years being a bit of an ostrich, where I buried my head down into the sand and just worked. To bring electricity and water, and to build the structures on this vineyard has been extremely difficult. This doesn’t allow you the time to stop, reflect, and look at yourself. My father and my grandfather have been of great influence on my life, perhaps more than I could ever imagine. My grandfather once told me that to do something average takes you the same amount of time and money as it does to do something great, so you might as well do it right from the beginning. I think that’s where he has inspired me the most.”



At Bodega Chacra, every aspect of the production is done by hand. The wines are un-fined, un-filtered and fermented with wild, native yeasts. The grapes are not pressed – they are whole berry fermented and the juice is transferred to barrel by gravity. “Barda” is the entry level cuvee from the estate and the pure expression of Pinot Noir is truly captured in this delicate, yet beautifully concentrated wine. Piero tells me that this year they will experiment with pressing the grapes for Barda for the first time after receiving advice from a friend from the famous “La Romanee” vineyard in Burgundy.

“We always keep all of our options open. There is no right or wrong in life, only points of view. We experiment to find the balance that is appealing to us. We prefer low alcohol wines, with minerality, and with fruit that is not overripe. This allows the wine to carry elegance, natural concentration, freshness, typicity and balance. When you let the grapes ripen for a very long period of time, you lose a lot of acidity and you lose the sense of place.

For a man who’s philosophies are that of a unwavering naturalist, his views on the human influence in wine are refreshingly honest and realistic. “When we speak about terroir we have a tendency to isolate the micro-climatic condition, the soil composition and the minerals, but in my opinion, man is very much a part of the terroir. Without man, the wine would not be made. I think that a wine will always reflect the spirit and soul of the person who made it. If you look at any chateau in France, whenever there is a transition of a generation or a winemaker there are differences in the product. It’s not necessarily better or worse, but it’s still different. Today we are afraid to tell the truth and the truth is, we are only as good as our team. Bodega Chacra is not about me, it’s about the 22 people who work here, along with Mother Nature.”

I wrap up my chat with Piero and he closes with an invitation to come and stay at the Bodega. My guess is that he extends a fair few of those offers of which very few of them are actually taken up on, given its rural location. My hope is that I will take the journey there someday along with many other wine enthusiasts, because I have a feeling that this is a terroir that deserves some attention.

2009 Pinot Noir ‘Barda’ – entry level cuvee, (\$41.99 at Dundarave Wine Cellar)

2009 Pinot Noir ‘Cincuenta y Cinco’ – 1955 vineyard, (\$88.99 at Dundarave Wine Cellar)

2009 Pinot Noir ‘Treinta Y Dos’ – 1932 vineyard (not currently available)

| by Emily Walker