

Henry Finzi-Constantine & Titouan des Goyat in one of the many vineyards at Castello di Tassarolo.



The WORKHORSES of Italy

story by Henry Finzi-Constantine with photos by Sara Baroni



Mike Paddock & Vadant teaching with a modern Italian plow.

Within the rich green hills of Gavi, Italy, just north of the port of Genoa, hidden from view by a multiplicity of forests, one can find the estate "Castello di Tassarolo" (castle of Tassarolo). The Spinola family has inhabited this castle in one form or another since 250 AD, and has been making wine from its vineyard since the year 1367. Theirs is one of the families of Old Nobility that dominated the history of Genoa during the city-state's great period, from the 12th to the 14th century. When Christopher Columbus discovered the New World, the Spinola family

contributed half of the costs of his journey.

Members of this family include film director (and wine maker) Paolo Spinola and his daughter, Massimiliana Spinola, who found success as a painter and photographer. Her career in the contemporary art world took her to faraway places such as London and New York for 12 years. During her time abroad, she had continued working with her father, and always returned each year for the harvest and vinification (wine making). In 2005, Massimiliana returned to her family's Italian estate to take over its operation.

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The Workhorses of Italy continued

Later that year, she made the decision to convert the enterprise to biodynamic agriculture, which employs what proponents describe as "a holistic understanding of agricultural processes" with an emphasis on the use of manures and composts and excludes the use of artificial chemicals. One of the earliest sustainable agricultural movements, biodynamics

Workhorses are gaining ground on Italy's agricultural scene. As their use increases, so has the need for the associated skills of using them.

is based on methods developed by Rudolf Steiner in the early 20th century. Its objectives are closely related to nature's laws which, enrich and enliven the earth, leaving it fertile and healthy.

Shortly after Massimiliana's return home, her partner, Henry Finzi-Constantine, joined her there. Henry, a London native, was keen to use working horses on the estate, which perfectly complimented the couple's commitment to biodynamic agriculture. Of all the available working horse breeds, they decided on the Trait Comtois—for its intellect, serenity and willing collaboration in working conditions. This breed comes from the Jura region of France, close to the Italian border.

In 2009, Henry acquired his first

Comtois, Titouan des Goyat. To this day, this gelding remains the rock of the group, not only as a comfortable and willing horse in the vineyards, but also for keeping the team calm and focused. Nicotine, the second horse to arrive, is more Massimiliana's favorite—sharp and trustworthy, she is more involved with carting and carriages, teaching horsemen and women, working with children and logging in the winters for which she is absolutely great!

Cyrus 2 was the third workhorse to arrive. He came from a project called "Save the Working Horse" where suitable horses, fattened for the table in France, are chosen for placement. The prime movers of this program are Tony and Miky of L'Estancia, who select and train the horses. In the process, they also train the new owners as the first step in the relationship. Tony has developed a good eye and can select the right horse for fulfilling a new owner's



Mike & Nicotine demonstrating timber extraction to a group of students.

BIODYNAMIC WINE

Biodynamic grape growing is a type of organic viticulture that uses special preparations of herbal sprays and composts, and times the applications according to the lunar calendar. Biodynamicists look at their land as a complete living ecosystem, as a living being that needs biodiversity in order to be healthy. Biodynamic winemakers often also live and work on a farm, with wheat fields, animals, fruit trees, woods and vines striving to be self-sufficient. The soil is not seen as the surface for production, but rather is considered an organism in its own right, and preparations are used to enhance the micro-life in the soil. The soil is part of the context of lunar and cosmic rhythms.

Rudolph Steiner, an Austrian philosopher, is often credited with having laid out the basic tenets of biodynamics in a series of talks he gave in the early 20th century. Steiner gathered together the oral traditions passed down by simple farmers for thousands of years. Many of these ideas were based on the work of monks such as the Cluny sect in France, that spent countless years tinkering with various mixtures and timing of preparations to find what worked best, in a trial-and-error basis.

The practice of biodynamic principles in agriculture were first developed on the estate of the Count and Countess of Keyserlink by an introductory course held by Steiner in 1924, following a request by the local farmers with regards to the deterioration of product quality and the developing corrosion of the soil, desertification.

Within the course were seminaries many of the principles that guide the biodynamic farmer of today, with regards to the "forces of life" and the fertility of the soil, the importance of livestock and deeper insights into the forces and dynamics that nature reveals to the developed and discerning eye.

Many organic vineyards use some biodynamic tools, so there is often no clearcut line between organic and biodynamic. Biodynamic certification also costs money, so just as with organics many biodynamically prepared wines do not say so on the label.

needs. Their motto: "From under the knife to a new lease on life" is often toasted with a bottle of Titouan Gavi or Titouan Barbera—wines originating from vineyards worked almost exclusively with workhorses.

With the arrival of horseman, Nicolas Spinardi, and his 5-year-old gelding, Vadant, the stables now house four working horses. With 20 hectares of vines, two hectares of vegetables, six hectares of forest, six for seeding and 15 in pasture, the needs of the estate keep the team comfortably busy all year round.

Outcome

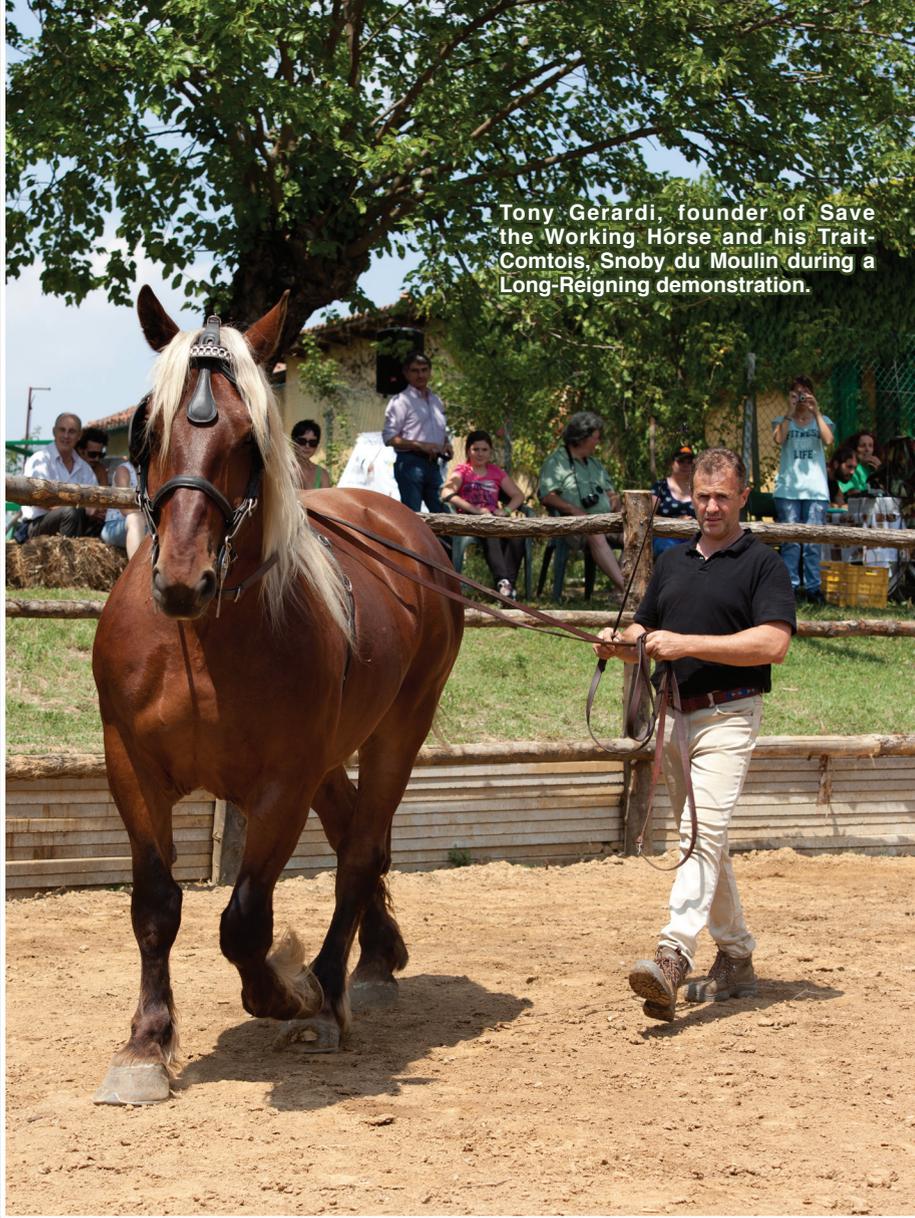
Henry's conviction of the necessity for working horses on biodynamic farms, replacing many of the tasks previously carried out with mechanized equipment, seems to have paid off. The entire atmosphere has changed, from more worms and flying insects to small animals and birds. After only five years, the land is thriving, the grass is greener, the soil more fertile, the vines are stronger, the grapes healthier, thus the wines are better.

Working horses have not only generated a positive farming methodology with regard to quality and sustainability, but the estate is host to many courses, working demonstrations and a bi-annual workhorse festival, developed for the working horse community at large as an occasion to gather, share knowledge, experiences and generally promote the workhorse farming culture.

Henry is also developing a nationally recognized certificate for the various fields of work suitable for heavy horses while engaged in promoting their use in the Piedmont region of Italy.

As an example, L'isola Delle Verdure ("Vegetable Island") is a project involving seven hectares of vegetables, seeding fields, pasture, vineyard and forests with the underlying purpose of marrying clean energy (horse, solar and wind power) and composting to form pluri-dynamics (biodynamic biodiversity) for a healthy and sustainable approach to food production. Cultivation on the Island is guided by a "Diet for Health" and not by market demands! Henry recently made a presentation in Slow Food pavilion at EXPO, Milano, on the project.

Because of heightened interest in the use of workhorses in agriculture,



Tony Gerardi, founder of Save the Working Horse and his Trait-Comtois, Snoby du Moulin during a Long-Reining demonstration.

coupled with the need for accessibility to the many skills and equipment required, Cavallavor (meaning "Workhorse") was formed as a consultative arm under the auspices of a regional association, AgriBio Piedmont. It was the result of Henry's idea to develop the fundamental principles of biodynamic farming methods; to give healthy forces to the plants through curing the earth.

Cavallavor is working closely with other associations through Fédération Européenne du Cheval de Trait pour la promotion de son Utilisation (FECTU), the European draught animal federation for the development of horse traction and the dissemination of working horses in European agriculture. As its representative, Henry participates in meetings throughout Europe.

Cavallavor and Castello di Tassarolo hosted FECTU's annual

general meeting in March, the main theme of which was to develop "easy access" to the many scientific and economic studies available, and to develop an access plan to informative opportunities within the sphere of agriculture.

In conjunction with AgriBio, Cavallavor has also launched a pilot project for the development of a European workhorse marque to highlight and promote products and services derived from the use of working horses.

Since the arrival of Titouan des Goyat, Nicotine des Fresnes, Cyrus 2 and Vadant, life has been breathed back into the land, the lives of those on it and our very relationship to the land, in a way that could not have been imagined. The mere fact that the historic Castello di Tassarolo is now farmed with workhorses provides optimism for a better future.