



THE OTHER FACE OF MALTA

Ta' Betta, justifiably ambitious *grands vins*

We meet the family of Juanito Camilleri who, after ten years of trials, is presenting three fine wines named after important knights, defenders of freedom > A story that weaves passion, energy, research, values and a taste for life

by **Alessandro Torcoli**

I only intended to write about wine. Instead, as usual, I find myself flying to other worlds, too interesting not to recount. I turn the wine glass and the golden flashes or ruby reflections become brush strokes that revive my memory; scents are released and succeed one another while the story becomes denser, and they seal memories that will remain with us forever. There is no great wine without the face of he who desired it. And, believe me, in this case he desired it so strongly that not only did he defy fate (as always, when one decides to take the vineyard route) but much more, with the courage of a lion. This is **Juanito Camilleri** and his story. The origins of **Ta' Betta**, which means "Betta's", his daughter's.

An unexpected trip

The phone vibrates. The name of Vincenzo Melia appears, a friend I haven't heard from in years. An expert Sicilian agronomist with a happy past at the Regional Institute of the Vine and Wine of Palermo: at the time of Diego Planeta (president), Melia and a few of his colleagues, under the guidance of the maestro Giacomo Tachis, achieved in a few years, for Sicilian wines, what others had not managed in a whole century. Now Melia sails between his Alcamo, Linosa and Malta. And it is precisely here, on the island of the Crusaders, that he heartily suggests we should go to see something special. Now such a proposal, in most cases, would sound like a trumpet blare to satisfy some commercial need, but not with Vincenzo. We know it cannot end thus, and the proof lies in the fact that he had never, before now, asked anything of his old friends from Milan.

FRONT PAGE Juanito, Astrid and Betta Camilleri. The wine cellar is named after the owners' daughter
 RIGHT the lion is the symbol of the family business. Here it is drawn on the cases of Jean Parisot, the Chardonnay dedicated to the knight of the same name, defender of Maltese freedom (represented in the statue BELOW)



To be honest, I wasn't eager to fly to Malta. An ideal destination for study holidays, for that mixture of English language and blue sea, unfortunately the local news had not been particularly tempting in recent years, due to that combination of opacity and oppression that had led to the sacrifice of a colleague, Daphne Caruana Galizia, who also wrote about food and wine and who, as an investigative journalist, was investigating drug trafficking, money laundering and corruption. On 16 October 2017, Daphne was blown to pieces when a car bomb placed inside her Peugeot 108 exploded.

I go anyway, sufficiently curious to take the trip to visit a new winery in Malta, where I only know of a few of little value, while Ta' Betta, on paper, shows international ambitions.

A family project

Juanito Camilleri has invested everything in this vineyard and in a wine cellar, which is simple and elegant "thanks to Astrid", his wife, as he is eager to point out. In fact, Juanito looks more like an engineer than a designer: robust and prepared, yet also a dreamer. For 10 years he was the rector of the University of Malta, the horizons of which he broadened by attracting students and interest from all over the world. Always travelling, or engaged on the boards of various companies, Juanito studied in Cambridge, England, where he met Astrid, and wished to remain in England. **Astrid** a little less so. Above all she didn't want to leave her sick father on the island. So they came back, and Juanito managed to make her promise to seek refuge in the countryside, where he could gaze at the bright stars in the centre of the Mediterranean.

This is how the story of the business began, with a small farmhouse and the vineyard that was meant to be more of a garden to tend in order to overcome the stress of a seemingly simple Maltese life.

The years at the University were tough, and the following years even more so: it is well known that Juanito believes in a different Malta, in freedom, honesty and justice. Like his friend Daphne. And thus, a series of difficulties arose: the permits did not arrive, and he was not even sure whether he could bottle the



first vintages, which were finally ready to present to enthusiasts of signature wines. It's amazing how, if one knows how to read wine, it is possible to find so many meanings.

In fact, the whole painful story emerges from the wine glass: I realise that the 2017 Chardonnay is different from the others; it is the warmest and the most mature, with hints of tropical fruits and a touch of honey. Reasoning out this obvious difference, Juanito recounts, "This wine was born of suffering. We had to make the wine and we were in the eye of the storm: they tried to stop us from doing business with a thousand quibbles; they would not give us permits; we were about to throw in the towel when finally our tenacity paid off and we were able to continue with our work."



The three labels of the Winery represent the Maltese sun and limestone soils with an elegance worthy of the menus of great restaurants

The courage of lions

“The grapes were ready, we weren’t.” This is the truth of oenologist **Vincenzo Melia**. “You can actually taste the excessive ripening.” If we did a blind taste test with this wine, we would downgrade it, compared to the other vintages, such as the precise and charming 2018; but after having tasted its story, it will be difficult to let go of this 2017 glass, which fills us with energy and courage. And we will uncork yet another bottle in the evening for dinner, between jokes and teary eyes.

It is not by chance that the symbol of Ta’ Betta is a lion. And the labels pay homage to the most famous defenders of Maltese freedom: the knights Antonio Manoel, Philippe Villiers, Jean Parisot. “This is the wine of life,” claims Juanito during the 19 tastings from which we draw an exhaustive overview of the company’s style. “It is not the whim of a millionaire; we have put everything into it.” Nor was it easy to scrape together, over 20 years, the four hectares of the vineyard from tiny parcels of land. Land is very expensive, and the limestone soil is very hard and forces the roots to sink. “The grapes are very tasty,” says Melia.

Juanito Camilleri has finally put the latest vintages up for sale, but he has waited almost 10 years since he planted the first vines. In all seriousness, he allowed the roots to sink really deep.

The wines are obtained from **Chardonnay (Jean Parisot, the tenacious one; it is said that he was able to convert a Protestant, so beware... you critics of the Chardonnay and the barrique, you may change your minds!), Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon (Antonio Manoel, the opulent), Syrah and Cabernet Franc (Philippe Villiers, the robust)**. They all express the Maltese sun but with an elegance that can aspire to the tables of great connoisseurs. Unfortunately, they are not imported into Italy yet, but they deserve to enrich the lists of the best restaurants with cosmopolitan ambitions.

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[images: eye, nose and lips] OUR TASTINGS

We are leaving out the older vintages, which helped us to understand the qualitative constancy of the wines and commenting on the most recent ones. All vintages are available to the wine club members.

Jean Parisot
100% Chardonnay
5,000 bottles

2017

A unique vintage, owing to the events narrated. Nevertheless, it is more in the style of a Sonoma than a Burgundy, a balanced wine, with intriguing smoky, toasted notes interlaced with delicate gorse and exotic fruits; a touch of honey on the palate.

2018

The sun: brilliant gold, releases aromas of citrus and flowers (hawthorn). Opulence from wood, smoothness and warmth, unyielding, with a plump finale and remarkable fruit precision.

2019 (from the barrel, on sale from March 2020)

Strong bouquet of yellow flowers, abundant fruits, maintains promising freshness, fruit concentration.

Antonio Manoel
60% Merlot, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon
9,000 bottles

2016

Floral, with intense notes of raspberries and strawberries, spicy. Mediterranean herbs, tastes of cherry and undergrowth re-emerge. Thick silk sensation in the mouth; persistent and sapid, spicy and floral with a finale of small fruits.

2017

Intense aromas of berries (strawberries and blackberries), a hint of grass, silky, robust with abundant alcohol, but well-balanced with the fruit concentration. Very persistent.

2018 for sale from March 2020

Philippe Villiers
70% Syrah, 30% Cabernet Franc
12,000 bottles

2010

Ample bouquet with toasted notes (coffee and cocoa) and traces of freshness (mint); floral touch (red rose). Slightly grassy palate, but finally deep, very long, with an aftertaste of blueberries.

2016

Intense red fruit, strawberry and blackberry compote. It is rich on the palate and dense with chocolate and blueberries, soft tannins and excellent freshness.

2017

Powerful vintage, a triumph of red and black fruits. Explosive on the palate, with a good freshness and floral finale.

2018 for sale from March 2020