

For Ex-Goldman Trader, Reporter Wine Work Is Bugs, Memory

By Krista Giovacco - Oct 29, 2012

The alarm sounds at 7 a.m., and this is during vacation.

Not your typical time off, though. I have an hour to wash, eat breakfast and get outside to meet the farm manager. I am in San Miniato, Italy, working the grape harvest at the Tuscany estate of Cosimo Maria Masini.

For two weeks I trade my Christian Louboutin heels for boots and my computer keyboard for gardening gloves and clippers.

Cosimo Maria Masini is a certified organic and biodynamic farm. It uses no synthesized chemicals and limited mechanical intervention in the winemaking process. The concept is based on principles derived from Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who is credited as the founder of biodynamics.

An organization called World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, or Wwoof, allows me to work like a dog picking the grapes that will become the 2012 vintage. The organization matches volunteer workers with organic farms in order to share sustainable ways of living. More than 50 countries offer Wwoof opportunities such as working on a coffee plantation in Hawaii or landscaping in New Zealand.

Yes, I volunteered. Yet nonfinancial rewards come in the form of San Miniato sunsets, sweet figs and ripe tomatoes from the orchards lining the property, and the camaraderie of people from diverse backgrounds.

There's a chef from Japan, two post-collegiate women from Iowa, an architecture student from France and an entrepreneur from Brooklyn.

Goldman, BlackRock

Helen Belogolova, a former trader at Goldman Sachs Group Inc. (GS) for three years and who also worked at BlackRock Inc. (BLK) for a year as a portfolio manager, now is pursuing a Ph.D. at the UCLA Anderson School of Management.

She seems less interested in winemaking and more in spending a few weeks in the beautiful countryside. By contrast, Andrea Bandini, 23, an aspiring winemaker from San Miniato, is working at the farm as part of his internship for the trade.

"It's obligatory for the program," he says about his university studies specializing in viticulture and oenology. "I'd like to make wine one day in Tuscany."

Anthony Vecci, a 25-year-old American who arrived as a Wwoofer at the farm last October, is now a full-time employee.

“I came looking for export jobs, but it’s a difficult industry in Italy,” he said. “Despite experience, you start at the bottom rung and are paid very little and have very little responsibility.”

Working Vacation

About one in 10 people are actually interested in wine when they arrive, Vecci said. “Most see the pictures on the website and think of the stereotypical Tuscan setting and see a beautiful way to vacation.”

Call it a working vacation. While I’m in the minority who are there to experience winemaking, the picturesque backdrop is not lost on me. Nor are the myriad mosquitos that laugh at the long pants and sleeves I wear in soaring temperatures to avoid getting scratched by the thousands of little prickles clinging to my clothes.

We start early to avoid the heat, which this year has been historically high. The sun beats down at as much as 40 degrees Celsius (110 degrees Fahrenheit). Our jugs of cold water are tepid by mid-morning.

Grape Stomping

A typical day is spent crouched among the dense vines, clipping ripe bunches to fill hundreds of crates that are brought back to the cantina where the winemaking occurs. Stomping grapes with bare feet is still practiced here.

While the rolling hills of Tuscany are beautiful, they’re a hard terrain to work on. Maneuvering with 25-pound (12-kilo) crates in the vineyard is more science than art. Back at the cantina, the grapes are manually dropped into a machine that separates stems from fruit, which is then dumped into the fermentation barrels.

I’m surprised by the weight of the grapes as I plunge my bare arm into the barrel. I’m more surprised by how hot it is at the bottom -- a sign that fermentation is taking place. The pre-fermenting juice tastes as sweet as sugar.

The sweet aroma of alcohol wafts through the cantina. The floor is sticky from juice that has splashed out, all of which means more insects.

Espresso Rush

We work until about noon and break for lunch, which is washed down with espresso to give us energy to get through the rest of the workday.

The red varietals are turned, or punched down, by hand a few times a day, typically by men. I tried it, standing on the narrow edge of the barrel and using all my weight to push down the grapes with a long, shovel-like metal tool while praying that I wouldn’t fall in. Another worker was not so fortunate.

Some days there's labeling and packing of boxes of wine that will be shipped for export or sold locally to shops and restaurants.

There's no maid service. Preparing meals and chores are divided among the workers. Leisure time is spent playing cards, napping or trying to access e-mail or Skype over the spotty Internet connection.

Dinners most nights last for hours and include beer and wine. They are followed by dancing. Weekends are free and often involve trips to nearby destinations.

Hard Lessons

I've never worked so hard on vacation -- nor learned so much. Handpicking allows for more selectivity, so only the healthiest grapes are used, and white varietals are often picked first because red grapes take longer to reach full maturation.

This wasn't true of the malvasia grapes, a local white variety that becomes Fedardo, Cosimo Maria Masini's name for the sweet Italian dessert wine known as Vin Santo. After picking, the grapes hang to dry for three to four months until ready to be pressed and aged in small barrels for five years.

Perhaps that's the only drawback of the experience: having to wait to taste the fruits of my labor.

San Miniato is about 45 minutes by train from Florence. It is the center of a white truffle zone and hosts an annual festival in November. The Wwoof website provides a list of participating farms. Membership is 25 euros (\$32.30) and covers medical insurance while working.

(Krista Giovacco is a reporter for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

Muse highlights include Jeffrey Burke on books.

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