



## Sacrafamilia Gran Dama Arte Della Luce: when the vineyards turn their heads towards nature's light

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"The history of wine is being written." Anna Mercandelli

The secrets of the land are known only to those who entrust it with their steps without counting them, thinking of J. Prevère... As a woman painted by Leonardo, the land here is pure and gentle; with its own origins, and evolving, where microorganisms work undisturbed to purify the soil; among the vineyards you can perceive a "musicality" as if the plants aspired to enhance the expressive touch of the chords, not their echo; it is a theatre made of reassuring and harmonious silence; an environment placed amid the logic of receiving, with that reciprocal respect that leaves no room for compromises.

Autumn's light and warm colours take centre stage in the scenery; the vineyards of Sacrafamilia Gran Dama Arte Della Luce are located between Godiasco and Rivanazzano, in the Oltrepò Pavese (the area south of the river Po in the province of Pavia), on land that dates back to the Langhian Miocene (about 15 million years ago) composed of thick layers of marl that were deposited in a very deep sea; they are found mainly as white-bluish marl, sometimes yellowish, in layers of varying thickness, sometimes alternating with arenaceous or calcareous layers. Anna Mercandelli, with her husband Domenico Capeto (Mimmo), owners of the company, have a strong bond of complicity with the land, and carry out their work with extreme dedication and humility, they have an apparently simple philosophy, but disarmingly deep. The vineyards, alongside their faith, are at the centre of it all; they await steadfastly and observe every day the full maturation of the grapes. The wines they produce prove to be absolutely pure, with an exotic charm and an aristocratic character; they express such a naked and natural language, but with a precise shape and rigour; it is an intellectual property to be defended, that distinguishes itself from the "common way of thinking" and requires a time of reflection to be able to reach, albeit with many questions still, some understanding. At the tasting we find ourselves lacking words, such is its noble beauty, a fundamental product made of earth, sky, wind, water. The intensity of the interview itself seems to instil us, in our opinion, with a sense of peace.



We thank Anna and Mimmo for giving us this important opportunity.

**Mimmo you are a musician, what did it mean for you to go from the art of making music to the one of making such particular wines, what has your path been like since you met Anna?**

*I'd like to say one thing, the most important one in my opinion: music is a mission for me as much as wine is, because we were created to get to know and love God, this is our service.*

*With music I was in love with what I did, just as I am in love with what I'm doing now. I started off on a strange path, because I was a teetotaller, when I met Anna I used to drink only water, that's it, I was actually a water connoisseur, this one was good, this other one less so, it was the most important thing for me and so I had to understand what I was drinking.*

*Wine wasn't my thing. As a child I worked with my uncle: he used to drink and he was often "in high spirits" and I felt sorry, I thought I'd never ever drink wine, it was the last thing I thought I'd do in my life. I started drinking when I was 37, when I met Anna.*

*Wine became a passion, it's true that we make a lot of sacrifices, but the gift wine gives you is so great that you can't go back, you saw how cold it was in the vineyards today: well, we go to work even under the rain, whether it is freezing or in the heat of the sun, we're always in the vineyard, but what is really important? What does practicing natural agriculture mean to us? Just as there are three theological virtues—Faith, Hope and Charity—so we have three motivating ideas that push us forward: the first one is that natural wine is good for your health, the second is that working with love and with our hearts fills us with joy, the third is that to us natural agriculture is a school of prayer, because we entrust all our sacrifices and our work to God hoping to reach the end of the harvest. This is why we define it as spiritual agriculture and the wine we make to us represents the union between spirit and body and between the sky and the earth. With such a beautiful project, how can you not be happy! It is a huge sacrifice, but it gives you great joy. I think that my meeting with Anna was willed by God. I really think that we have been entrusted with a mission: spiritual agriculture.*

**Over these years of hard work and spiritual strength in the vineyards, which were the trials, observations and eventual mistakes that helped you understand how to make your wine, even though, as you say, there are still many things to be learned.**

*The idea of the "spiritual" helps you understand the material aspect of things, for example in 1999 my father-in-law, he often used to take me to the vineyards to taste the grapes, "try this grape and then try that other one," and I didn't know anything, I didn't understand. Today, thinking about the past, I understand that it was something important and not a simple "yeah, let's go and eat some grapes." The idea was to go beyond, something really important would come out of that single grape. Of course we've had a lot of experience, every year is one more year of experience for us. In the past we tried everything, harvesting ripe grapes, unripe ones because of the never-ending autumn rains, selecting single grapes one by one from the unhealthy ones, dividing them into many vats. Of course, we've also had many setbacks,*



*once it happened that one vat had high volatile acidity. We take the grapes to the cellars as soon as they're harvested, we press them right away and the fermentation process begins naturally the next day. Of course, every year we learn new things about the evolutionary phases of the wine, but to be able to do so you have to know the vineyard, you have to know the grapes. Anna and I know almost every plant, how they have behaved over the years, we live like this, and every year we experience wonderful things, from the vineyard to the cellar, that's the way we are.*

*When we are in the cellar we don't think too much about the technique because the wine, when the grapes are extraordinary the wine will be good. You can't make good wine with bad grapes, not even by adding anything you can think of.*



**Mimmo, what does Grandama mean to you?**

*Grandama represents the beginning of a path; I remember that when we started I didn't know anything about agriculture or winemaking, we started thinking about Grandama as something special... and we said to ourselves: "We won't apply anything more to it," not even the sulphur I used to apply by hand. I remember that year, 2008, it was a very rainy year, many people applied systemic treatments over and over, since we didn't apply anything we only produced about a hundred bottles, but of excellent quality. What happened? Our determination in pursuing natural agriculture strengthened our relationship with Shumei with a signed partnership to promote natural agriculture in the world. The wine thus served as a sign for something more*

*important, a union, a grouping; a meeting of two different faiths but with one project, we didn't marry the plan, we married the Master Planner, this is the most important thing. Where this will take us I don't know, but what matters, as Mother Theresa said, is to give it your all, and if we don't manage to finish what we started, someone else will, we lay the foundations on the rock, someone will follow us.*

**Do you feel like a true winemaker today?**

*I don't know, I'm only sure of one thing, I am a son of God and I know He loves me and I must do the same, I have to pay Him back for what He has basically loaned us, because in the end we're here almost as if on a lease, in the true sense of the word, and, as we saw this morning in the vineyards, we have to leave a mark so people can think "we don't understand them, but what they're doing is beautiful."*

**Anna, you come from a family of winemakers. What is your most beautiful memory since you walked into the cellars? What intrigued you the most?**

*I remember I was 5/6 years old, my father took me there and told me "get inside," it was a 200 litres red tub, "and press the grapes with your feet," it's my only memory of those days. Later on in my youth I did many beautiful things: I remember my schoolmates fondly, but always with a tinge of loneliness in my heart, because we lived far from the town, so I only got to see my schoolmates during lessons.*

*From the top of the house I lived in I used to look towards the town and tell myself: "How I wish I lived close to my schoolmates, that I could play and talk with them," until I was 18 years old. I attended the agricultural high school, before choosing it my father took me to all the schools in Voghera and told me: "Anna, don't think about anything, only about the school you'd like to study in for 5 years." The last school we visited was the Carlo Gallini Agricultural Institute and when I saw it I said: "Dad, this is the school I like best."*

*There was greenery, the countryside; the others were very urban, like barracks; so I chose the agricultural institute. The most beautiful memory is of my professors, all of them special, each one more so than the others, they endured us all, our objective surely wasn't to learn agriculture, but rather to get done with school, which was getting more and more difficult for me because at 18 I was already living in the world of the family business.*

*When I finished my studies I started working in the family business right away, all of my family was in it, we all worked together to create the family business. I got into the world of vineyards: I did a little bit of everything, accounting, administration, sales, and client reception. Then there was the country side of things, the agriculture, my dad had already mechanized the work, he had tractors, tools to work with and for treatments. We then he had the harvesting done by hand which was quite strenuous, we didn't have the kind of selection we have today, the hours were quite long, but usually no later than 11pm.*

*Nowadays we have much longer hours with Mimmo in Sacrafamilia, because beside the selection of the grapes in the vineyard, something that absolutely didn't exist back then, we then have a lot of work in the winery which is a secondary much more accurate selection of the grapes and we love this but it is also very tiring, but*



*the feeling of tiredness at the end of the harvest is like a woman after giving birth, even if she suffered she says: "I thank you God because this child is the fruit of your love" and of the love for Mimmo because Sacrafamilia is like a child to us. We share these sacrifices with the people we love and who love us and follow us with their prayers.*

*It is so beautiful to have people who wish you well, who pray for the Lord to send us some sun because it is so important for us since the harvest has to last that much longer to carry out the grape selection. We thank the Lord who gave us health and collaborators who patiently work and pray with us and give their all.*

*The memory I have as a child is thus just the beginning, that matured when I really asked myself "What does Jesus mean to me? What does God mean to me? What is the daily effort I put in my work good for?" So, I've gone through this growth.*

### **So it is a journey of faith?**

*Yes, a journey of Faith. It was Padre Pio, this great saint of our times, who helped my Faith grow, helped me find the reason for my existence. He taught me to do everything with love to serve God and my neighbour and to also love myself. It is very important to love yourself, to like yourself, because by loving ourselves we understand that our neighbours must be loved as well, because by respecting our health we understand we also have to respect that of our neighbour, and we do so with our wines as well.*



**Anna, what do your wines mean to you?**

*Sacrafamilia's wine is the purest, most sacred thing we have, because we put all of our energies into our work and it bears this fruit. The surrounding environment is an influencing factor: the naturalness of the area, the fact that the vineyards are surrounded by woods, this is very lucky, but it's a situation we found by Providence. There are few farmers left in our area, young people abandon the vineyards, many of them pull them out. We see everything through our Faith, the Lord has shown us this path.*

*We have taken care of the vineyards of many elderly people who wanted to abandon the land. We were their salvation, because otherwise they would have had to pull the vineyard out. We thank them despite the difficulties we sometimes have to make them accept this form of agriculture, because the older people love to see a vineyard full of grapes, a vineyard where they can boast with their neighbour saying: "Look at how many grapes I had this year!"*

*Our aim is different, we want to make the purest fruit that may not be beautiful to look at, but when you put it in your mouth you can already taste what its future could be, the "spiritual wine".*

**When did you understand that you were taking a step away from the past, towards an important future that would begin the production of a wine "almost beyond reach"?**

*I don't think it's possible to say the exact moment when the change started, because day by day our common prayer was to say: "Lord shed light onto our path" and He did so day by day. We had to cut out certain things from our lives, cut down on many things: both from an economical point of view, as well as regards ties with people, but it was a sort of purification for us, that happened gradually.*

*It was a path of trust, of Faith. A key moment was the final separation of my brother from the company, in 2013. We had got to the point of saying: "What shall we do?" because we were feeling surrounded by hostility and envy. When we had to choose, the Lord guided us and we listened to Professor Roberto Zironi, who told us: "Move forward!"*

**So you were shown a path...**

*Yes, one evening we were talking with Roberto about what to do and he said: "Go forward, forward, and forward!" I told him: "Are you sure?" "Yes, forward." Zironi has supported us throughout all these years and he has encouraged us, he has always been a great friend, he said: "I have nothing to teach you, the wine is yours, and when I come to Sacrafamilia I sit down and I feel good." He was the one who even though he had the professional capability to tell us what to do, in the end he never forced any technical adjustments on us as an oenologist is wont to do; he was a spiritual father to us. We are grateful to him for all of this... he traced a path for us. When we later met again he told us: "I knew I wouldn't be wrong in telling you to go on."*

**What you say, along with what happens, is fascinating. Is there an explanation for it?**

*No, because maybe we will see an explanation at the end, we see the light but we don't know what comes after*

*the light, of course we don't know the "afterwards" but we know it is an absolutely beautiful thing, and that is what gives us the strength to walk. We happened to hear a story about toads on Radio Maria.*

*There was a race among them to reach a difficult finish line: one after the other the toads gave up, but one of them kept going forward, and everyone would tell him: "Why bother, give up." But he wouldn't listen to them. In the end all the other toads gave up, and he was the only one to reach the finish line. They asked him who had given him the strength and that's when they found out that the toad was deaf, he couldn't hear them telling him to give up. This is what happens to us, we go on as deaf as him, and the more things people tell us the more we don't hear them. This is our strength.*

**You spend many hours in the vineyards with very few workers, you don't have a lot of trust in others?**

*No, it's not an issue of trust. We know that in many companies the owners live well, they own a beautiful house, a beautiful car, they go shake hand with many people leaving the vineyard in the hands of other people, good people, but since they're not the owners... it's like having a child be raised by a nanny, no! A mother is a mother, and a father is a father, you can't leave your child with a person who no matter how good it can be for your child they simply aren't their mother and father. There's nothing to be done about it, we could never stay away from our vineyards.*

*Even if we're seen dressed in work clothes we are happy because we are not ashamed of who we are. Because this is not just a mission for us, it is much more. We are brave for others as well: "See: with simplicity and humility you can have everything."*

**In your tastings, is there any one wine you especially liked?**

*All the work done by others must be respected, appreciated and valued. We don't have enough professional knowledge to be able to judge. We prefer to let other more competent people analyse and judge the wines. We would never speak ill of others, because we know how much work goes into a winery, so we don't have any answers. As far as our wines are concerned, they are like our own children, from the youngest to the oldest. We appreciate the first wine we ever made as much as the last one; we respect them all in the same way, even though they have different prices in the price listings, because we know we carried out our work with the utmost sacrifice in every moment of our lives.*

*During the interview a good friend of Anna and Mimmo's is also present, Roberto, who said:*

*"There are some technical details that Anna and Mimmo have found in the experience they accumulated, the fact that they don't fear oxygenation, the fact that oxidation is not a negative thing for them at all, but rather something that gives value to what they do, especially thanks to the fruit they have, a great source material, everything seems easier, in the sense that they actually struggle a lot but they don't have to pull a lot of tricks, just put in the work, and what surprises in the end is the result, it is truly miraculous, they use neither sulphur nor any particular techniques nor temperature control.*



*The grapes ferment all on their own and they don't have to do anything, just pump the wine a few times, more or less follow the evolution of the fermentation without doing anything esoteric, nor lunar calendars. It is almost as if they were interrogating their source material and followed the vintage.*

**Anna** continues: "We interpret the work based on the vintage, on the moment, every year is different from the previous ones. It is always like the first time, with the same anxiety hoping for good weather and good health so as to be able to work every day.

But we never lose hope, Hope comes from Faith."

**Anna, you are a Shumei partner, what is it?**

*Shumei is a Japanese not-for-profit association, it collaborates with the United Nations. We met them at a fair in Lugano in 2007, we usually don't take part in any fairs, it was a fortuitous occasion, let's say Providential.*

*We were helping an exporter sell our wine and Shumei was also at this fair to present their principles: natural agriculture, spirituality, art and beauty. We had the occasion to invite them to Sacrafamilia since we were interested in their natural farming methods, which were already quite similar to our own. As Mimmo was saying, at that point we were using only quarried sulphur in our vineyards and nothing else. It was beautiful for us to discover how people on the other side of the world were cultivating in such a natural way. We felt they were like our brothers, they were so similar to us.*

*Throughout the journey of getting to know each other we met with people from the simplest workers to the highest Teachers, in a hierarchical sense, all the way to the President Hiroko Koyama, a truly enlightened person, a great woman. She wanted to meet us in Milan, and so we got to know each other. It was 2007, she came to visit Sacrafamilia and even the Rustega, the place where we live, and the small church nearby dedicated to Sacrafamilia.*

*She understood what was important to us, she wanted to visit the places we lived our lives in. When we entered the small church we prayed together, their oriental prayer together with ours. We then parted ways, but only for a short time, because the following year, in May 2008, when the sakura were in bloom, the President invited us to Japan to their headquarters and that is when we signed our partnership agreement.*

*It is a collaboration that is based on spirituality, to heal the earth and contribute to the wellbeing of the human being with the help of our faith. Natural agriculture thus became a way to bring wellbeing to mankind through contaminant-free food. We started natural agriculture in the Grandama vineyard, that was the beginning; we then followed in all the others, until 2011 when all the vineyards were purified, meaning they had spent a period of three years without the use of any product.*

*President Hiroko Koyama had faith in us; it wasn't a business trade, but a common commitment to do good through natural agriculture at any cost.*



**Which wines do you produce and how many of them are there?**

*Starting in 2011 we have been making four of them, three reds and one white. We used to make many more of them, basically a wine for every vineyard, so we used to separate everything, but now we only produce the “Arte della Luce” (“Art of Light”) line. As we said before it all started with a red wine: Grandama. We then started producing: a cuvee of all the ancient red grape vineyards called Granre, a white wine called Gransol, and, from the new vineyards that come out of the three-year purifying cycle, Grancor.*

**And the names?**

*We came up with them ourselves. We dedicated them to what is most important to us: Grandama (lit. “Great Lady”) is the name we have for Mary mother of Jesus, Granre (lit. “Great King”) is inspired by Jesus himself, Gransol (lit. “Great Sun”) by the Holy Spirit. Grancor (lit. “Great Heart”) is inspired by the heart and soul we put into our work.*

**Is there also a connection with the President of Shumei?**

*There is a connection. The name Grandama inspired President Hiroko Koyama because it recalls the maternal figure of Mrs. Mihoko Koyama, founder of Shumei.*

**What are the characteristics of these wines? What do you perceive?**

*That is the same question I ask of those who come here and none of them can answer, when someone asks me what do I think of Grandama then I think of the whole year that went by, all the things that happened, and so I live all the beautiful and sad things that happened in that year, it's like thinking about the life of a child, it flashes in front of my eyes from his birth to that present.*

*I let the wine talk and then I don't know, it changes every day, it evolves constantly, it's not fair to freeze it in one moment, it is a constant movement, but what matters most is what happened in that vineyard in that specific year.*



**Anna who is this wine for? You make so little of it..**

*There are many wines out there that are more expensive than ours. Sometimes people who wish to taste it save money for it, or pool their resources with others to buy them. If a person truly wants our wine, why not? This is why I say it is meant for everyone.*



**However it is also not a very accessible wine...**

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**How much do your vineyards yield?**

(Mimmo) Over the past four years we have had about two, maximum three hundred kilograms per hectare. To some people that is nothing, to us it is a lot. We are thankful every year for even the little we get... You should always be thankful because it is not always a big quantity that makes you happy, a small one can do so, too. If we happen to get a bit more our joy doesn't change, on the contrary, it remains the same, if what we harvested is the way we wanted it to be. Of course we don't harvest the grapes when they are beautiful, we harvest them when they are good, because when they are beautiful there are a lot of them, but they are not good..

**And when are the grapes good?**

(Mimmo) Every year it's different, we usually harvest starting in the middle of October, but every year is different, the ripeness of each vineyard is different, the choice whether to harvest or not depends on our own sensibility. We will be grateful to Roberto Zironi our whole lives, the first thing he taught us was: "Put a grape in your mouth" like my father-in-law used to do; and even after ten years what my father-in-law used to say is the same as Roberto: "Put a grape in your mouth." It's the same thing.

**So Professor Zironi reminds you of your father-in-law?**

Yes.

**What was your relationship with him?**

*I can only say I loved him.*

**What's your relationship with the press?**

*We were waiting for the right time to trust someone, we are interested in talking to honest people who don't have an agenda, and we trust you completely. Over the years we have gotten more and more careful. Prudence is the first Cardinal Virtue.*

*We have had to do with loudmouths who simply wanted to find out about business, where our vineyards were, how much we produced; we found out about this later on when we went to court. These people only wanted to hurt us, hurt the company we built with so many sacrifices and debts, we aren't ashamed of saying that, because we earned them honestly and we would do it again, maybe a little more prudently, given our age..*

Says **Anna**: "Zironi played an essential role, he's still doing that, we are walking together.

**He believed in you?**

And we believed in him.

### **What about your previous philosophy? The biotic wine, etc?**

(Anna) The word biotic belongs to my brother. We don't even know what it means. We have always worked in the vineyards and in the winery and that's it.

### **Did you know Professor Zironi before you created your own company?**

*The name Zironi was written in my father's agenda, I don't know why, not even Roberto knows it. We met him later on, I don't remember when was the first time we saw him, maybe at Vinitaly or at some wine tasting, but he struck us as a dear person and especially as a teacher figure.*

*We hadn't started Shumei's natural agriculture method yet, but he was already appreciative of our products, our simple way of working. Later on we forged a stronger bond, he always told us to move forward: "You have the product, this is the most important thing." We asked him to point us towards some textbooks to learn what other wine producers know, he told us: "I won't give you any textbooks" and we were disappointed, "what if we have to deal with other wine producers or wine experts, what can we talk about?", "You don't have to talk about anything, you just have to get on with your work, you are doing well as you are."*

*We don't know much about tannin, enzymes, fermentation, chemistry, etc, but we know that we have to move forward and try not to make mistakes, because natural agriculture is constantly on the edge of a razor.*

**Mimmo** says: this is why you have to live in the countryside, in the winery, because even when you have to do the pumping, there is no computer that tells you three times a day and it gets done in three days, every day is different, so in the evening we take a look, we taste it, who gets to decide if we have to pump for a minute, three minutes, fifteen minutes? These are different experiences every year, we feel it, it's like the wine tells you, a little more, two more minutes, or that's it, there's something in the atmosphere that you perceive, it's incredible.

Maceration is different every year, every vat is different, what we have to do is to understand that if the skin is thick it has to be done in one way, if it's thin of course it's different, this is what we have understood over these past years, even if it's a simple thing, but then you have to put theory into practice, we destem and press the grapes when they are very soft.

However destemming is not a problem because we harvest the grapes with a stalk that is wooden, it's matured, that's when you have to harvest the grapes. That means losing hundreds of kilos of grapes, but you get so much tastiness, it's worth more than the kilos.

This year for example we extended the harvest for as long as we could because of the fragrances, with a high alcohol level and the right ratio of acidity, so we waited for it to rain for a few days, the fragrance came later this year because the heat stopped everything. This is to explain how every year is different.

In any case we always thank the Lord because He gives us the strength to go on and gives us good health. Most of all we wish for Him to be happy, so that when He will come to get us he can say: "Well done."