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## “Organic farming is under attack in Europe, especially in Italy.” Interview with Matilde Poggi, president of the Italian Federation of Independent Grape Growers

Posted on May 1, 2019 by Do Bianchi

Happy *International Workers' Day*, everyone!



At Vinalty this year, I had the opportunity to sit down with Matilde Poggi (above), president of the Italian Federation of Independent Grape Growers (FIVI as it is known in Italy). I was eager to ask her about the EU's newly implemented limits on the use of copper to combat downy mildew (*peronospora*). And I was also keen to hear her insights into the white-hot debate over organic agriculture in Italy. Matilde is one of the people I admire most in the Italian wine trade: FIVI advocates for wineries who grow their own grapes, make and bottle their own wine, and market and sell their own wines. You can identify FIVI-member wine by the FIVI logo on the bottle. The following is an excerpted translation of our conversation.

We believe that the four kilos per hectare [allowed], including the average [of 28 kilos per hectare allowed] over seven years, is fine.

For certain organic wineries in certain growing areas that are less suitable and more problematic, where there is a greater risk of peronospora, four kilos aren't going to be

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enough in some instances.

In the light of this, we would have preferred that the European Community would have given us a little more time to prepare. A five-year grace period would have been great. Especially for organic wines. Because conventionally farmed wines have many other chemically based alternatives to copper that can compensate for peronospora.

The EC chose not to make a distinction between organic and conventional and so this is the result.

There was a study of organic wineries in France that found that nearly 20 percent will have to convert to conventional farming. We don't believe this is a positive message.

There are 1,200 [FIVI-member] wineries in Italy. Roughly half of them are organic. Many have told me that it's going to be a challenge [to maintain organic practices]. This is especially true in certain zones where there are different amounts of rainfall, where the vigor of the vines is different. There's no question there will be problems.

One thing that I'd like to point out is that we producers only use copper when it's necessary. None of us want to use 10, 15, or 20 kilos [per hectare] of copper the way it used to be done. It's not in our best interest. First of all, because we need to contain our costs. And more than anyone else, we are the ones who want to keep our land as pristine as possible. This isn't something we enjoy. If we could avoid using even one gram of copper, we'd be happy. But if we do use copper it's because we want to obtain healthy grapes and that's the first step in creating good wines.

Conventional farming also impacts the environment. The difference is that we use only copper. It's a metal that can be found in nature. But conventional farmers use chemical products. Many of those are systemic and so they enter into the plants and they end up in the wine.

Our position is that we want change attitudes about organic monitoring and certification.

Organic certification requires a big commitment of time to complete the required bureaucratic procedures. It's a lot of work between filing documents and reporting. For example, organic farmers have to file a production estimate. What's the point for someone with a vineyard? You already know, more or less, how much you are going to produce. It becomes onerous for producers because if you make a mistake, even just an incorrect date, you get fined.

We believe that the resources should be shifted to monitoring of the wines on the shelves of wine shops; monitoring of the wines stored at the wineries where wines are labeled as organic; monitoring of leaf samples taken from our vineyards without us knowing about it. This is the type of monitoring that should be done instead of the [authorities'] visits to the wineries to make sure that all the forms have been filled out correctly.

Organic farming is under attack in Europe, especially in Italy. There are a lot of opinion leaders who claim that organic farming isn't really organic.

I believe that more post-production monitoring would be really useful and it would help to eliminate any doubts regarding organic farming. When a vineyard is declared to be organic, the inspectors should go into the vineyards and take a handful of soil and leaf samples and determine whether or not it's really organic. This is what we feel should be done instead of focusing on pre-production.

Organics isn't a fraud. It's a guarantee for the consumer that the product is [organic] certified. That's why certification is so important. All of us can say that we do one thing or another but when a wine labeled as organic certified, the consumer can be confident that it's really organic.

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