

Valle Ponci. prospettiva.

This is a preliminary and discursive sketch that would like to facilitate the comprehension of the complex entity known as Valle Ponci. In order to better imagine possible future patterns of development, a brief historical review will help to understand the present state of the valley: its main features, structures, infrastructures, and more in general all the dimensions related to the system “azienda agrituristica Valleponci”. In the end, a few personal suggestions.

The descent in the valley is organized in three distinct moments.

Valle Ponci. ieri.

The physical characteristics of the valley have been determined by the flow of a river fed by the large underground reservoir present in the belly of the hills of Finale. The river, its endless flowing, brings us back to the beginning of the known history of the valley, when the Roman engineers chose it - not being able to get around the impervious capo Noli - as the way of spreading out their road network towards Gaul [the modern France]. Before them it is most likely that because of the mild climates and the generous water reserve present, the valley was inhabited by the Ligurians, an insular population dedicated more to hunting than to agriculture.

But it is with the advance of the Romans and more specifically with the construction of the *Via Julia Augusta* that the Ponci Valley began to undergo an important degree of anthropization. A series of bridges were built [some still standing] that connect in different points the two edges of the valley; not by chance the name Ponci seems to take origin from the presence of these structures that cross it. The bridges were built with stones coming from a system of quarries and caves present in the valley.

However, it was not only a line of passage to elsewhere; unlike today, the Ligurian population preferred inland settlements to coastal ones (too exposed to piracy and adventurers from overseas). The large terraces present, those reactivated by Giorgio and by the last management but especially those still covered by woody vegetation, tell of a solid and important agricultural past. From the passage of the Romans to a little more than 70 years ago when in the Ponci valley there was a luxuriant and strongly diversified agricultural settlement: forestry, pastures, grains in the central part, vineyards on the hill coast up on the airy terraces..

Valle Ponci. oggi.

Returning to the river and its endless course. After the rains, when the dense network of underground caves is filled up, the river rises. During all his years in the Valle Ponci Giorgio claims the river has flooded only a handful of times. The current water supply for the farmhouse comes from the municipal aqueduct. However, given the presence of this underground reservoir, a hydro-geological analysis could lead to a direct water supply independent from the water service of Finale. Given the rare flooding of the river, the road that runs through the valley [driveway to the farmhouse] is (according to Giorgio) in good condition. The responsibility for the maintenance of the road is the responsibility of the municipality and the agency for nature conservation.

The road, after having gone up the course of the river and having skirted the buildings of the farmhouse, opens up into a discreetly placed large parking lot that lies in the heart of the flat land redeveloped by the current owners - after months and months of clearing from brambles and shrubs.

The total flat surface (and legally stacked for agricultural use) is about 10% of the total property; only 5% however (i.e. half of the 10% available) has been recovered.

This recovered part is located on the central and flat strip of land where the main house and all the structures of the farmhouse are located - unfortunately due to the presence of guests it has not been possible to enter part of them and investigate the conditions but since the recovery works took place in the early 2000's for the main house and about ten years ago for the other buildings [which were formerly warehouses] it can be assumed that the conditions are not too deteriorated – as Giorgio confirms [proper investigation needed – 110% to improve the energy efficiency – and renovate other parts of the structures – seems to be very possible]. In addition to the residential structures and the parking lot, the central part of the valley hosts a recently planted orchard that includes kiwi, loquat, pear, apple and plum trees [all hardy stuff that doesn't need much treatment] as well as a wonderful old *cacheto*; moreover, the area of the vegetable garden [highly implementable], the road pattern and a series of meadows (whose extension is also to be mapped) left green and wisely managed by the horse Palma.

This central artery, however, runs within a vertical and wooded fabric characterized by a fundamental and founding element of the Ligurian landscape, that of the dry stone walls. This element allows the development towards the north of the farmhouse's territories; right above these terraces, in a zone that is quite low – in terms of proximity to the river bed and the humid heart of the woods all around – 1.7 hectares of vineyard was planted [2002].

Composed exclusively of two (now three) local varieties [*pigato* for the white, *rossese* and then *granaccia* for the red], the vineyard is located in a position as romantic as somehow dangerous. Its being embedded in the bush makes the grapes very desirable to wild boars and other wild animals; for this reason, it is [according to Giorgio] effectively protected by a fence that surrounds its entire extension. But even more than wild animals, a vineyard located in such humid position is dangerously exposed to fungal diseases typical of *vitis vinifera*; in particular *peronospera* and *oidium*. For this reason a quantity [to be better determined] of chemical treatments of various nature (some more invasive, such as the two/three systemic products Giorgio administers, others less and surely more common such as sulfur and copper) is well needed.

However, it seems that the treatments administered so far have not been effective enough: the vineyard – which has an age of twenty years – should be at this point close to the moment of best condition – both for yield and health. Yet, the situation is slightly different. In addition to a portion equal to 0.2 hectares that has recently been uprooted [not by chance the one that was lower down, in a border area very close to the brush], walking along the rows one cannot help but notice the various holes and missing plants – sign of a forced removal certainly due to the disease.

The state of health of the vineyard should be analyzed in a deeper way [a first mapping of existing plants could already provide an interesting perspective of possible yield in terms of bottles, and therefore of consistency of the level of business related to wine], somehow the first short visit has already shown a few important critical aspects. There are some possible buffer measures which could be adopted, such as the creation of a buffer corridor (of a few meters) between the bush and the plants. This, however, would not dispute the current lack of plants and the consequent downsizing of the 1.7 hectares of vineyard.

The choice of planting in a low area was understandable in terms of efficiency and mechanization – the vineyards are reachable by a tractor. High up on the hill coast, as it probably was originally when the rows were located on the terraces on the west side where the wooded humidity was better mitigated by a better influence of sun, wind and openness in general, there might be better conditions for viticulture.

The wine [vintage 2019] produced with the grapes of Valle Ponci [in the winery *Rocche del Gatto*] is surprisingly (considering the apparent state of health of the vineyard) delicious.

The possibility of deepening an investment, maybe building a winery on the spot (in order not to depend on another *cantina* for the wine-making) loses its significance in light of such small quantities of grapes. Wine can surely still play an important role in the economy of the *azienda agrituristica*, but the backbone of the project – as wine could be and often is – might have to be found elsewhere.

Valle Ponci. domani.

However, there is another part of the estate's agricultural development potential that has not yet been reclaimed by the work of current management. To the north of the vineyard, the paths enter a wooded clearing that rests on a heritage of terraces [that need to be brought back to light]. Atlantis of (legally cultivable) land submerged by the woods, a good part of the beating heart of the agricultural past of the valley rests under a blanket of shadow and humidity. What in recent days has been used to develop the vineyard was more likely the area of the pastures, fresher and more luxuriant. The old, wise men had probably granted to the development of viticulture the best ventilated

and essential walls of the hill - specifically the west side (the east side remains to be explored).

A recovery project - which would entail an enormous amount of work given the morphology of the territory - could easily be a candidate, upon presentation of a coherent and well-developed vision, to receive various funds (from the European Union and elsewhere). The recovery value of such a reality, the reflection on the rematerialization of culture and on the decentralization of its production outside the cities, would already be enough to make the earth tremble in its foundations. To reintegrate into a valley without imposing too many ideas formed a priori [as I had, for example, regarding the implementation of the vineyard]; to let its morphology, its biological connotations, suggest what would be most appropriate to do.

The avenues for development are endless, they must be dreamed and talked about. Starting from what is there is certainly an appropriate approach. And in case of a handover, a period of shadowing together with the current management could be – in my opinion – rather appropriate as well.

And then meetings, management of the forests, collaborations, courses, outdoors, harvest festival, storytelling, the Mediterranean, all life and much more.

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