# La Spinetta One Liter Club, for the real wine lover...

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## Summer has gone by fast...

… harvest time has arrived. This year the grape picking is a bit late. We have had a long and severe winter, and spring only picked up three weeks later than usual. This is the reality and beauty of working with the land, the grapes and the weather: one cannot plan. Now the Moscato grapes are ripe and even the Barbera grapes from our old Bionzo vineyard have already been picked. Soon we will start also with the Nebbiolo. The Piedmont harvest is long, from Moscato to Barolo we usually have to work hard for 6 weeks. Long hours and much physical work, but what an exciting time! We love it.

*Bruno, Carlo and Giorgio Rivetti and the La Spinetta Team*

## A word from Giorgio

A tribute to Moscato. Champagne or Moscato?

For over 30 years La Spinetta has been making Moscato d'Asti, that sparkling sweet wine, that unfortunately in the past had to suffer a bit under a bad reputation. Today wine lovers around the world have rediscovered the good Moscato d'Asti as a wine so refreshing and enjoyable that it puts a smile on your face anytime you drink it.

Our Moscato sales are booming. The 2009 vintage was the first vintage that was sold out long before the new vintage will be ready.

What makes Moscato so special is the balance of fruit, sweetness and acidity and of course the natural $CO_2$ that is a byproduct of the natural fermentation.

The balance of fruit and acidity we can only achieve by harvesting balanced fruit. That means that the essential ingredient for Moscato is, just like for any other wine, perfect ripe fruit with good acidity.

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After taking off the stems and crushing the grapes, the Moscato grapes are pressed. The juice is immediately filtered and transferred to closed steel tanks for a very slow, low-temperature (16°C degrees) alcoholic fermentation. This process takes about 2 weeks. The slower the fermentation, the more fruit and flower aromas one will extract. At an alcohol level of 4.5-5.5% the fermentation is stopped by reducing the temperature to 3°C degrees and by filtering out any remaining yeast. All of this happens under pressure in order to maintain the natural $CO_2$. Finally the Moscato is bottled, again under pressure and is ready to be released and enjoyed right away. The fresher the Moscato, the better the taste.

Now compared to Champagne, Moscato is a true **natural** sparkling wine. No sweetness (liquor) and no $CO_2$ is added. The grapes for Moscato d'Asti made by La Spinetta come from vineyards that are free of any herbicides or pesticides, a vineyard respect and treatment that is very hard to find in the Champagne region.

Un brindisi al Moscato! Cheers!

*Giorgio, the farmer*

## Interview: speaking with Michael Skurnik

Michael Skurnik founder, owner and Managing Director of M. Skurnik Wines in New York, has created an impressive wine importing and distributing company over the past 23 years, largely influencing the US wine culture. Skurnik Wines was founded in 1987 and today employs 60 people, that manage approximately 3,500 different wines from 12 different countries (USA and Italy being the top).

***1.Where does your great passion for wine come from? Was it passed on by your family or did a special coincidence make you discover the world of wine?***

First of all, you need to understand that in America in the 1960s, our culture did not include an awareness of fine foods and wines. When I was 14 years old, my parents visited France and

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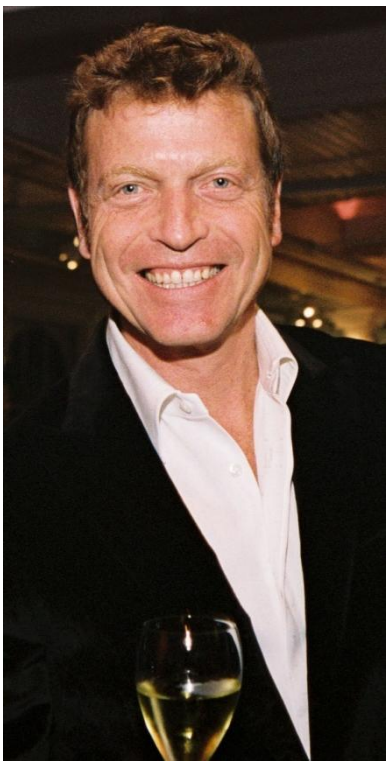
fell in love with wine. It was my mother whose passion led to a wine cellar being installed in the Skurnik household. This was my first exposure to fine wine.



***2.When did you first start to import wine and distribute it in NY?***

We started doing business in September 1987, six weeks prior to the stock market crash!

***What kind of wine did you first import?***

We sold American wine first, then French, then Italian…

***What was the local NY market like?***

In 1987, it was very French-dominated. All the best restaurants were French, and as a result, French wines were the most widely available. The Italian wines scene in New York was dominated by Bolla, Riunite, and the like.

***3.How did the market and your clients change over the years? How much did the wine sophistication increase? Did Michael Skurnik Wines influence the local market? If so, to what extend?***

I like to think that we played a major role in influencing the way the market here has changed over the years. However, wine has just been a small part of the overall cultural revolution we have experienced. The combination off increased awareness and exposure to fine food, fresher flavors, higher styled fashion, and easier travel have all combined to create a more sophisticated market for wine.

***4.You have and you still travel a lot to different wine countries around the world. Obviously great wine is linked to great food and therefore you certainly have become also an expert on great food. Today, do you think that the NYC restaurant scene and the availability of food still differs from what you experience around the world? Or do you think one can experience the world of food and wine also by staying in NYC?***

If you want to experience the world, you must travel the world. There is no substitute. That being said, there is no question that New York is the greatest city in the world to dine and

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consume fine wine, if you want to experience the diversity of tastes and flavors of the whole world. They are all here!

***5.What do you love most about your work?***

I love the wine first, the people second, and the places they all come from third. What do I like least about it? The compliance, the complex and unnecessary red tape involved in doing this business.

***Why do you think your company has become so successful?***

Service, selection, people, attitude, passion

***Is there a secret you want to share?***

No secret really, it's just about caring and really believing in the work you do. If you follow through and do the things you promise, with integrity and honesty, the rest will follow.

***6.Your portfolio is extensive and very impressive.*** Thank you! ***Do you really know every wine that you sell?***

Well, my brother Harmon and I still make the selections for the Skurnik portfolio. Even though we have appointed skilled, talented individuals to manage the day-to-day details of our diverse portfolios from around the world, Harmon and I are still the ones who taste and decide which wines make it into the Skurnik portfolio and which will not, no-one else.

***How often do you still attend tastings?***

I taste as often and as much as I can.

***7. Michael Skurnik Wines is a family business. What in your opinion are the advantages, when you have your family involved in a business?***

Being a first generation family business, I can only tell you that we have built our company on a certain level of trust and shared knowledge which yields a power base that is hard to duplicate.

***8. Do you think a real passion for wine is genetically passed on, or something one can be brought to?***

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This is a very interesting question. There is no doubt that the ability to taste and differentiate between flavors is a specialized set of skills. I think it is more of a question of paying attention and listening to your palate than it is a genetic disposition. Musical and athletic prowess can certainly passed on from generation to generation, but being a good taster? I am not so sure.

***9. And at last, the famous question: If you were to go to a deserted island and you could only take one case of wine with you, what would those 6 bottles (European case size) be?***

Six Methusalem – one champagne, one fresh young Italian white like Orvieto or Greco di Tufo, one Chablis, one Barolo/ Barbaresco, two red Burgundies.

*Jan-Pierre Geraud, Managing Director of Taransaud TONNELLERIE in France, will be answering our questions in the next newsletter.*

## September 4th was a great day for the OLC members and for the La Spinetta Team

On September 4, we held the first La Spinetta One Liter Club Hands-On Day, a day of work - and play! - in the La Spinetta vineyards and cellar.
It was a lovely day: the weather was fantastic, and the Moscato grapes had ripened just in time. 42 winelovers from 10 countries joined us in Piemonte to pick grapes and learn how Moscato wine is made, from the grapevine to the bottle.

A blue sky and warm sunshine greeted our visitors as they arrived at the winery in Castagnole Lanze in the morning, where they met Giorgio, Giovanna and the rest of the La Spinetta staff. After a brief tour of the cellar and facilities, we headed out to our Biancospino vineyard, not far from the winery, and began the grape harvest. Giovanna and Giorgio explained the work: Harvesting grapes is not a singular work, you work in a group along a row, two to a basket.

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Each bunch of the plump juicy Moscato grapes has to be laid carefully into the basket, after taking off leaves and any shrivelled or rotten grapes.

The sun was warm and the hill was steep, but our enthusiastic helpers managed to pick more than a tractor-load full, which we then destemmed and put into the press.
Hands-on: this means more than just seeing a picture of a cellar, looking at a map to determine the exposure of a vineyard, memorizing the good vintages of a particular zone, or reading tasting notes. Hands-on, for our visitors, meant to feel the sunshine that produces the sugars and aromas in our Moscato grapes hot on their shoulders, the steepness of the vineyard in their legs, the plump juiciness of the bunches in their hands, and then the coolness of the barrel cellar.

It also meant to share the preoccupations of the grape farmer, or anybody working with nature and living things: would the grapes be ripe despite the cool weather a few weeks earlier, would it rain so we couldn't harvest, and what to do when the birds have nibbled at the grapes.
It meant learning new skills, assessing ripeness or over-ripeness in the grapes by tasting them, tasting still-turbid grape must straight from the barrel, and the pressed-out grapes that will be sent to the distillery.

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Our visitors were certainly hands-on: carefully clipping the ripe bunches of Moscato grapes, loading the full baskets onto the tractor, pouring the grapes into the destemming machine and tidying up the empty baskets - there were always many helping hands.
The group proved to be also very interested, listening intently to Giorgio's and Manuela's explanations and asking many questions.

And certainly, a good morning's work made a good lunch all the more welcome, and the generous picnic of Piemontese antipasti and Tuscan La Spinetta wines laid out on a big table under a chestnut tree was much appreciated. A friend of the family joined us with his guitar and sang Italian and Piemontese songs. After a relaxing lunch overlooking hills and vineyards, Manuela and Eleonora took us on a walk through the Gallina vineyard in Neive, to see the Nebbiolo and Barbera vines ripen in sight of the tower of Barbaresco.

A celebratory dinner rounded off the day. The traditional *aperitivo*, the start of any Piemontese evening, was set right in the middle of the La Spinetta Campé Barolo vineyard, and we toasted as the sun set over the rolling hills of the Langhe, striped with vineyards beneath sturdy castles and little towns. Then a mouthwatering Piemontese feast, prepared by Giovanna, awaited us at the winery. *Carne*

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*cruda* and *vitello tonnato*, *tajarin al ragù* and *coniglio al forno,* cheese and fresh peaches - the traditional Piemontese flavors were matched perfectly with La Spinetta wines from Piemonte which Giorgio introduced one by one, like old friends. Fun was also the blind tasting with wines brought along by our club members. Giorgio led a round of tasting and discussing the wines, and the enjoyment of the wines was made even better through the pleasure of sharing the experience with others who were just as interested and knowledgeable.

This is also what made the day so special for us: being able to share our passion and enthusiasm with many like-minded wonderful people – our La Spinetta One Liter Club Members!

**We are already looking forward to the next time!**

## High season Piedmont: October and November is when the people from all over the world come for white truffles, great food and wine…

## Truffles – the white gold of Alba

The small Piemontese town of Alba is much renowned in the world of gourmets. Situated at the doorstep of the Langhe hills, it has long been the trading point for the wines of Langhe, among them the noble Barolo and Barbaresco. Also the other important product of the Langhe, the hazelnut, has left its culinary mark on the town – transformed with traditional praline-making

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skills and sometimes married with chocolate, Langhe hazelnuts are the stars of the cafés of Turin, sold in the famous chocolates and gianduoitti hazelnut pralinés. The typical Piemontese confectionery has also been mass-produced and distributed worldwide through a local sweet manufacturer by the name of Ferrero.

And then there is the third jewel in Alba's crown: the legendary white truffles. These fungi have a particular and complex aroma that cannot be matched or copied. They are a highly sought-after delicacy that can fetch fantastic prices of €3000/ kg or more. White truffles cannot be artificially raised, and they cannot be preserved for longer than their natural life-span of around 10 days. They are a completely wild, naturally-occuring and quite rare product, only found in a few places, in a short season from October to January, and only with the help of specially trained animals (dogs are favoured over pigs, since pigs are connoisseurs and reluctant to give up what they find…). This explains some of the mystique that still surrounds these unusual fruits of the earth.

The truffle (tuber magnatum pico) is a type of fungus that develops underground at the roots of certain trees. Not any tree will do: favoured are certain types of oak, linden, poplars and willows. There are many such woods in the hills of the Langhe which makes them also a favoured habitat of wild boars, the nightmares of wine growers as they thrash through the vineyards and eat plants and fruit.

For the white knobbly truffle bulb that we like to eat to form, the earth must be cool and moist – as it would be, in late October in the Langhe. A truffle will grow for some time underground, but it will only begin to develop its famous smell when it is mature and ready to give out spores. The smell is too faint for a human nose to detect, but the fine noses of dogs and pigs are able to find it. Like the mist that blankets the nebbiolo vineyards in early Fall, so, too, the scent of the truffles rises from the warmer earth into the colder air. Rain will completely wash away the smell, that's why truffle hunters get to have a night off when it's raining. Otherwise, they are likely to be out every night in the season, checking their prime spots (like other mushrooms, truffles tend to always spring up at the same places, since they actually grow out of a fine web laced through the ground, called mycelium). There is no reason to go searching for truffles at night except for secrecy. At the prices that these bulbs sell for, it is no wonder. Most restaurant owners (and other connaisseurs) in the Langhe region will have their own truffle supplier, usually a taciturn older gentleman in a flannel shirt and padded hunter's vest, who will show up on the kitchen door at night and unwrap a few specimens from a large white handkerchief. The best way of keeping truffle (if one must, for a few days!) is in a bowl covered with a slightly damp teatowel. If you out some eggs into the bowl alongside,

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they will absorb some of the truffle aroma through the fine pores of their shells. The best way to serve white truffles is thinly shaved over simple dishes, such as a plate of fresh egg tagliatelle, or a fried egg, or in the Piemontese specialty of carne all'Albese: over thin slices of raw beef, finished with a drizzle of mild olive oil.

There are several types of truffle, beside the white one, such as the black winter truffle which can be found alongside the white, and the black summer truffle. These are fine products in their own right, and a shaving of black summer truffle over some delicately steamed green asparagus and a poached egg can be a delicious June supper, but in complexity and aroma, the white truffle remains untouchable, an exquisite and elusive delicacy.

## Cooking Piemontese with Giovanna Rivetti

Giovanna Rivetti was born in 1947. She is our "vineyard manager" and our "in-house chef". She learned the work in the vineyard from her father and the work in the kitchen from her mother. Both parents taught Giovanna skills which until today are great assets to La Spinetta.

In each newsletter Giovanna will share one of her secret recipes with us.

Today she is teaching us how to make marinated chicken. The ideal appetizer for the hot season. A little sour and spicy, this chicken refreshes any meal.

**You will need:** 1 kg of chicken breast - sliced, 250 ml white wine (Giovanna uses Chardonnay Lidia), 125 ml white wine vinegar, 125 ml water, 2 cloves of garlic, 15 sage leaves, 150ml olive oil, 2 eggs and 200 gr bread crumbs

First one bathes the chicken breast slices in the raw eggs and then in the bread crumbs. Then you fry the slices in a pan, using ample olive oil until the chicken is cooked. Don't use too much heat. Remove the chicken and let it cool down on paper towel to remove some of the oil. Cut the sage and the garlic into small pieces and heat them up in a pan, using olive oil. Again, watch the temperature. Cook

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sage and garlic for 10 minutes and stir frequently, then add white wine, water, vinegar and a tea spoon of bread crumbs. Continue to cook on low temperature for 40 minutes. Cut the chicken in small pieces (Giovanna uses round cookie forms to cut out the chicken into round pieces) and pour the sauce over the chicken. Let the chicken marinate for at least 12 hours in the refrigerator.

When you take the first bite, you will be amazed by the refreshing flavors!

**Buon appetito!**

## Salone del Gusto, October 21st – to 25th in Turin!

At the end of October, Turin will host one of the largest gourmet fairs in the world: the International Salone del Gusto.
This event, held every two years, attracts up to 800,000 visitors from all over the world. It is organised by the Slow Food association, a not-for-profit organisation concerned with promoting not only good food, but also sustainable practices in the production and consumption of food. This means food production that is respectful to the environment, produced with fair labour conditions, and the consumption of food that focuses on the values of pleasure and conviviality – eating together, enjoying the food and the company. Slow Food sums it up under the motto 'good, clean and fair' food. The Salone del Gusto serves as a showcase to show how the principles of the association are put into practice by quality food producers in Italy and all over the world.

This is the philosophy behind it – and it is realised into a veritable fun fair for food lovers. There are guided tastings of everything from wine through olive oil to bread, beer, cheese and chocolate. There is the great Market, where a few thousand artisan food producers are offering their products for the visitors to sample and purchase. There are workshops on all sorts of food-related topics: amphorae wines, biodynamic farming, raw milk cheeses, homebrewing

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and fish farming. There are educational parcours for children, cooking demonstrations by chefs from Africa, China, Catalonia and Iceland, and lessons on growing a vegetable garden. Visitors can taste wines made from vineyards that have never seen phylloxera, or attend a talk by Aubert de Villaine, director of Domaine Romanée-Conti.

Naturally, also chefs and restaurants play an important part in the activities, including both Michelin-starred international chefs, and the heads of the kitchens of humble osterias, the traditional simple Italian restaurants. Every day during the event, lunches and dinners prepared by famous chefs are held, not at the exhibition grounds, but in historic residences, villas, castles or restaurants in Turin or the surrounding region. Among the chefs are Alain Ducasse, Michel Bras, Massimo Bottura, Gennaro Esposito, and many more distinguished names from Italy and the rest of the world.

A special guest chef this year will be our very own Giovanna! On Sunday, October 24, we will welcome a group of Salone del Gusto visitors at our winery, where they will be able to participate in a traditional Piemontese lunch prepared by Giovanna Rivetti, acording to her mother's recipes. Little green and yellow frittatas, chicken breast in carpione, tajarin with a sauce cooked over a slow fire for hours and bollito misto, mixed boiled meats, are just some of the traditional Piedmontese dishes on the menu that day. The lunch will be of course be paired with our wines: Barbera d'Alba Gallina, Barbaresco Valeirano, Barolo Campè and Moscato d'Asti Bricco Quaglia, plus a few surprises and some older bottles.

More information about the Salone del Gusto, including the full schedule of activities, at: www.salonedelgusto.it.

## Anything new at La Spinetta

### Screw tops for Australia, or why La Spinetta is starting to use cork alternatives…

We recently started to bottle our Il Nero di Casanova also in bottles with screw tops. Our first customer is our importer in Australia, as this market primarily asks for none-cork solutions for specific wines.

We believe that this is a good step into the right direction. Wines, like the Il Nero di Casanova, that are not meant to be laid down for aging, should be closed with cork alternatives.

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For wine producers it is increasingly more difficult to buy good quality cork, as the world demand for cork is higher than the world supply. Natural cork is harvested form cork oak trees. The tree forms a thick, rugged bark containing high levels of suberin, a waxy, water-repellent substance. Over time the cork cambium layer of bark can develop considerable thickness and can be harvested every 9 to 12 years to produce cork. The harvesting of cork does not harm the tree, in fact, no trees are cut down during the harvesting process. Only the bark is extracted, and a new layer of cork regrows, making it a renewable resource. The tree is cultivated in Spain, Portugal, Algeria, Morocco, France, Italy and Tunisia. Cork oaks live about 150 to 250 years. However a tree **can be harvested only twelve times in its lifetime**. Cork harvesting is done entirely without machinery, being dependent solely on human labor.

In order to harvest high-quality cork, it is important that the bark is not extracted all the way to the ground. Fungus grows around most trees and sometimes grows up the bark to a height of 50 cm and more. If the bark is harvested all the way to the ground, the cork will include fungus. It is this fungus then that will turn a bottle of wine into a "corked" bottle of wine.

With less demand for natural cork, its producers are more likely to harvest smaller quantities, achieving higher cork quality. At the end we can all profit. Wines that are made to age will carry higher quality corks and wines that are supposed to be enjoyed when young are closed with cork alternatives.
For us, this is definitely a big step towards better quality!

## Your opinion on…

**Bordeaux or Burgundy, Piedmont or Tuscany?**

Many people say, that Burgundy and Piedmont have as much in common as Bordeaux and Tuscany and they are referring to single vineyard, single grape wines for the first two and blends for the second.

What is your opinion, which region makes the greater wines? The one that stays with the single vineyard, single variety? Or the one that aims for a perfect blend?

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If you like to share your thoughts and opinion with us and would like to have them published in our next newsletter, please write to myopinion@la-spinetta.com

## Your comments to our question in April's Newsletter:

Black truffles that taste like white truffles? White truffle taste all year around? The use of truffle oil in the kitchen makes all this possible. What is your opinion on using this artificial truffle taste?

*When I discovered truffle oil as a chef in the late 1990's, I was thrilled. So much flavor, so little expense. I suppose I could have given some thought to how an ingredient that cost $60 an ounce or more could be captured so expressively in an oil that sold for a dollar an ounce. I might have wondered why the price of the oils didn't fluctuate along with the price of real truffles; why the oils of white and black truffles cost the same, when white truffles themselves were more than twice as expensive as black; or why the quality of oils didn't vary from year to year like the natural ingredients. But I didn't. Instead I happily used truffle oil for several years (even, embarrassingly, recommending it in a cookbook), until finally a friend cornered me at a farmers' market to explain what I had should have known all along. I glumly pulled all my truffle oil from the restaurant shelves and traded it to a restaurant down the street for some local olive oil.*

*That truffle oil is chemically enhanced is not news. It has been common knowledge among most chefs for some time. Instead, the use of truffle oil continued apace. The question is, Why are so many chefs at all price points — who wouldn't dream of using vanillin instead of vanilla bean and who source their organic baby vegetables and humanely raised meats with exquisite care — using a synthetic flavoring agent?*

*Part of the answer is that, even now, you will find chefs who are surprised to hear that truffle oil does not actually come from real truffles. The flavor of real truffles, especially black, is evanescent, difficult to capture in an oil under the best of circumstances.*

*But, much as I did for years, chefs want to believe. Stories of sightings of natural truffle oil abound, like a gourmand's answer to the Easter Bunny or Santa Claus.*

*Truffle companies are secretive, and speaking to their representatives does little to illuminate their production techniques.*

By Daniel Patterson, chef and owner of Coi in San Francisco