

THE FLORENTINE

FOOD + WINE

The Obama sommelier

A chat with Filippo Bartolotta

Helen Farrell

JULY 6, 2017 - 10:16

Filippo Bartolotta is a humble guy, down to earth, dynamic and utterly devoted to his passion and profession: **wine**. These qualities earned him the privilege of selecting and serving wines to Barack and Michelle Obama during their recent Tuscan stay at former [U.S. Ambassador to Italy John R. Phillips](#)' estate Borgo Finocchieto, near Buonconvento.



Filippo Bartolotta | Ph. Andrea Moretti

Wine is the most amazing human glue.

Helen Farrell: I know you're a natural storyteller, Filippo. Tell me *your* story.

Filippo Bartolotta: I started my career in London so I realised how Italy is such a

complicated country—the wine world is a bit bonkers. Even wine experts were struggling to really pinpoint the difference between Chianti and Chianti Classico. I've always thought that you have to present Italy first. Then, according to the level of knowledge and expertise that people want to get into, you focus and get into the details. I started doing this tasting called Italy at Your Table {ed. now The Amazing Italian Wine Journey}, bringing Italian food and wines anywhere in the world, telling the stories of the winemakers—the great ones have so much to say—and food producers, as well as history and culture. You always end up talking about sex and politics. Wine is the most amazing human glue.

HF: How do you decide which wines to serve?

FB: I'm always in the middle of it as a storyteller. I take wines from Mount Etna all the way to 800 kilometres to the Alps, back to Puglia and up again to the Langhe. A few years ago, I started to take this format to Washington, D.C. for some charity events under the art direction of Alice Waters, the chef who brought the green garden to the White House. There were 80 different chefs from all over the world and I matched Italian wines to their cuisines. I got talking to one guy, drinking and chatting. He said to me, "So, you're the wine guy. Where's the good stuff?" We got jolly and it turned out that he was John Phillips, the man who was about to become the new U.S. Ambassador to Italy.

HF: And the Obama connection?

FB: I was flying back from New York and I read about Obama potentially coming to Tuscany. I sent the Ambassador an email, although there was a part of me that didn't want to bother him. After all, we hadn't been in touch for six years. He replied, "Where have you been?" We started exchanging emails and I just came out with it, "If Obama is going to be in town, then I would be honoured to do a tasting for him." He phoned me the following day: "If it's the good stuff, you're in!" Of course, the whole thing was top secret.



Sommelier Filippo Bartolotta (right) with three-Michelin-star chef Massimo Bottura, who catered the Obamas' Tuscan meal

HF: How do you prepare for a grand tasting like this one?

FB: I spent a whole week working on it before knowing whether it was actually going to happen. Then I decided to do my usual Italian journey, but taking Barack Obama's vintage of 1961, one of the best vintages in Europe. I took the train up to see Mariacristina Oddero in Barolo, tasted and brought the wines back. Then I went to Col d'Orcia in Montalcino for the former First Lady's vintage. I decided to go with the Gravner '08 for their first presidential term because I wanted them to taste some incredible wines—people are usually scared to introduce this stuff. At the same time, there had to be something relatively normal, like a Carricante from Mount Etna—a wine that's on everybody's lips these days. Plus Sicily's where my father comes from. People never talk about Puglia but it's a region that deserves recognition, hence the rosé. The Sassicaia '09 was for Obama's Nobel Peace Prize.

HF: How interested were the Obamas in the wines you served?

FB: Michelle kept me there for an hour and a half! Clearly intuitive, she's not scared to ask questions. She was up for the journey, shushing people down quietly but nicely. She was drawn to the Brunello, which had this earthiness and concentration, moss and mushrooms, and tannin touch. She preferred that style, which was fun because it was her vintage. Barack was interested in finding out how you recognise the age of the wine. He was wearing a white shirt so I used that as a background. In fact, the two of them were complimenting each other at opposite sides of the room, talking about how young the wines were showing despite their age. They were very sweet.

HF: Where's exciting for you right now in the wine world?

FB: Alto Adige, for the energy. Rioja, the 1920s and '30s wines are incredible value for money. In Tuscany, Chianti Classico is always *numero uno*: nobody told the farmers to design the landscape the way they did. Vignamaggio has this terrace with the same background as in one of the *Annunciation* paintings in the Uffizi and Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* was filmed there. You go from the Antinori winery to the small producers like Angela Fronti of Istine and Badia di Coltibuono. Chianti Classico can resonate even with a teetotaller.

