

Anne-Louise Mikkelsen is from Copenhagen, Denmark but lives in Tuscany, and makes wine at the volcano Etna. She holds a Master of Science in International Business, is a big game hunter, former elite kick-boxer, and now winemaker on her way to establish her own cantina.

By Elsebeth Lohfert

Etnas Karen Blixen

With a rolling suitcase in her hand Anne-Louise Mikkelsen walks quickly across the backyard in central Copenhagen where we are meeting for an interview. She is an 'old-young'. "I was programmed from early childhood on" she explains in between her tea and bites of the croissant, "preferred the adult life – would rather work than go to school and I always worked my holidays. I couldn't wait to conclude my studies." After secondary school she studied a year in the United States, then went to high school in Denmark and continued at CBS – Copenhagen Business School, where she studied International Business while doing kickboxing and developing her interest in wine. "I got so enthusiastic about wine – I couldn't get it out of my head. And one morning I woke up, and wrote and unsolicited application to KB Vin." She got a student job at KB Vin with Kim Bulow, a good mentor and specialist in Burgundy, which became the first region she really got to know in depth.

Burgundy and business

In the summer holiday of 2003 she parted for Meursault in Burgundy, and worked for Jacques Thevenot-Marchal. In her spare time she drove around to taste with as many producers as she could . And she was often offered to taste the better bottles once she drew up her notebook, and her sincere interest became obvious.

In 2004 she quit her student job with KB Vin, and got a consultancy job in Connecticut USA where she was to investigate new distribution channels for a Swedish wine company. When that was done she moved to Grenoble, France to study more business and to once more spend the weekends over and over again tasting wines in Burgundy. "Many of my friends thought I was lucky, because I was so committed to and passionate about wine – I loved to be in Burgundy – and on and off in the US, where I resided for a year and made analysis and wrote essays about wine. I was always happy and enthusiastic because I dedicated myself entirely to my passion and allowed it to guide me."

A new native country

While Anne-Louise Mikkelsen is in the US she hears about the Italian Count Gelasio Gaetani d'Aragona Lovatelli whom amongst others have been wine consultant to George Clooney, Michael Douglas, Don Johnson and Sharon Stone. In an interview with Financial Times Gaetani explained how he to Sharon Stone at an auction in Florence for the sum of 6500,00US\$ bought a Double Magnum Sagrantino di Montefalco wrapped in leopard skin designed by Robert Cavalli.

Anne-Louise Mikkelsen doesn't have neither Sharon Stone's fame nor money, but she can write letters and sends one to Gelasio in regards to a potential collaboration on the US market. That idea doesn't work out but the introduction to Italian wine for the newcomer certainly does. The letter opens up to a new world. She flies to Florence to meet Gaetani. Rents a car and follows him out in Tuscan wine country. They bond immediately and the trip extends to several days where they amongst others visit Antinori's hideous vineyards all the way by the coast, and Gaetani's cousin Andrea Franchetti's Tenuta di Trinoro cantina. "After three days in Tuscany I think the world is good to me. Gelasio comes to greet me in the airport in Florence just as I am to board my flight back to the US. His farewell reply goes: "You need to stay here and work - You get it. You understand our challenges!"

"Italy, that's where I am going to be

- it was a gut feeling. It felt right."

In October they meet up again this time around to attend a wine auction in Rome. And Gelasio informs her "Now, you HAVE to come to Italy, I have a job for you. You just need to send your CV to this lady at Castello di Terriccio". Anne-Louise Mikkelsen does just that, and becomes responsible for the estate's wine export and website from January 2008 onwards. "I felt really good - I felt at home in Italy culture wise and lifestyle wise - that was where I wanted to live my life."

Captured by Etna

In Sicily Anne-Louise Mikkelsen meets winemaker Paolo Caciorgna. He lives in Chianti, but has since 2005 when he bought his first parcel at Etna's northern slopes, made wine there. The volcanic terroir, and the old Nerello Mascalese vines pre-phylloxera (not attacked by the wine-lose phylloxera and therefore growing on its original rootstock), fascinated him. In 2005 he bought his first parcel, Passo Cannone (0,5ha), and made the wine N*Anticchia which in Sicilian dialect means 'little'. That 'the little' can become something big he expresses like this: "Even miniscule vineyards have their very own identity - an identity we seek to understand in the vines, and express in our wines."



Anne-Louise Mikkelsen on Etna's north-side during harvest 2012 at the 0,5ha Passo Cannone parcel. "A fabulous harvest with sunshine and 22-24 degrees (Celsius) and two good teams of pickers" she explains. "I picked grapes and drove forth and back from one vineyard to the next and to the cantina. We produce our wine in someone else's cantina where they vinify also for other producers so at times you have to stand in line to offload your grapes. The harvest-week was tough and intense but it is like an adrenalin rush – you don't feel exhaust and fatigue until much later. It is an almost hollow feeling to see the vineyard from one moment to the next being without its beautiful grapes – one entire year's hard work gone, just like that."

Today Anne-Louise Mikkelsen makes N*Anticchia together with Paolo Caciorgna (see tasting notes at the end of this interview), and has bought into his other three parcels: Passo Cannone (0,5 ha.) Santa Spirito (0,5 ha.), Bocco d'Orzo / Piano d'Aria (0,3 ha.).

After their encounter at Etna she quits her job with Castello di Terriccio, and in the fall 2008 she starts to collaborate with Paolo Caciorgna, and to work as an independent consultant for smaller producers advising on pricing, sales strategy etc. But the old friend Gelasio is still lurking in the background. He suggests that she takes a job at Tenuta di Argiano which is owned by his ex-wife Countess Noemi Marone Cinzano, also known from several tv series ('Four seasons at Argiano') in which she talks of her wines which are made by her partner enologist Hans Vinding Diers.

In January 2009 Anne-Louise Mikkelsen takes seat in the Commercial director chair at Argiano. That ends up being full-speed three and a half years before she resigns in order to devote herself to her own projects now bringing with her a solid professional knowledge and experience.

The direct way doesn't exist

As of now she lives in a forest in Tuscany. From here she commutes to Etna where she now owns a couple of hectares herself, besides from what she tenants and buys up of grapes. "The direct way doesn't exist – you can only do something at Etna if you have the right connections and people want to help you. You have to be part of the local community to work there. Several wealthy people have invested at Etna because it got trendy. But for many it has become a backlash because they aren't present. It is a live product – incredible faceted, you shouldn't produce it just for fun, so to speak. To many it has become a drag – a smaller fortune that has turned into red figures. It has to be something you really care for, and you have to be present yourself.

In Sicily life is lived in an almost melancholic way, very simple but also very present and real, very alive and intense as it was lived 60 years ago. You live the moment, every instant. Etna has its own unique rhythm – there is just something in the air. You live, just live. Life is what it is, simple pleasures, and in Sicily and especially Etna we breathe it every day. There is a gratitude, a friendliness and joy. For me it is Paradise. To watch the dusty vines being able to produce so beautiful wines – the yearly- if not to talk lifecycle that a vine goes through is absolutely fascinating. The workers who work in the vineyards have hands the size of my thighs. Tough work, rough hands, and yet it delivers so elegant wines. It is about basic life conditions where all the unnecessary is eliminated. It is the weather that counts – everything depends on that. We are small human beings when we watch and consider the old vines that were planted in the beginning of the 1900. We are basically just passing through whereas the vines produce grapes every year, and will still be standing there when I will be here no longer.

Yes, I finished with Denmark long time ago. Italy, that's where I am going to be – it was a gut feeling. It felt right" concludes Anne-Louise Mikkelsen whom by her aristocratic mentor, Gelasio Gaetani d'Aragnoa Lovatelli has been given the nickname 'Etna's Karen Blixen'.

TASTING



Thalìa 2010, Etna Rosso DOC

Perfumed, sweet cherry, aromas of cherrystone, hints of leather, licorice, flower, marzipan. Very elegant structure, warm, engaging with velvet-like tannins, creamy on the palette, and with a rich, slightly sweet long aftertaste with mature tannin. 91 points

N*Anticchia 2007, Etna Rosso DOC

Intriguing aroma, very developed, mineral, slightly matured with forest brush, licorice and leather. Full on the palette, flavorful, velvety tannin, good acidic touch, creamy, slightly sweet with a long sweet aftertaste and at the same time dry with a spicy, almond-like note to it. Very interesting wine that should be drunk now. 92 points

Free translation by Mikkelsen & Caciorgna of the original Danish version of the article 'Etnas Karen Blixen' by Elsebeth Lohfert