

An ancient center for agribusiness processing

A brief history of the Court of Giarola, its dairy farm, and its food-processing factory

The location and the farming court

Giarola rises on the right bank of the Taro River, at about halfway between Fornovo and Pontetaro. The meaning and origin of the toponym are easily understood: *Giarola* indicates the gravel of the Taro River in Roman or Medieval times. The main stronghold of numerous fords on the river, Giarola was located on the road at the foot of the hills that came from Val Baganza leading in the direction of Medesano, Noceto and Borgo San Donnino.

The location was completely on flatland and was enclosed between Oppiano in the south, the main road on the east, the Scodogna Torrent on the north, and the Taro River in the west. In antiquity, around the Eleventh century, the era in which we find the earliest sources, it became the property of the nunnery of Saint Paul and the headquarters of a small monastic community around which a church, stables and cowsheds, homes, a mill and a dairy farm were built. It was a real self-sufficient rural court, protected by solid walls and in some documents, it is also called *castrum*, which means castle.

The water of the Naviglio Taro canal that, like today, began its course uphill in Ozzano, and then more towards the valley near the church of Oppiano, operated the mill. In Oppiano, there also was a monastic court, which belonged to the Benedictine monks of Saint John the Evangelist, and there was a mill and perhaps a *xenodochio*, a small housing facility for pilgrims who traveled along the river going towards Fornovo and approached the Apennine Mountains path of the Francigena Road, also called Romea Road.

The Naviglio Taro canal therefore ran through Collecchiello and Vicofertile and brought water to Parma through the Gate of Saint Francis, today Barriera Bixio, and reached as far as the Parco Ducale (ducal park). It operated several mills and factories in the countryside and in town, reaching up to the glass and majolica factory bought by the Bormioli family in the mid-1800s.

All of this river front area, which once was surely swampland and filled with woods, by the onset of the year 1000 had been already reclaimed and turned into a productive area. The cultivations were cereals, forage, vines and rice. Rice bogs, that can be traced starting from the 1500s, were suppressed by a ducal law, but later were established anew in the 1800s since they were very profitable. In 1874 though they were finally suppressed by law, since they were considered a danger to public health.

The castle had strategic importance, though a limited one, since at the beginning of the XIV century it was bitterly fought over during a war between the factions that gathered around the most important families of Parma. In 1451, Duke Francesco Sforza was hosted there while travelling towards Parma from the Piacenza province. Part of the Colleggiati army lead by Francesco Gonzaga, who signed some of his letter from Giarola, camped there on the eve of the Battle of the Taro River of July 6, 1495.

Giarola was part of the system of castles of the territory. Just to mention the immediate surroundings, we find other fortified courts such as Madregolo, Collecchio, Segalara, and Carona and, beyond the Taro River, Noceto, and almost all of these belonged to the Rossi family (1).

The church, instead, was originally just a small chapel, and though was part of the Francigena Road, did not possess the title of Pieve church, but as early as 1230 it was subordinate to the nearby church of Collecchio.

Though, it surely was built in the shape of a *plebana* church, with a Romanic façade, a semicircular apse and *cotto* stone arches, some of which have survived the successive large remodeling in time, in particular in the XVIII century, and the bombings of World War II. Inside, a, *Annunciation* from the first half of the 1600 by a skillful follower of Malosso, perhaps Francesco Lucchi (as suggested by Giuseppe Cirillo and Giovanni Godi) and placed in an Eighteenth century frame can be admired. A *Sacred Family with Saint Joachim and Anna*, of the second half of the second half of the 1700s and an painted and decorated leather altar piece from the same era are stored inside as well (2).

In 1562, at the time of the first systematic land survey that we recall as *Cadast of the Farnese Dukes*, since it was ordered by the newly established Farnese family as Dukes of Parma, Giarola reached the size of 1140 *biolche* (note: a unit of land measure corresponding to about a third of a hectare). Of these, 1063 were the property of the Monastery of Saint Paul. There were 110 residents, reaching 147 people by the end of the century. Giarola was always directly subordinate of the judiciary government of the city of Parma and was never a part of the feud of Collecchio, owned by the Dalla Rosa Prati family.

Today, the Court of Giarola, like the nearby court of Oppiano, is very close to the river, but in past centuries between these courts and the Taro there were still extended cultivated fields, as demonstrated by the maps from the beginning of the Eighteenth century stored in the State Archives of Parma (3). These were later submerged by the floods of the river that tends to move slowly eastward and in doing so inevitably corrodes the right bank, which in this stretch was never protected by dams.

At the beginning of the 1800s, the inhabitants were just over two hundred. The population reached 312 in 1855 and later decreased to 225 in 1890. The French established the *Mairies*, or municipalities, and Giarola at the beginning was directly under the jurisdiction of the town, but very soon (1806) became a fraction (or small town) of Collecchio (4).

When in 1804, Captain Boccia visited the place during his well-known journey to the hills of Parma, and described the area of Giarola as "extremely fertile".

The possessions that the French confiscated to the monastery were included by the government in the so-called Civic List and were leased to entrepreneurs that hired farmers to work the land. The first great leasers of Giarola were Camillo and Alessandro Ziveri, two brothers from a family from the nobility who, on the wave of new ideas from France, did not hesitate to devote themselves to the life of the bourgeoisie (5). In the 1840s among the tenants, we find the literate and professor Michele Leoni of Borgo San Donnino, who owned a home in the country in Gaiano, and Professor Giovanni Rossi, a medical surgeon originally from Sarzana who worked at the hospital in Parma.

Towards the end of the century the lands of Giarola were sold to the Montagnana family, whose heirs still own part of it. In particular, we remember Luigi (died 1013) and Giuseppe (1881-1932). The latter, together with his wife Clarice Figna (died 1947), built the lovely *Liberty style* villa in 1920, designed by architects Ennio Mora and Alfredo Provinciali (6). The Montagna were attentive to the technical teaching of the Itinerant School of Agriculture, and gave a modern imprint to their farming activities in function of the agribusiness industry. They surely were among the first in the area of Collecchio to devote themselves to tomato cultivation.

The Companies of Cavalier Ercole Azzali and Giovanni Jenni

From a postcard from the second decade of the 1900s, we know that the company of Cavalier Ercole Azzali (7) owned factories in Vicoopò on the road to Mantova, and in Parma at via Trento number 59. It defined itself a “farming and industrial company – food conserves”, and it produced and exported Parmesan Cheese and “*Pearl Brand super tomato concentrate paste*”, whose advertising vignette represented an opened oyster with a shining bright pearl inside of it. A poster board from the post-World War II period instead advertised only the tomato concentrate in double, triple and golden triple tubes, still under the “Pearl” brand. The plant of via Trento is mentioned, but the not the other locations. In the back of the labels on the cans, the poem “A Labor f Hercules” was printed in which the author (most likely Renzo Pezzani), played a pun based on the name of Ercole (Azzali) to create parallels with mythology (8).

Cavalier Ercole Azzali (1870-1936) was the president of the Associazione Cascinai (farm owners association) in 1919, a member of council of the Cooperative Bank of the Agrarian Association (9) from 1917 to 1922, and councilor of the Chamber of Commerce between 1914 and 1923 (10). He was also a member of the council for the San Donato Mandamento and for the Provincial Committee of 1922, under the Honorable Giuseppe Micheli as president, and was a councilor of the Cooperative Agrarian Consortium (11). He was among the first to sign up in the Partito Popolare Italiano (12) and was a candidate in the elections of November 1919 together with the Honorable Micheli, the lawyer Tullio Maestri, engineer Egidio Pecchioni and the farmer Giuseppe Corradi, but he did not win the elections (13). Two of his letters dated October 18 and 22 of 1919, dealing with the elections, are kept in the correspondence of the Honorable Micheli at the Palatina Library (14).

After gaining experience in his homeland, Giovanni Jenni, a native Swiss national (Berne 1887- Martorano, Parma 1963), moved to Italy, at first residing in Modena and then in Parma starting from 1916, where he created an export company for cheese and conserves in Parma and a factory in Martorano. He later became president of the conserve entrepreneurs group formed within the Industrialist Union, and remained a board member from 1947 to 1961. He was a member of the committee for the wholesale prices of tomato concentrate paste, and a member of the Permanent Special Committee for the Industry at the Chamber of Commerce as well as ice-president of the Fairgrounds Institution for Conserves (15). During World War II, the General Consulate of Switzerland of Milan nominated him as delegate for the Parma province: his work was extremely useful in the private and business relationships of his conational residing in belligerent countries (16). A member of the Parma Rotary Club since 1948, he held numerous conferenced there on various economic topics until 1958 (17). The Jenni company also sold Parmesan Cheese and natural butter and had its headquarters in via Trento number 27 in Parma.

The tomato conserve factory of Giarola was part of a system of factories of small and medium size located along the axe of the State Road of La Spezia, the railroad, and the Taro River between Fornovo and Parma. This included the companies of Abele Bertozzi in Fornovo, Carlo Erba and Rodolfo Mansueto in Ozzano Taro, Roberto Fainardi in Gaiano, Gino Bontempi in Oppiano, Tanzi, Magnai and Alessandrini on the southern border of Collecchio. It included the Tanzi Calisto company near the railroad station of Collecchio and the Ferrari and Figna company (now Copador) in Collecchiello, along the road to Madregolo, and some other minor businesses that at times started out and disappeared very rapidly (18).

Nowadays, only the companies of Ozzano Taro and Collecchiello are still active. Near the conserve factory (located outside the court in the northeast area, almost across the Naviglio Taro canal whose water was indispensable for production) inside of the Court of Giarola there was an operating dairy farm with an annexed swine farm. All of the surrounding buildings and land were property of the Montagna family, as already mentioned, and therefore bot the dairy farm and the factory were leased to various conductors through time (19).

The factory was equipped with modern *boules* and machinery from its start, and began the activities in 1924. From that year to 1929 then was under the Giovanni Jenni company name and had in its logo the image of the Monument to Verdi in Parma. From 1929 to 1945, the company became a society between Jenni and Azzali (Giuseppe (21)) and later became Conserve Azzali from 1946 to the beginnings of the 1960s, when it closed. In the post war period, Jenni, who had its production in Martorano, raising much criticism chose to continue to represent in its brand logo the Monument to Verdi that had been destroyed by recent bombing (22).

It is possible that Giarola had been functioning from ancient time as a Parmesan Cheese dairy farm, operated by the San Paolo monastery as documented in 1451 (23). In our contemporary era, we find it under the name Maghenzani Primo & Sons, at least from

1901 to 1922-1925 (24) and in the years from 1926 and 1927. We also find it under the name Maghenzani Primo & C. and Machenzani Ciro & brothers (25), but perhaps these were two different dairy farms in the same town, only one of which was in Giarola. In 1924, listed in the farm leasers is Odoardo Azzali (26), who was confirmed in 1925 and 1926-27 as well (28).

In July of 1934 a Voluntary Consortium of Provinces for Typical Grana Cheese was formed in Reggio Emilia and on the following October 23 the associates meeting elected Cavalier Ercole Azzali to be one of three councilors to represent the Province of Parma in the Consortium itself (29).

In 1938 the Maghenzani Ciro and Brothers was among the farm leasers and the Maghenzani Primo and Sons was among the cheese manufacturers (30).

In the 1930s, Jenni expanded and remodeled the factory and during the works, a number of skeletons were discovered. Some hypothesis were made these could belong to soldiers who died in the famous Battle of Taro River, but there is no evidence of this (31).

The Cavalier Ercole Azzali (son of Giuseppe) company was among the first to adhere to the Provincial Association of Farmers in 1951 since it had a stable located in Vicopò (32). In 1953, the company, by then under the name Cavalier Ercole Azzali and Sons, had plants in Enzano di Sorbolo, Trecasali, Busseto and Giarola (33). In 1957, the Montagna heirs finally sold the conserve factory to Giuseppe Azzali while the dairy farm continued to be leased (34). That year the dairy farm of the Cavalier Ercole Azzali resulted as active (35). The conserve factory of Giarola, as it was said, ceased activities in the 1960s.

A photographer portrayed Cavalier Giuseppe Azzali in the 1959s together with Cavalier Pietro Barilla, a pilot and a fa of racing cars standing next to a Zagato 1750 Alfa Romeo car (36). The Azzali Company stopped its tomato production in Vicopò as well in 1976/77. That plant was sold to the Cavalier Primo Tanzi company and in its turn closed in 1985 (37).

In March of 1970, the dairy factory of the Cavalier Ercole Azzali company in Giarola was operating and one of the cheese makers, Elio Frigeri, was awarded a prize as meritorious person by the Consortium of Parmesan Cheese (38). In August of 1971, on the occasion of a union dispute, the Communist Party of Collecchio indicated the "Azzali conserve industry" to be among the agrarian businesses of the town.

The factory, then the dairy and all of the buildings of the Court of Giarola, with the sole exception of the church and a few homes, were facing progressive decay until the recent restoration works – providential, though still partial – which were made by the Regional Park of the Taro River after it established its headquarters here.

Ubaldo Delsante

NOTE

1 Lino Lionello Ghirardini, *La Battaglia di Fornovo: un dilemma della Storia*, 2ª ed., Edizioni Storiche d'Italia, Parma, Tip. Bassoli, 1981, pp. 27, 164.

2 Italo Dall'Aglio, *La Diocesi di Parma*, vol. I, Parma, Scuola Tipografica Benedettina, 1966, pp. 532-534.

3 Ubaldo Delsante, *Tra Oppiano e Giarola. Costruirono una galleria dove il fiume guastava*, in *Per la Val Baganza 1986-1987*, Sala Baganza, Tipolitotecnica, 1986, pp. 162-171; Id., *Le corti di Giarola e di Oppiano nel contesto ambientale del Parco del Taro*, in *Malacoda*, n. 76, January-February 1998, pp. 20-27.

4 Ubaldo Delsante, *Collecchio. Strutture rurali e vita contadina*, Parma, Officina Grafica Artigiana, 1982, pp. 255-267;

Nicoletta Antonioli (edited by), *Il Parco fluviale regionale del Taro*, Bologna, Centro Villa Ghigi, 1994, pp. 149-179;

Franco Ceccarini, *La Corte di Giarola*, in *Il Corriere Romeo*, n. 16, dic. 2002, pp. 44-47.

5 Ubaldo Delsante, *"tra gente povera e mendica". L'ambiente a Collecchio durante il periodo napoleonico (1796-1814)*, Italia Nostra, Amministrazione Comunale di Collecchio, Parma, Graphital, 2000, p. 37, 99.

6 Ferruccio Botti, *Collecchio Sala Baganza Felino e loro frazioni*, Parma, Scuola Tip. Benedettina, 1961, p. 137.

Ubaldo Delsante, *Collecchio. Ville e residenze*, Italia Nostra, Comune di Collecchio, Parma, Tip. La Nazionale, 1979 pp. 75-76.

7 Ubaldo Delsante, *La salsa di pomodoro nel Parmense*, in *Parma Vecia*, n. 41, July-August 1984, p. 7; Marzio

Dall'Acqua (edited by), *Enciclopedia di Parma. Dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, Milano, Franco Maria Ricci, 1998, p.

548; Giuliano Colla, *Parma Savor. Antologia del sapere e dei sapori parmigiani*, Parma, Tecnografica, 2000, p. 95.

8 Marzio Dall'Acqua (edited by), *Vecchio e nuovo mondo. Il pomodoro è colto*, catalog of the exhibit, Parma, Graphital, 1983, pp. 98-99.

9 Ubaldo Delsante, *Le banche in canonica. La breve stagione delle Casse Rurali cattoliche nel Parmense*, III, in

Malacoda, n. 96, May-June 2001, p. 35n. Naturally, as many farmers and businessmen did, he had to face the consequences of the

bank's collapse: Vincenzo Paltrinieri, *Il processo della Banca Agraria*, Parma,

Officina Grafica Fresching, 1926, pp. 11, 74.

10 Stefano Magagnoli, *Élites e Municipi. Dirigenze, culture politiche e governo della città nell'Emilia del primo '900 (Modena, Reggio Emilia e Parma)*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1999, p. 71.

11 Nestore Pelicelli, *Guida Commerciale di Parma e Provincia*, Parma, Officina Grafica Fresching, 1922, pp. 13, 95,

125, 129,

12 Luciana Brunazzi, *Parma nel primo dopoguerra 1919-1920*, Istituto Storico della Resistenza, Parma, Grafiche Step, 1981, p. 51.

13 *La Giovane Montagna*, 25.10.1919, 1.11.1919 e 29.11.1919; Celso Pelosi, *Note ed appunti sul movimento cattolico a Parma*, Quaderni di "Vita Nuova", n. 4, Parma, Scuola Tipografica Benedettina, 1962, p. 104; P. Bonardi, *L'impegno ecclesiale e socio-politico dell'on. Michele Valenti*, Ferrara, Arstudio C, 1989, n. 99, p. 128.

14 Ines Giuffrida (edited by), *Giuseppe Micheli e i suoi corrispondenti (1887-1948)*, Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Province Parmensi, Parma, Tip. La Nazionale, 1983, p. 22.

15 In this office he wrote an article published in *Parma Economica* (November 1960, pp. 9-13), *Panorama dell'industria parmense: la conserva di pomodoro*. See also: *Delibere camerali*, in PE, sett. 1960, p. 12; *Composizione delle commissioni*, in PE, February 1961, p. 29.

16 Leonardo Farinelli, Gian Luca Pelosi, Gianfranco Uccelli, *Cento anni di associazionismo industriale a Parma. Ricerca e analisi*, Parma, Artegrafica Silva, 1996, see index of names; Fabrizio e Tiziano Marcheselli, *Dizionario dei Parmigiani*, Parma, Tipolitografia Benedettina, 1997, pp. 170-171; Marzio Dall'Acqua (edited by), *Enciclopedia di Parma. Dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, cit., p. 399; Roberto Lasagni, *Dizionario Biografico dei Parmigiani*, III, Parma, PPS ed., 1999, pp. 138-139.

17 Vincenzo Banzola (edited by), *Sessant'anni del Rotary Club di Parma 1925-1985*, Parma, Artegrafica Silva, 1985, pp. 131, 138, 148, 149, 151, 154-157, 300.

18 Ubaldo Delsante e Romano Barbieri, *Collecchio storia e immagini d'altri tempi*, Italia Nostra, Parma, Artegrafica Silva, 1978, p. 106; U. Delsante, *Le corti di Giarola e di Oppiano nel contesto ambientale del Parco del Taro*, in *Malacoda*, n. 76, gennaio-febbraio 1998, p. 26.

19 Memory of one of the two Montagna heirs collected orally and written in November 2002.

20 The company appears in the registers of the Chamber of Commerce in 1908 without the exact indication of the names of the associates. In the area of Lisoni there were two, the brothers Cesare and Giovanni sons of the deceased Antonio, cheesemongers and butchers, who were listed since 1901; as far as the Maghenzani, we imagine that he/they? were Primo and Sons, cheese makers.

21 Cavalier Giuseppe Azzali was governor of the Town of San Lazzaro Parmense from 1934 to 1939.

22 Marzio Dall'Acqua (a cura di), *Vecchio e nuovo mondo. Il pomodoro è colto*, cit., p. 102; Iacopo Pergreffi, *L'industria del pomodoro a Parma tra la fine dell'Ottocento e la seconda guerra mondiale*, Reggio Emilia, Tecnograf, 1994, pp. 232, 233, 237, 240; Pier Luigi Longarini, *Il passato... del pomodoro*, Parma, Artegrafica Silva, 1998, passim; Giancarlo Gonizzi, *I luoghi della storia*, II, Parma, PPS ed., 2001, p. 91; Alfonso Minardi, *Fra città e campagna: dal Comune di San Lazzaro alla Quinta Circostrizione di Parma*, academic thesis, Università degli Studi di Parma, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Literature Degree, coordinated by professor Antonio Parisella, and professor Felice Gabba, academic year 2001-2002, p. 207.

23 Mario Zannoni, *Il parmigiano-reggiano nella storia*, Parma, Artegrafica Silva, 1999, p. 27.

24 Nestore Pelicelli, *Guida Commerciale di Parma e Provincia*, 1922, cit., p. 19; *Ibid.*, 1924, pp. 24-25 (where it is not indicated the exact location where Maghenzani could have its conserve factories, that could be Giarola); in 1925 there is a sure record of the dairy factory under the name of Maghenzani (but it is not certain that this was in Giarola); the conserve factory, as already said, was passed on to Jenni, and was no longer there; *Ibid.*, 1925, pp. 25-26. The alphabetic lists in register books of the Chamber of Commerce that we examined starting from 1901 make it clear that the Maghenzani Primo, Son of Antonio company was active with a dairy factory in Giarola and starting from 1902, with a cheese warehouse. This was later moved to the Town of Cortile San amrtino in 1904.

25 Nestore Pelicelli, *Guida Commerciale di Parma e Provincia*, 1926-27, Parma, Officina Grafica Fresching, 1925, p. 26.

26 Nestore Pelicelli, *Guida Commerciale di Parma e Provincia*, 1924, cit., p. 24. We do not know the exact location in this case as well. We can only make a hypothesis that this was in Giarola at this point of research. We do not know whether Odoardo and Ercole Azzali were related and in what degree.

27 *Ibid.*, 1925, p. 25

28 *Ibid.*, 1926-27, p. 26.