

Lunch with Roberta Inama

There is a dusky aura to the Ligurian countryside in the early morning. The rolling hills are softer at this time of the day, and it is now that the region demonstrates best its celebrated romantic ambiance.

It is late in January when I decide to drive out to the flood ravaged region of Liguria to meet two influential horse trainers and discover what their rare horses can offer modern recreational and competitive riders.

Chiusola is a tiny village located in the Apennine mountains. Standing guard over a densely forested topography, the lure of the Ligurian Apennines is that the villages up here feel authentic, without any obvious tourist trappings. The old streets and stone houses have remained almost exactly the same as a thousand years ago- the streets are calm, and one can smell the soft scent of Marsiglia soap lingering in the air.

Michelangelo Boer grew up in this small mountain village. An accomplished horseman in his own right, he developed a fascination with Murgese horses from Puglia in the late 1980's. At the time Michelangelo was looking for a low maintenance trail horse that could handle bitterly cold winters and work over summer as a trail horse. The thick forested surroundings of his home were filled with wolves, wild boar, eagles and deer. The terrain here is challenging; steep and craggy. To handle this unforgiving landscape and extreme weather – trail horses need to be tough. A visit to Puglia convinced him that the Murgese was what he was looking for. A strong and hardy horse that was known as a hard worker.

Michelangelo met Roberta Inama soon after. With their combined equestrian knowledge and experience, they worked together to breed and produce exceptional

Murgese horses for a variety of disciplines; from long distance trekking through to dressage and finally working equitation.

Roberta and her brilliant mare 'Macina' promoted the Murgese horses versatility through success in working equitation. At the 2006 World Championship in Lisbon, the little blond Inama and her powerful black horse achieved a team medal (bronze). In 2009 the pair participated at the German Bentaiga Trophy in Germany where they took away two gold medals in dressage and completo (best over all four trials).

I met Roberta in the village. The rain had stopped for the moment, so we decided to head straight up to the stables.

The Murgese stallion lines can produce an outstanding variation of type suitable for a wide selection of equestrian pursuits. Roberta and Michelangelo are quick to point out why they consider this an attribute of the breed. 'Murgese horses were bred by nobility. There were horses for different purposes – and even today at the annual sales you can find a truly diverse range of horses for sale'.

To demonstrate the different types of Murgese horse, they bring out different examples and release them in the arena.

Adone is first up. A black stallion with an unmistakably baroque profile. Roberta sends him off and works him at liberty in the arena. He is not a big horse – but exudes an incredibly special presence when he moves. 'This is an excellent classical dressage horse.' Roberta tells me. As they leave the arena Adone bounds over a small cross pole on the ground. "It's not true when people say that Murgese can't jump", jokes Michelangelo behind her.

Aurora is next. This mare competes with a 14-year-old rider and recently took the silver in a regional dressage championship, proving not only the wonderful nature of the Murghese, but also their athletic capability.

Troiano and Beniamino are next up. Troiano is Roberta's dressage mount. He dances about the arena excitedly and then runs up to Michelangelo and Roberta who show me how he can bow.

The couple have sold horses which became famous equestrian performers – and watching the beautiful Troiano work for them in harmony and complete liberty, I can understand why.

Beniamino is a young horse that has recently been sold as a trekking mount. After watching the gelding in the arena, I tell Roberta that it's a shame he's not going to be used in dressage. Michelangelo laughs and tells me that with the market the way it is – the fact he has a good home is what is important.

Violante enters the arena with head held high and nostrils flared. She is a statuesque mare with a fiery personality, not for the faint hearted. Roberta had hoped she would be suitable for working equitation, but is now swaying towards dressage as she is too highly strung for the latter. As Violante tears around the arena showing off her moves, I curiously ask Roberta how she behaved under saddle?. Roberta grins and Michelangelo laughs. 'There are butteri (Tuscan cowboys) that would give their right arm for a mare like this. Unfortunately, she just didn't have the consistency for Working Equitation'.

Next up Roberta brings out Bruno Rinaldi, a young stallion. He is in her eyes the ideal working equitation type. Rinaldi's compact conformation is remarkably like the Napolitano horse of old. His stature and movement are exemplary of a classical warhorse. He is quick and agile, yet levelheaded. Many horses competing in working

equitation are working horses, predominately the Lusitano, PRE and Lipizzaner.

‘Precision and speed are important, but if you don’t have a horse that’s sensible in the head, then it’s all over. This is what lets down many riders. The riding is good, but the horses can always be counted on. We have high hopes for this horse, he is small for a Murgese but look how well put together he is.’ he adds.

Macina, Roberta’s star mare and winner of the Betaiga trophy in 2009 is a sweet mare that demonstrates how talented she is in a liberty demonstration of Spanish walk with Roberta – it is real privilege for me to watch this equine/human partnership – well known amongst working equitation and Murgese enthusiasts.

It is touching to hear how Macina was in a box all alone when Roberta found her. Even then, there was something special about the little mare. That spark turned into a successful partnership that is still evident today; Macina has done more for the promotion of the Murgese internationally than any other horse.

It is apparent with all the horses here, that the temperament is generically kind and easy, even the excitable Violante comes up to me twice when free in the arena. These are horses that seek human contact. This is a testament to their trainers since the horses often arrive terrified of humans.

‘They arrive here virtually un-handled. The mares don’t get touched at all when they are living out.’ Roberta tells me. “It’s survival of the fittest down there. The stallions get it worse. Castration is non-existent and as soon as they start causing trouble in the herd, they are closed in a box.’

Aristotle, a handsome little gelding ridden by a seventy-year-old woman, leans out of his box for some attention. ‘He was one of the worst when he arrived, Roberta tells me. They can tell the difference though. Like an abandoned dog that has been kicked around all its life, they draw a distinction between a kind hand and a violent one”.

The rain by this stage is falling hard, so we decide to put the horses away and retire to the farmhouse, where over a plate of basil pesto linguine, we enter an interesting discussion on working equitation.

Working equitation, or *monta da lavoro* started off as a contest of horsemanship between Butteri of Tuscany on their Maremmano horses and French gardians on their Camargue horses. Italy won the contest and the sport is now popular all over Europe.

‘Working equitation has been a good learning opportunity for our riders,’ Roberta tells me. ‘It has been good to compete against other countries like Portugal to understand the holes in our own training style. The Italian team has good riders; fast and fearless. We excel at the speed trial and work cattle well – but we need to work on refining our riding and training system as this is what is holding the team back. We are not as organized as a team compared to some other countries’ she adds.

She says the German team are also very good and extremely dedicated. ‘They have good backing and support which is something our team doesn’t have. I believe they will move up the ranks quickly’.

When I ask why the Murgese makes a good working equitation mount, Roberta answers:

“These are horses raised amongst cattle in Puglia, so cow sense is bred into them.

The quick agile movements that were once important on the battlefield make the breed suitable for each of the four working equitation phases. A good head also helps. You can have everything else; speed, elegance etc – but if your horse loses his head when the pressure is on, then he’s never going to go far’.

Roberta and I discuss how to best publicise the Murgese horse for modern riders. She tells me ‘It’s a case of reinventing a warhorse into something marketable for the 21st

century. The popularity of working equitation internationally has promoted the Lusitano horse immensely, and I hope the same will occur with the Murgese. The Murgese is ideal for various equestrian pursuits – be it trekking in the mountains or dressage. There is a great selection of registered horses available and this is a great marketing attribute for the breed.”

As I am about to leave, a deep rumble causes Michelangelo to leap to his feet and order us out of the house quickly. I later discover that we were located at the epicentre of a 5.4 earthquake.

I drive home thinking about these wonderful black horses. Michelangelo and Roberta are two very particular horse people. They have realised the importance not only of good breeding, but also how to promote the Murgese horse best under saddle. Whether it is out on a mountain trail ride or competing in dressage regionally– the Murgese really does need to be seen to be believed.