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From Italy, a Vintage Redolent of Horrors

By **ELISABETTA POVOLEDO**

COLLOREDO DI PRATO, Italy — Vini Lunardelli is no stranger to controversy. Every year, it seems, usually during the summer, a tourist will happen upon its wines with their outrageous labels and make a fuss that is then picked up by the local — and sometimes national and international — media.

This year, the fuss picked up some extra heft when it was raised by the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Infuriated by wine labels that portray Hitler and sundry members of the Nazi hierarchy, the Los Angeles-based Jewish human rights group called on distributors this month to stop handling Lunardelli wines.

Though Lunardelli has been selling Nazi-themed wines for 20 years, the once-idiosyncratic marketing device is even more intolerable these days, center officials said, with the rising incidence of anti-Semitism in Europe.

“What is the condition of Jewish life in Europe: is it getting better or worse? It’s getting much worse,” said Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean and founder of the Wiesenthal center, citing recent disturbing episodes in France, Greece, Hungary, Eastern Europe and Spain, where earlier this week a banner appeared at a bullfight with the slogan: “Adolf Hitler was right.”

“This is not a time where we can say we defeated anti-Semitism, we are being marginalized,” said Rabbi Hier. “This is not the time to drink wine with Hitler’s image. It’s an insult and the desecration of the memory of the Holocaust.”

But the winemakers believe they are doing nothing wrong.

“It’s history, not propaganda,” Andrea Lunardelli insisted during an interview on a warm August morning in his family’s modest wine cellar where a lone employee was busy attaching labels — Hitler giving the Nazi salute; a portrait of Hitler with his autograph; another portrait with the motto “Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer” (one people, one nation, one leader) — on bottles waiting to be boxed and shipped.

It is not just Hitler. The company offers about 30 Nazi-themed labels, including glorifying images of Himmler, Göring, Eva Braun and others.

Bottles with labels from what Mr. Lunardelli, the son of the company owner, Alessandro Lunardelli, describes as the “historical line of products” occupied a shelf on a wall. The discriminating buyer could choose among Mussolini, Lenin and Stalin, indicating that when it comes to despots, Lunardelli wines are equal-opportunity merchandizers.

“It’s pretty absurd because Hitler was a teetotaler,” said Mr. Lunardelli, who seems genuinely aggrieved that people might be upset about his wines, but is nonetheless unrepentant.

These products “are a way of not forgetting history and the monsters it produced, ensuring that they never return,” he said. At least the past had identifiable tyrants, he added. “Today’s monsters are faceless multinationals.”

Besides, Mr. Lunardelli said, “most people buy the bottles as a joke.”

But the labels are no laughing matter as far as Rabbi Hier is concerned. “Who does he think his customers are, people having fun?” he asked in a telephone interview from his office in Los Angeles. “People enjoy drinking the wine because it is in sync with their feelings about Jews.”

Anti-Semitism is growing, Rabbi Hier said, and “everywhere you find people inching up to tear down barriers against Nazism.” The wines are yet another example of this. “To me, it’s amazing that he can get away with it.”

To assuage criticisms of promoting fascism or Nazism, over the years, Lunardelli developed a historical and artistic range of products that produced some hits — Sissi, the Empress Elizabeth of Austria, the Mona

Lisa — and many misses — Churchill, Napoleon, and even Dracula’s Blood, which all “sold very few bottles,” Mr. Lunardelli said.

Only Che Guevara popped corks when it came to leftist figures. But Mr. Lunardelli was forced to pull the plug after the widow of Alberto Korda, the photographer who took the well-known image of Che wearing a black beret, asked for 20,000 euros (about \$27,000) and 15 percent on every bottle sold. “So we sent her all the unused labels,” Mr. Lunardelli said, a little wistfully.

Nazi bottles, he acknowledged, are among the company’s best sellers. “Eighty percent of the sales are Hitler,” he said, or around 20,000 bottles a year, about a quarter of Lunardelli’s total production, which consists mostly of table wines using local variety grapes.

For Fabio Bogo, who started a similar line of historical wines out of his home near Belluno in the Veneto region 13 years ago, the percentages are even higher. “Ninety-five out of every 100 bottles sold are Adolf,” he said, though a line featuring Dolomite peaks is also popular.

He says his business has been booming in recent years. “Perhaps the crisis makes people think that things were better when they were worse,” Mr. Bogo said, “but I suspect they didn’t live through, or remember, the past.”

Despite years of complaints about his labels, Mr. Lunardelli pointed out that the law was on his side. Several lawsuits and investigations by public prosecutors have failed to prove in court that the wines are an apologia for fascism or Nazism, which is against the law in Italy.

National legislation also bars Lunardelli from selling the Nazi-labeled wines in Austria and Germany, he said, though he believes that most people who buy these wines are from those countries, as well as from Eastern Europe.

He suspects that there is a brisk black market, with truckers moving boxes of wine over northern Italian borders, “but no one admits it,” he said.

Are the wines any good? At about \$10 or \$11 plus shipping and handling, they are not bargain basement bottles, and Mr. Lunardelli is proud of the historical wines he makes from a variety of local grapes.

Mr. Lunardelli, who claims to be apolitical, said he doesn't mean to offend anyone, and tries to respond to every e-mail of complaint he receives. But for every critical message, he said, "I get 100 inquiring where to buy them," even from the United States. "These wines sell."

In downtown Udine, a pastry shop and knickknack shop displays the bottles — Hitler, but also Popes John XXIII and John Paul II — in the storefront window. "We see that most people buy them as a joke," said the owner, Giuseppe Folegatto. "No one wants to exalt these figures. It's just business."