

GILBERT GAILLARD

THE FRENCH EXPERTS ON WINE

MONTEFALCO SHINES THE SPOTLIGHT ON UMBRIA



Chiara and Alice Cesarini in their family's vineyards

SUMMER 2024

L 19045 -56 - F: 7.95 € - RD



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MONTEFALCO SHINES THE SPOTLIGHT ON UMBRIA

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PHOTOGRAPHS: GILBERT & GAILLARD -
COURTESY OF ANTONELLI SAN MARCO

Some people constantly compare Umbria to Tuscany as both of them are punctuated with hills dotted with cypress trees. Certainly, in terms of landscapes, there are some similarities. But from a wine perspective, there are countless differences and this province in the centre of Italy is far from being a poor second to its prestigious neighbour. And that's exactly what you're about to see!

ANTONELLI WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1881, MAKING IT ONE OF THE OLDEST WINERIES IN THE DOCG MONTEFALCO





OMERO WITH HIS WIFE SARAH MARI, THE EXPORT MANAGER, IN FRONT OF THE RANGE OF WINES TASTED



CHIARA AND ALICE CESARINI IN THEIR VINEYARDS WITH SYLVAIN PATARD

In Umbria, many towns have kept their mediaeval appearances, with their walls and narrow doorways. And at the top of the list is Montefalco. This fortified market town perched on its promontory overlooks all of its namesake vineyards. It is both an anchorage point and a landmark, a beacon that lights up the entire area with its aura. Montefalco is a landform, a climate – the Apennines are close by – and a grape variety, Sagrantino. The varietal itself is like no other Italian cultivar, from Tuscany or any other region for that matter. Sagrantino is a tannin beast which always remains civilised. It takes centre stage in its Sagrantino di Montefalco DOCG iteration, the star of local wines, requiring a minimum 30 months' maturation including at least 12 in barrels. In its Montefalco Rosso or Montefalco Rosso Riserva versions, it agrees to vie with Sangiovese for the limelight, and even with Merlot, which generally produces suppler, earlier-drinking wines. We also tasted some Passito, the ultimate rendition of Sagrantino made from grapes dried for at least two months to concentrate the sugars before fermentation.

The good news is that Umbria also produces beautifully crafted white wines, primarily from Trebbiano Spoletino or Grechetto, which we also tried. But now the time has come to follow the routes through the 'green heart of Italy', the charming moniker for this agricultural province covered with vineyards and olive groves.

The first stop in glorious sunshine is at Moretti Omero in Giano dell'Umbria. This young company (2001) boasts 16 bearing hectares, entirely farmed organically, and its own olive oil. Its export and hospitality manager, Sarah Mari, presented us a very consistent range of wines where one top Montefalco Sagrantino clearly stood out – Vignalunga. This is a truly top flight, racy, intense wine with an oakiness that shows great finesse.

Our second visit took us to the charming Cesarini sisters, Alice and Chiara, in Gualdo Cattaneo. The ebullient siblings are full of innovative ideas and have completely redesigned their winery in order to steer away from the use of synthetic chemicals in favour of intense manual work with the support of technology – the aim is to leave nothing to chance, but to restore everything to nature. Comfortably seated on their shady terrace, they introduced us to some stellar wines with the Montefalco Rosso, the Rosso Riserva and the highly successful 2016 Passito as the high points of the range. All of them were expertly served with food, setting a very pragmatic stage for the wines. To round off the experience, I cannot resist the pleasure of telling you about the Rosso Bastardo, "the only bastard you can take home", as their witty slogan says. This rustic yet appealing IGT Umbria displays great character and is totally off the beaten track.

TENUTA DI SARAGANO, ELEGANCE AND PANACHE

To end the first day, we had a great visit punctuated by an excellent dinner and tasting at Tenuta di Saragano in Gualdo Cattaneo. Riccardo Pongelli-Benedettoni and Ivan Vincareti are the partners at this very charming property which boasts 15 hectares of vines perched 500 metres above sea level. The vines enjoy good air flow and exposure. They are planted to high densities and cropped quite low. The result is a winning combination as we were able to see in our glasses throughout the meal. A great evening was had, for the wines and the food – thank-you Signora Pongelli! – along with the company. There was a remarkable Trebbiano Spoletino and some excellent Riserva and Sagrantino.

We began the second day with a must-visit winery – Antonelli. One hundred and ninety hectares were bought by the family in 1881, which makes this one of the oldest wineries in the DOCG Montefalco. In 2009, the vineyard was converted to organic. The clayey, limestone-rich blocks have a range of geological origins – some of them are deep and others rockier, lending a variety of nuances to the wines. The hills ringed by woodland enjoy an ideal micro-climate for vineyards and olive groves – there are over 50 hectares under vine and ten hectares of olive trees. Basking in their south and west-facing sites, the native grape varieties Grechetto and Trebbiano Spoletino for the whites and Sangiovese and Sagrantino for the reds show perfect site-expressiveness.

We had a wonderful tasting with a lunch designed to pair with the wines curated by the company's manager Filippo Antonelli. The wines that deserve a special mention are the white 2018 Trebbiano and the magnum of 2009 Sagrantino, in absolute peak condition.

The next visit was to the top-notch winery Lungarotti, which I totally fell in love with four years ago. In addition to its remarkable Montefalco Rosso Riserva and Sagrantino – whose 2020 and 2019 vintages once again fully lived up to expectations – I had the pleasure of tasting the 2018 Vigna Monticchio again, after first experiencing it at Prowein. As I told Chiara that day, "this is only my opinion, but for me, this is the best Italian wine in the world". I won't bend the rules any more by not talking about Montefalco

ITALY FOCUS

RICCARDO, GUGLIELMO HIS SON, IVAN AND HIS DAUGHTER IN THE CELLARS AT TENUTA DI SARAGANO



FILIPPO ANTONELLI TOOK US ON A TOUR OF THE COMPANY'S CELLAR



CHIARA LUNGAROTTI AND SYLVAIN PATARD IN THE WINERY'S VINEYARDS IN TURRITA, NEAR MONTEFALCO





GIANLUCA PIERNERA ON THE TERRACE OVERLOOKING HIS 3.5 HECTARES OF VINES



A SUBLIME WINE TASTING WITH THE MANCINI FAMILY AT THEIR TERRE DI SAN FELICE WINERY



MATTEO MAZZONI AND SYLVAIN PATARD AFTER A TOP-FLIGHT TASTING AT PERTICAIA IN FRONT OF THE PLOUGH WHICH THE WINERY IS NAMED AFTER

– suffice it to say that this is a Torgiano Rosso Riserva, and it is always a sheer moment of pleasure! Cantina Ninni is a young company – its first wine was produced in 2012 – located in Spoleto at an elevation of 350 metres. Gianluca Piernera welcomed us, his impish smile and proud look in his eyes conveying his sense of achievement and his respected belief in his vines. In his boutique vineyard – just 3.5 hectares in size – the clay-dominant soils are home to natural grass cover and no weedkillers or fertilisation are used. The vines are given a helping hand during the growth phase with natural products made from algae extracts – there is no systemic spraying with pesticides. The organic wines – most of them white – display very pure profiles. There is the excellent 2020 Trebbiano Spoletino and the 2021 Misluli labelled IGT Umbria. Our next stop is in Castel Ritaldi at Terre di San Felice. This is another boutique vineyard covering just 3.5 hectares and is the joint venture of Carlo and Douchanka Mancini. The whites are refreshing and whet the appetite, but the reds in particular draw your attention. They are mouth-caressing, full and aromatic, combining density and finesse. The 2019 Sagrantino – a top vintage – deserves a special mention and offers an extra touch of gorgeous flavours. This is a prime winery that should definitely be on anyone's tour itinerary.

PERTICAIA AND ITS STRONG REGIONAL BOND

Perticaia welcomed us in Casale, which is virtually at the foot of Montefalco. Matteo Mazzoni took us on a tour of the property which belongs to the Becca family – these entrepreneurial expatriates were keen to re-establish a connection with their home region. The bond is even reflected in the name which in the ancient Umbrian language means 'plough', symbolising the deep-rooted links between man and the land. The wines are of an excellent standard, particularly the red 2019 Montefalco Rosso Riserva and 2019 Sagrantino. These structured, full, elegant wines deliver very smooth tannins. Back now to the foot of the ramparts of Montefalco to meet up with an old acquaintance – Colle Ciocco. Silvia Spacchetti is gradually taking over from her dad Eliseo who still likes to greet visitors and introduce them to his range of wines made from the 12-hectare vineyard, including 3 hectares of white varieties, located in Montefalco. The range is extremely consistent in both colours though we had a slight preference for the 2018 Sagrantino which is currently maturing with its very charming chocolate and liquorice aromas. It is always a pleasure to visit this very endearing family.

ITALY FOCUS

The next stop in the north-east is at Benedetti & Grigi where the winemaker Matteo Basili welcomed us. This large property with 70 hectares of bearing vines pulls out all the stops to ensure things are done properly – grass cover is used between the vines and grasses and legumes are sown to promote biodiversity; no chemical herbicides are used and plant protection products and fertilisers are kept to a minimum. Inevitably, healthy plants and grapes produce quality wines. A tasting reveals energetic, refreshing whites and remarkable quality reds, particularly the 2017 Sagrantino Dioniso which shows great complexity.

It's due south next for what, unfortunately, is the last stop on our tour – Tenuta Alzatura, owned by the Cecchi family who have been working in wine for 130 years and invested here at the end of the 1990s. The family immediately identified the local quality factors – the 'sacred union' of the Sagrantino grape variety and this prime region; the unique character of local wines; and the social and cultural rooting of winegrowing in the area. In the glass, the whites are of a very good standard and the reds are high-end, including the 2015 Sagrantino and the 2010, a notch above, which is enhanced by its tertiary aromas of forest floor and mushroom. The tasting was punctuated by a small selection of food paired with the wines which would have convinced even the most reluctant visitors.

A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Unfortunately, the time has come to leave this enchanting region which is not only home to vineyards but to some real architectural and historic treasures. This Italian province is not very well-known – or at least by wine enthusiasts – and my best advice to you is quite simply to go see for yourself! Obviously, you can read our tasting comments at <https://www.gilbertgaillard.com/en> - you will already have realised that there are countless good wines in the Montefalco region. But if you add the incomparable pleasure of the journey and discovering the region, your senses will experience all the sensations that cannot be felt remotely. And on top of this, you get the light, the blue skies of Italy and the legendary cheerfulness of the local people!

SILVIA AND EISEO SPACCHETTI WITH SANDRA SIRVENTE AFTER OUR TASTING



MATTEO BASILI MAKES WINES FROM THE 70 HECTARES OF BEARING VINEYARDS AT BENEDETTI & GRIGI



A MAGNIFICENT TASTING AT TENUTA ALZATURA HOSTED BY ROSALBA PEPPE AND ALESSANDRO MARIANI

