



Curtains up on Ruchè and its vineyards

Treasure hunting in Piedmont

The Piedmont wine scene is so much more than just world-famous Barolo, Barbaresco and Barbera. The region is actually home to many obscure native varieties, such as red Ruchè, Freisa and Grignolino, to mention but a few. After decades spent in the shadows, consumers' interest for indigenous varieties is casting new light on these grapes, encouraging wineries to preserve and promote them.

By Irene Graziotto

Photographs: Irene Graziotto, Ferraris winery, Collisioni, Consorzio Barbera d'Asti e Vini del Monferrato

Broadly speaking, Piedmont's grandeur – compared to Tuscany – could be summed up as follows: native varieties versus international varieties, single varietals versus blended wines and, with regard to designations, Docg versus Igt. "Piedmont can be considered indeed synonymous with native grapes" point out Marco and Dante Garrone of Garrone winery, as an explanation for their Ruchè – which is the name of both this rare variety typical of the Monferrato hills and the wine produced from it.

THE DOM PERIGNON OF RUCHÈ

Only a short ride from Turin and Milan, the Monferrato hills offer the inquisitive consumer the perfect destination for treasure – and truffle – hunting. Grown solely in Asti province, Ruchè was abandoned over time due to its high sugar content, which makes it an easy target for insects and birds, substantial plant vigor which requires a lot of pruning and, last but not least, fermentation problems. Today's technology, which allows these problems to be dealt with, has paved the way for Ruchè's comeback. But more than technology, Ruchè owes its revival to the stubborn enthusiasm of Costigliole priest Don Giacomo Cauda, who decided to create a dry 100% Ruchè wine – nowadays, Ruchè can be produced as a single varietal or blended with a maximum 10% Barbera and/or Brachetto. Don Giacomo Cauda chose selected yeasts so to ensure sugar was entirely turned into alcohol, thus transforming Ruchè from a sweetish wine to a dry one. Compelling on the nose, with a fairly floral aromatic profile of roses dotted with red fruit, light to medium body and usually around 15-16% ABV – due to the high sugar content of the grapes – Ruchè little by little earned due consideration, finally being awarded a Doc in 1987.

A CRUCIAL SOURCE OF INCOME

The small parcel of Ruchè owned by Don Giacomo Cauda still exists and belongs to Ferraris estate. Luca Ferraris, the estate's current owner and chairman of the Consorzio Ruchè, illustrates the crucial role the grape has recently played as a source of income. After World War II, many young people moved to Turin or Milan to work in the booming car industry, happily leaving behind their life of misery in the fields. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, with industries moving to Asia, people were made redundant and looked backwards, to the vineyards and houses they had left in Monferrato.



From right to left, Dante and Marco Garrone of Garrone winery



Luca Ferraris, chairman of the Consorzio Ruchè, with his wife Chiara and their daughter



The Amelio family of Amelio Livio winery



Claudio and Franco Cavallero of Cantine Sant'Agata



Roberto Morosinotto, chief winemaker at Bersano winery

Luca Ferraris returned home to concentrate his efforts on his grandmother's winery and on promoting Ruchè. Luca was not alone – many resolved to attend the oenological school in Asti, which helped raise average quality levels, and ultimately upgrade the appellation to Docg status in 2010.

CASTAGNOLE MONFERRATO:

1,100 INHABITANTS AND 7 RESTAURANTS

Fuelled by a group of about 30 growers located in 7 villages around Castagnole Monferrato, current production amounts to 1 million bottles per year and it continues to gain traction – at Massimo Marengo, for example, 9 out of 11 hectares have been devoted to Ruchè, at Gatto 9 hectares out of 20 whereas at Cantine Sant'Agata, Ruchè accounts for one third of production. "Ruchè has been a godsend for the area: in Castagnole Monferrato there are 1,100 inhabitants and 7 restaurants wholly relying on wine tourism" says Luca Ferraris. Almost all wineries produce a Ruchè aged in stainless steel, considered to be the "classic Ruchè", and an oaked-aged version. At Amelio Livio they prefer instead to produce only the classic version "to enhance its floral bouquet", says Daniela Amelio, who represents the fourth generation at the estate. Many other wineries are as old and have developed over time: Crivelli was established in 1860 whereas Bersano, which is now one of the biggest estates in the area, was founded in 1907.

A PENCHANT FOR NATIVE VARIETIES: GRIGNOLINO

Local producers have invested heavily in this native variety, and managed to achieve significant results thanks to a far-sighted approach. Ruchè "L'Accento" by Montalbera, for example, is the ten-year culmination of a careful zonal approach, Luca Caramellino's wine making expertise and the visionary project of Franco Morando who chose to use partially raisined grapes. With quality increasing, markets too have become more interested. Nowadays, export plays an important part although in some cases it is not new: "In 1994, I used to sell more Ruchè in New York than in Italy" claims Franco Cavallero of Cantine Sant'Agata. "Increased attention towards the variety has also helped promote other native grapes such as Grignolino" says Fabrizia Caldera who runs the family estate. Grignolino is a red-wine grape whose name means "pip", intimating at the high amount of pips and therefore tannins. It has a light-bodied personality, with herbal flavors and many Ruchè wineries also produce it - namely Caldera, Tenuta dei Re and Montalbera where they are working on a Grignolino aged in amphora. There are two Docs promoting the grape: Grignolino d'Asti and Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese.

scaffale con nuovi prodotti che aumenter



Franco Morando of Montalbera winery



The team at Caldera winery, owned by Fabrizia Caldera (on the left)

500 YEARS OF FREISA

Freisa is another gem of the Piedmont viticultural landscape. It used to be very popular at the end of the 19th century and its most common version is sparkling. However, in recent years, producers have moved towards other versions: at Gilli, for example, they also produce a dry and a sweet Freisa. Although the market is mainly local, wine tourism allows visitors to take a closer look at this otherwise unknown variety, thus promoting it abroad. "Buyers do like it very much but somehow it is difficult to sell in foreign markets – it has been known for buyers not to find satisfactory demand but to become private customers themselves, such is their taste for it" says Paolo Vergnano. This year, Freisa has celebrated its 500th anniversary: it was first mentioned in a customs bill in 1517. Five centuries later, the variety, along with even rarer grapes such as Malvasia di Schierano – used for the production of a sweet wine called Malvasia Castelnuovo Don Bosco – still adorn the Monferrato hills, and dining tables.



The Vergnano family at Gilli winery