

ANGELO GAJA

Since he first burst on the scene in 1961, Angelo Gaja has been a tireless ambassador for Italian wine, says Michèle Shah. But more than that, he has revolutionised both winemaking and the wine business – which has earned him a Meininger's Lifetime Achievement Award.



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Angelo Gaja, the man behind some of Italy's most revered wines, defines himself as an artisan. To others, he is a man of character with tireless energy, who lives by a number of steadfast rules. Among these are respect for the environment, uncompromising striving for quality and seeking to produce something original, even if it's less commercial. But as anyone who has followed his progress will acknowledge, he is also a supreme businessman and showman. Watching him at any wine industry event is not unlike being in the audience at a presentation by Steve Jobs.

"Gaja has always had his feet firmly on the ground," says dynamic Italian producer Gianni Zonin, "His conservative realism when it comes to safeguarding his land, traditions and wines, and his innovative boldness and clarity of mind in business have made him an exceptional ambassador for Piemonte and Italy."

Gaja entered his family wine business of the same name in 1961. Founded in Barbaresco in 1859, it comprised three hectares of vine-

yard, making it the biggest wine property in the area, and was run by his father, Giovanni Gaja, a surveyor by trade. Today, the Barbaresco property comprises 92ha, producing 350,000 bottles. The business now includes a distribution company, as well as two highly regarded Tuscan estates, Santa Restituta in Montalcino and Ca' Marcanda. But, even more important, perhaps, is the impact Gaja has had on winemaking in Italy.

Innovator

Angelo Gaja studied winemaking at both the School of Enology in Alba and at Montpellier in France, and holds a degree in economics from the University of Turin. He joined the family company at the age of 21, as expected by his family. "Family ownership in viticulture in Italy is very important, even today, as it allows one to make long term decisions which account for growth and continuity from generation to generation," explains Gaja. Viticulture was fundamental to Gaja's training, and offered him the lesson that nature has its own cycle

and there is nothing anyone can do in the face of adverse weather conditions. "Witnessing one's hard work and harvest wiped out by hail or rain, and gathering enough enthusiasm to start all over again," is, in Gaja's words, "a life learning experience."

From the beginning, Gaja wines were different. The Gaja label, developed by Giovanni Gaja in 1937, featured the family name in bold red letters. A commonplace approach to branding today, it was then revolutionary. Gaja says it was an "ingenious way of branding. No other label like it existed," adding that his "father had always sold his Barolo and Barbaresco at a higher price than other producers and he wanted to identify his name with its quality." In 1978, Gaja revamped the label, choosing black and white graphics, but retaining the GAJA name. "My father was neither pedantic nor jealous about his work; it was up to me to 'steal' his knowledge," says Angelo. "We never had any major conflicts as he wasn't a forceful man, never imposing his philosophy on me, so it was up to me to observe and learn." But Angelo Gaja soon went his own way.

Right from the beginning, he had experimented with green harvests, or diradamento, and he began single vineyard production with Sori Sa Lorenzo in 1967. In 1978 he went much further, flouting the area's traditions by planting a Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard, while the next year he planted a Chardonnay vineyard. In 1982 he produced a Cabernet wine. The label, 'Darmagi', means 'it's a pity' in Piemontese dialect, referring to his father's reservations about the project; to Giovanni, it was a pity to plant 1.2ha of Cabernet Sauvignon rather than Nebbiolo, a grape that had proven its worth in the region over centuries. "My father had no idea of Cabernet or what it tasted like. He had zero interest in my project, but there was no conflict between us," says Gaja. "What I think is important when a new generation joins the family business is to allow them to fuel their passion and fall in love with their project. They can't just work and fuel passion for other people's projects. I don't think my father really understood this."

The project paid off, however, as Darmagi was instrumental in establishing links with markets outside Italy.

"I have known Angelo Gaja since my wine career started in 1980. By that time he was already famous and in a position of leadership and his wines were selling at very high prices," says Leonardo LoCascio, CEO of Winebow in



New York. “Whenever I think of Angelo, my thoughts go to the incredible number of contributions he has made to the world of Piemontese wines – indeed of Italian wines in general. He was one of the first to use new, small, French oak instead of old, large, Slavonian oak barrels, and to achieve amazing results in Piemonte with Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc.”

These initiatives strongly influenced other Piemonte producers, such as Renato Ratti and Aldo Conterno. Other initiatives include the introduction of a special rootstock, ‘161-49’, with the aim of containing yields – at a time when others were looking for productivity. “He has always strived to produce top-quality wines and at the same time, like all great achievers, he is never totally satisfied with his best, thinking he could always do better,” says Renzo Cotarella, CEO of Marchesi Antinori.

International success

In the 1970s, Italian viticulture was parochial; one drank local wine and followed local traditions. Although he had planted French varieties, Gaja wanted to draw international attention to Piemonte and its local grape Nebbiolo, which at that time was barely known in the international arena. In the late 1970s, as Gaja built up the company’s exports, begun by his father, he realised that to expand to other markets he needed to travel, learn languages and experience the winemaking and wines of other countries.

In 1996, Gaja openly challenged the status quo by removing his single-vineyard Barbaresco wines – Sori San Lorenzo, Sori Tidin and Costa Russi – from the DOCG system, relabelling them Langhe Nebbiolo DOC. Gaja recalls that until 1966 when the DOC and DOCG regulations came into force, Barbaresco always had small percentages (under 10%) of local varieties such as Dolcetto, Barbera and Neirano in the wines to balance the quality. “The use of single-vineyard, mono-varietal wines such as 100% Nebbiolo or 100% Sangiovese are modern concepts of winemaking,” he explains. “In the case of our single vineyards, I wanted to challenge this modern concept and return to the philosophy and tradition of adding a small percentage of other local varieties to enhance the balance of the wine.” As he says, this was a tradition that had existed for centuries. For Gaja, leaving the DOCG did not mean “declassifying our wines. It was more a challenge and an act of courage!” He also points out that his

flagship Barbaresco is a 100% Nebbiolo which comes from 14 different vineyards.

“Gaja was not only revolutionary, but also visionary, because he challenged the status quo while still respecting tradition. The combination of the two are essential when aiming for quality,” says Cotarella. “Gaja changed the style of his wines without changing their soul or the character of their terroir. Like all great winemakers he was able to reinterpret

“Cabernet is to John Wayne as Nebbiolo is to Marcello Mastroianni. Cabernet has a strong personality, open, easily understood and dominating. If Cabernet were a man, he would do his duty every night in the bedroom, but always in the same way. Nebbiolo, on the other hand, would be the brooding, quiet man in the corner, harder to understand, but infinitely more complex.”

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Barbaresco, giving it his own dimension.” The controversial decision did not reduce sales, thanks to the reputation of the brand. In fact, he could not even meet demand; however, not being a DOC or DOCG was a difficult concept to explain to conservative customers and media. He was helped, however, by the response he had on the other side of the Atlantic. In 1985 the *Wine Spectator* called Gaja’s Barbarescos “the finest wines ever made in Italy”; in 1997 he received that magazine’s Distinguished Service Award. Winning *Decanter’s* Man of the Year Award in 1998 helped as well.

“Angelo has always been an exceptional communicator,” says Lamberto Frescobaldi CEO of Marchesi de’ Frescobaldi. “When I heard him speak at Wine Spectator’s Wine Experience Symposium, I just thought ‘what a dynamic and natural speaker!’”

Gaja abroad

Out of the 52 countries to which Gaja exports, the US represents one of his prime

markets. For the future he looks to Asia, which represents 15% of his total exports. Gaja’s main Asian markets include China, where he distributes through ASC, and Japan through Enoteca. “China, though a difficult market, offers great potential and is growing at a faster rate than the US did in the past,” says Gaja, adding that the BRIC markets are also important, with the wines being distributed through Brindco in India, DP Trade in Russia and Mistral in Brazil. He maintains, however, that Europe still remains Italy’s best focus.

When it comes to distribution, Gaja is in a class of his own, having established Gaja Distribuzione in 1977. Although Italy is notoriously impervious to wines from abroad (apart from Champagne), Gaja imports some 40,000 cases of super-premium wine from 70 producers in 15 countries. According to Cotarella, Gaja Distribuzione was “another achievement which is quality driven and a challenge for its time”, bringing in such wines as Domaine de la RomanéeConti and such top US wines as Robert Mondavi Opus One and Stag’s Leap. Many overseas importers think highly of Gaja’s achievements. Just as Gaja praises David Gleave MW of Liberty Wines in the UK for having taken Italian wine out of the ‘Dark Ages’, by raising the appeal of quality Italian wine in Britain, Gleave returns the compliment. “Nobody has done more to create the market for fine Italian wine than Angelo Gaja,” he says. “He has changed the perception of many consumers, and has led the way for other Italian producers to follow. I remember Elio Altare, his neighbor in Piemonte and no mean producer himself, once saying that ‘we are all children of Gaja’. Angelo’s commitment to quality and modernity has, quite simply, changed the face of Italian wine. Without him, companies like Liberty Wines would not exist.”

The future

Gaja’s daughters both work in the family business. The elder of the pair, Gaia, has been following export markets for over seven years and is slowly taking over from her father, while Rossana has been assisting for over two years with Gaja Distribuzione. At the age of 72, Gaja neither intends to retire nor expand his business. His role today is to offer advice, monitor ongoing projects and bring his charisma to public events. He has also taken care to ensure that Gaja survives through future generations. A worthy recipient of the Meiningers’ Lifetime Achievement Award, indeed. ■