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Family Values

Michèle Shah interviews Gaia Gaja, eldest daughter of Italy's most influential wine producer, Angelo Gaja, about her part in the family business

The Gaja family settled in the region of Piemonte in northwest Italy in the mid-17th century. Five generations of Gajas have been producing wines in Piemonte's Langhe hills since 1859, the year Giovanni Gaja, a local grape grower, founded the Gaja Winery in Barbaresco. Giovanni's son, Angelo (grandfather of today's Angelo Gaja), was blessed with ambition and vision. Clotilde Rey, whom he married in 1905, inspired him to establish the tradition to which the Gajas have adhered ever since – total dedication to uncompromising quality.

Gaia Gaja, fifth generation, eldest daughter of Angelo and Lucia Gaja has most certainly inherited the ambitious and tenacious traits of her ancestors. At 39, her serene and confident manner complemented by her good looks, is

worn with natural warmth and charm. She entered the family business at the age of 23 in 2004, after graduating in economics from Pavia University followed by a year's internship with a wine importer in California.

Growing up in an inspiring family environment in which both parents played a role in the family business, listening to them discuss their projects and seeing how these were developed with creativity and conviction, fascinated Gaia and drew her into becoming part of this experience.

"I'd like to say that I started for love more than for tradition, because of the love I have for my family. I loved the idea that I could be part of the business and carry on the dreams and projects of my family, keep them alive and help accomplish them. Then suddenly one day, I realized that those dreams and those projects



Angelo and Lucia Gaja with their children, Gaia, Giovanni and Rosella. Each member of the family has a role to play in the business

had become mine too,” says Gaia. “Even though I had no understanding of wine, I was happy to have the honour of carrying forward the work of my grandfather.”

Gaia works closely with her younger sister Rosella, 36, who entered the family business in 2009 and is mainly responsible for the viticulture side of the business. Her brother Giovanni, 25, has only recently joined the family business and will start off in the commercial sector, slowly taking over a part of Gaia’s responsibilities and travels. In fact, it is an important moment of transition for the Gaja family, now that all five members will be working together, each one, as Gaia points out, with his own personality and individuality.

“We actually all get along fine, we are a close family, even though at times we raise our voices, but that’s part of being a family! Right?”

Angelo (grandfather of today’s Angelo Gaja), established the tradition to which the Gajas have adhered ever since – total dedication to uncompromising quality

We can afford to do this because we are family,” says Gaia with a big smile. “The main thing is that we are all in sync and know what every other family member is doing; we have our own family chat line which each member regularly updates with anything new or to let the others know what is going on.”

Today, the Gaja Winery owns four wine estates in Italy. Their first, partly inherited from the family tradition, has grown into a 100-hectare estate in Barbaresco, comprising the areas of Barbaresco and Treiso, and the Barolo areas of Serralunga d’Alba and La Morra.

In 1994, the Gajas acquired their first wine estate in Tuscany, Pieve Santa Restituta in Montalcino. The property’s 27 hectares of vineyards produce three Brunello di Montalcino wines: Brunello di Montalcino, Brunello di Montalcino Sugarille and Brunello di Montalcino Rennina. A couple of years later, in 1996, they purchased a second property in Tuscany, Ca’ Marcanda, located in Castagneto Carducci, on the Tuscan coast, in Bolgheri. Here, new plantings of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon as well as Cabernet Franc, Syrah and Sangiovese



Gaia Gaja, fifth generation, eldest daughter of Angelo and Lucia Gaja

cover 120 hectares. The wines produced at Ca' Marcanda are Promis, Magari and Camarcanda.

More recently, in 2017, the Gajas extended their boundaries down south, in a joint venture with Alberto Geraci's Etna estate, investing in 21 hectares on the volcanic soils of Mount Etna in Sicily to produce mainly white wines from the local variety, Carricante.

"We are very happy to start this new adventure on Etna. We have always found the Etna wines very interesting for many reasons, and in particular because they have in common with Barbaresco and Barolo, the fact of not being immediate, and of having a delicate and elegant character," says Gaia. "But we would have never taken the step to go to Etna alone as we don't have specific and deep knowledge of the region."

Now that her brother, Giovanni has entered the family business, Gaia has more time to develop her interest in aspects of viticulture alongside Rosella and her father, in particular in the sustainable part of viticulture, to which the Gajas have dedicated several years

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of research. According to Gaia, climate change has made it necessary to rethink the laws of nature and modify their work in the vineyard. By using insects to better oxygenate the soil, for example, and by studying plant genetics to better understand how the vineyards adapt to climatic changes.

Gaia sees her work as a long chain, made of thousands of details linked together one after the other, in which each detail can be analysed and again detailed further. A chain of endless opportunities allowing one to learn more about the nature of the territory.

"The dynamics suggest there are universal laws ruling the world: less over more, respect and patience over force, simplicity and support of physiological dynamics over artificial solutions," explains Gaia. "Each time I stroll through the vineyard it's an explosive experience. Each vine has its own personality and this is something that I find so exciting about my work. The French talk about 'terroir' - we like to think that our land has a soul."

Gaia chose not to study enology because she didn't want to restrict her life to the "cellar". She loves travelling and meeting people of different nationalities. While Gaia is constantly learning from her vineyard work, she also has great tasting experience, having learned a lot from Gaja's master winemaker, Guido Rivella, who has been with the family for over 40 years. He has now handed over to the new generation, Gaia and her sister Rosella, along with her father, Angelo who still plays a major role in the family business.

Thanks to her father, she has been well schooled and has learned from his questioning approach, analysing minute details on any, and every subject. Gaia says she has learned to live alongside Angelo's towering personality, without feeling that he takes centre stage. "The great thing about my father is that he is extremely creative," she says. "Most of the time he is actually living in his own world and



The Gaja family pictured in the vineyard

projecting into the future, which leaves the day-to-day running of the business to the rest of us.

“My problem is that I am still far too involved in directing the business. I now want to spend more time on the creative side, and leave a good part of my work to Giovanni.”

With less travel in store (right now she travels on average, one week out of each month), Gaia is looking forward to spending more time at home in Piemonte. “I feel I am ‘married’ to my work, with little time to dedicate to myself. My work has always been my comfort zone.”

Gaia has always worked hard to prove that as a woman she can be on par with, if not more competent, than men. Italy now has an increasing number of talented women working in the world of wine, not only in marketing but also in a technical capacity. They are a new generation of talented women, proud of their work and their achievements in the vineyards and the cellar.

As for the future of wine, the current awareness of climate change and the trend towards less intervention has resulted in sustainable viticulture and greater inclination

for “natural” wines. Consequently, there is more authentic production of wines that show definite terroir character.

Asked if she has a preference for any of her terroirs, she rightly says that it is impossible to choose, and that all three areas are special regions for her. These are places where man, vines and the landscape combine to imprint the wines in different ways. The Langhe region in Piemonte is complex, a cocoon-like environment often hidden by fog – discrete, delicate, sometimes austere and often generous. Bolgheri, on the contrary, gives her a sense of peace and light-heartedness, thanks to its very bright light, the always clear sky and the light breeze from the nearby woodlands and sea, which produce joyous, supple wines marked by ripe fruit.

“The characteristic that makes me fall in love with a wine is not its perfection, but its fleeting, mesmerizing, delicate personality. That’s what I prefer more than a specific region or variety,” she says, which is a good way of summing up Gaia’s philosophy on wine. ❖

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