

AN UNDISCOVERED GEM

Modern winemaking is unlocking the potential of Sagrantino, writes Michèle Shah. But it remains a hard sell.



Montefalco, Umbria, where vines were planted within the city walls.

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Sagrantino di Montefalco, Umbria’s “blue chip” wine and one of Italy’s rediscovered, unique indigenous red grape varieties, is considered a tannic monster by some, yet full of character and personality by others. One thing is certain; Sagrantino is having a hard time making its claim in global markets.

Its home is Montefalco, a picturesque hilltop town located south of the Umbrian Valley. Its strategic position looks out over a range of majestic hills including the Martani mountains, Mount Subasio and the Apennines, home to mediaeval towns such as Spoleto, Trevi and Assisi, making it an attractive destination for tourism. Montefalco is one of the few Italian towns – home to a number of churches and monasteries – where vines were planted inside the city walls, adding to the allure of this “mystic” and misunderstood grape.

Sagrantino was mostly made by families for their own use, to be drunk on special occasions such as baptisms, weddings and other celebratory occasions. Historic documentation from 1088 suggests the name Sagrantino derives from the Latin “sacer” meaning “sacred”, since the grape was cultivated by monks to produce a passito wine used for religious rituals.

The passito method remained in use until the mid-1980s as way of managing the harsh and difficult-to-tame tannins. The big change came in the 1970s and ’80s with the arrival of a new wave of winemakers that pushed for DOCG recognition and for a different

style of winemaking. Historic estates such as Scacciadiavoli, Antonelli, Adanti, Arnaldo Caprai and the Terre de’ Trinci co-operative were among the first to put Sagrantino on the national map among Italy’s “noble” varieties. But it is thanks to the winery Arnaldo Caprai that Sagrantino went global in the 1990s.

The evolution of the dry style of Sagrantino owes a lot to the Caprai family, who founded their winery in 1971. When son Marco Caprai took over the management in the late 1980s, he pushed for a dry style of Sagrantino, helping to create the DOCG rules that were implemented in 1992. Today, Arnaldo Caprai is one of the largest producers of Sagrantino, with 136 ha and a production of 900,000 bottles.

Sagrantino Montefalco DOCG is made from 100 percent Sagrantino. It comprises 750 ha constituting little more than 6.3 percent of Umbria’s total production. Montefalco Rosso DOC, the second most important wine of the Montefalco region, represents 430 ha, constituting 10.4 percent of Umbria’s total production. The Rosso is a blended red made from between 10 percent to 25 percent of Sagrantino, plus between 60 percent to 80 percent Sangiovese, while up to 30 percent of other grapes grown in the area can be used. The historic passito wine today constitute only five percent of Sagrantino DOCG production.

On average Sagrantino is a low-yielding, late-ripening variety – DOCG yields do not exceed 8,000kg per hectare and a more realistic yield for a premium wine is 5,000kg – with a high sugar content that

fermentation transforms into a wine that has an average of 14 percent or 15 percent ABV. In a good vintage, this powerful wine is aged for 12 months in oak and up to 37 months altogether, before being released. It can last for 30 years or more.

Like many indigenous varieties, Sagrantino is a temperamental grape characterised by large pips and a thick skin, the latter being high in anthocyanins and phenolic content. Deep in colour, it has an even higher polyphenolic content than Tannat, one of the world’s most tannic grapes. It is a late-ripening variety that needs to reach perfect phenolic ripeness to tame the astringency, for which good vineyard management is essential. Its ageing capacity is extraordinary, keeping a youthful dynamic character.

The possibilities it offers created a flurry of interest around the turn of the century, when companies like Famiglia Cecchi moved in during the late 1990s, attracting new investments to Umbria. Cecchi bought the Tenuta Alzatura winery, while Cantine Giorgio Lungarotti from neighbouring Torgiano also purchased 20 ha of Sagrantino planting rights in Montefalco.

Today there are more than 70 estates, with plantings having grown from 122 ha in 2000?? to the current 750 ha. The style has also changed tremendously in that time, as winemakers have better research, vineyard management and modern technology available to them. Yet these new methods mean there is a lack of homogeneity in both style and pricing which, according to

Chiara Lungarotti, owner of Cantine Giorgio Lungarotti, does not help either market growth nor the understanding of Sagrantino, especially in export markets.

Montefalco exports around 60 percent of its production. "Export prices are extremely variable, ranging between €10.00 to €30.00, from a base wine to a Riserva or a single vineyard. There should be an average recognition on pricing, something we need to establish among us producers," says Lungarotti.

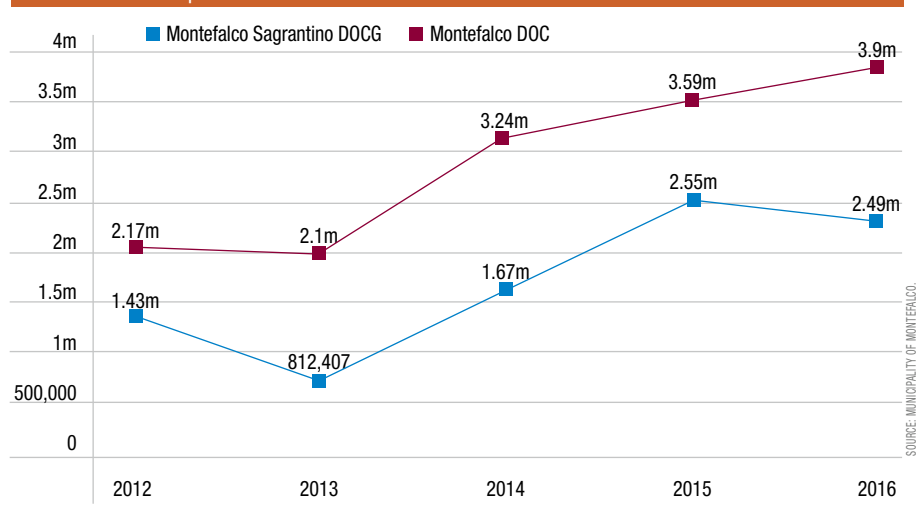
"The end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium showed good growth for Sagrantino within national markets, as part of a trend in Italy to discover new indigenous varieties, while on international markets Sagrantino is still having a hard time in establishing itself other than with a number of known brands," says Andrea Cecchi of Alzatura. "We are sure that, with a focused promotion, there is room for growth in international markets."

Sagrantino has not delivered the economic boom that was expected of it in the 1990s. Due to its tannic style, consumers have found it difficult to embrace so exports have not developed as widely as expected. Arnaldo Caprai winery, which exports some 40 percent of production to more than 40 countries, has recently taken on consultant winemaker Julien Viaud from Michel Rolland's team, to revamp the style to a fruitier and fresher wine by using less oak.

Another winery to have a major impact in the area is Tenute del Cerro group, backed by Unipol, one of Europe's biggest insurance companies. It invested in Montefalco in 1995, establishing the 140 ha Còlpetrone estate, one of the largest estates in Montefalco, of which 35 ha are dedicated to Sagrantino. "I am convinced that the development and appeal of Sagrantino as one of Italy's top red wines has yet to come," says CEO Marco Castignani. "Thanks to continuous investments and research on the variety and its terroir, we are reaching a better understanding of the grape, yet we still have to reach its maximum expression."

Alessandro Meniconi, winemaker at the Perticaia estate, explains that up until the end of the 1990s, 80 percent of Sagrantino production was only sold locally within the province of Perugia, while today Sagrantino exports are reaching global markets. "It

Montefalco D.O. production



takes years to reach a position of equilibrium between offer and demand within export markets," says Meniconi. "We must look to the future but also be patient for our vineyards to become fully 'adult' vines, capable of showing the real potential of Sagrantino. All wines of strong personality need to be understood. Our slogan is 'Sagrantino is different... difference is opportunity'."

Scacciadiavoli has been bottling its Sagrantino in the "secco" version since 1979. Amilcare Pambuffetti, president of the Consorzio of Sagrantino and owner of Scacciadiavoli winery, maintains Sagrantino has many fans and is not a difficult wine to understand, nor is its pricing the fundamental issue; it is a wine that shows its best when paired with food. Volio Imports in the US have been its importers for more than six years and reports that 2017 sales have eclipsed 450,000 bottles, a 20 percent increase over 2016 sales.

"The category is challenging, as many American consumers struggle to understand the terroir and tannin that drive Sagrantino's flavour profile," says Charles Lazzara, president of Volio Imports. "When paired well at a restaurant, it can be a great confidence builder for the American consumer venturing away from known international varieties like Cabernet and Merlot in search of a full-bodied wine."

Dino Caprotti, president of Vinity Wine Company, Scacciadiavoli's Californian importer, says: "Scacciadiavoli's recent 92 points in Wine Spectator's top wines has brought good exposure to Sagrantino, but it is not enough to spark great sales. Sagrantino belongs in the circle of great wines of Italy and deserves high recognition as long as producers stay focused and keep working hard at production and promotion."

Reidemeister & Ulrichs, Caprai's importers for the German market, are of the same opinion that food pairing is important. "It's more a communication challenge. Sagrantino requires a competent gastronomic recommendation. We notice that it is quite successful in the high-end gastronomy and particularly interesting for wine connoisseurs, who like to discover new wines," says Isabella Güstrau of Reidemeister & Ulrichs.

Peter Heilbron, vice-president of the Consorzio of Sagrantino and owner of Tenuta Bellafonte, is of the opinion that the future of Sagrantino lies in convincing customers who tasted Sagrantino made some 15 to 20 years ago – a wine that was then characterised as harsh and tannic – to come back to try the wine again.

Sarah Abbott MW, CEO of the Swirl Wine Group, a UK marketing specialist of Italian wines, believes that Sagrantino is probably the most serious Italian red that most people have never heard of. The opportunity, she says, is that in the UK awareness of and demand for age-worthy Italian reds is highly developed, particularly in the on-trade. "The prices for Barolo and Brunello have created an appreciation for the joys of structured Italian reds: tannic but succulent, demanding but generous, epic but subtle," she says.

"Of course, Sagrantino is not for everyone. It's not an easy, fruity wine. But then, it's made in tiny quantities. For connoisseurs of concentrated, age-worthy Italian reds it is an undiscovered gem. And the fact that it is highly localised in its origin and grape just adds to its niche appeal. In the context of top Italian reds, it is incredibly inexpensive."

It's a grape, in other words, whose time is coming. ■