

Montefalco Sagrantino - Entering A New Chapter



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I write about wine (and sometimes food) from around the world.

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Sagrantino Vineyards at Tenuta Bellafonte, Bevagna

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Montefalco Sagrantino is among the richest, most powerful of all Italian wines. That statement alone would believe you to think that it is also one of the most critically praised and beloved of all the country's wines. But that simply is not the situation. However, thanks to a renewed effort by area producers, Montefalco Sagrantino is enjoying a renaissance, as vintners are crafting more refined offerings that display a new era for this wine and potentially, more attention from critics and consumers alike.

The name of the wine derives from the town of Montefalco in central Umbria; Sagrantino is the only variety that can be used to make the wine. This gives the wine a unique identity, much like Barolo that is produced entirely with Nebbiolo, or Brunello di Montalcino, crafted exclusively from Sangiovese.

However, as Sagrantino is one of the most tannic varieties in the world - arguably the most tannic of all the major varieties in Italy - this accounts for a problematic image of Montefalco Sagrantino being a wine that is too bitter and rough, a wine that lacks charm and elegance.

It's an image that area producers have battled for years, and now they're doing something about it. Maturing the wine in large casks known as *grandi botti* is one way to lessen the tannic identity of

the wine, although some producers that use barriques for aging have also found ways to craft more elegant wines. The real secret, according to many local producers, is their work in the vineyards.



Marco Caprai, Arnaldo Caprai, Montefalco

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Marco Caprai, proprietor of Arnaldo Caprai, one of the area's most critically praised wine estates, notes the change in planting today compared to several decades ago. "The vineyards over the past 60-70 years had no more than 1000 plants per hectare. Every plant produced more than 10/15 kilos a plant. Today every plant produces no more than one half kilo or 700 grams per plant.

"It was not possible then to produce a good wine every year. Harvest would be in November and after the first week of November, the temperature would be cold. There was fog. Only in a few

years was quality excellent. So the first thing was to resolve the problem in the vineyards. The first step to excellence for Sagrantino in the vineyards. Today it is normal to have 7000 plants per hectare or more - we have no less than 8000 plants per hectare.”

At Antonelli, proprietor Filippo Antonelli notes that many vineyards were planted in the mid-1990s, as “it was difficult to keep the vineyards that were planted in the 1970s and ‘80s, as they were planted in silly ways with large rows. It was not the historical tradition, but one that emerged after WWII.” As for the more recently planted vines, quality has greatly improved, as the vintner remarks, “Now the vineyards are more than 20 years old and the result is different.”

As for managing the tannins of Sagrantino, Antonelli points out that harvest is dependent on a new way of thinking. “In the past, we were looking at sugar and acidity content. Now every day, we taste the berries and skins, as well as the seeds to see if they are ripe or not ripe.”

Interestingly, Caprai and Antonelli have two very different cellar techniques, as Caprai matures his wines in barriques, while Antonelli opts for *grandi botti*. Yet each receives high ratings from critics and is considered one of the best producers of Montefalco Sagrantino; thus it is the work in the vineyards that has greatly affected the quality of recent releases. Other top producers of this wine include **Tenuta Bellafonte, Paolo Bea, Bocale, Scacciadiavoli, Lungarotti, Fratelli Pardi** and **Tenuta Castelbuono**.

Caprai sums up his vision, one that is shared by other Sagrantino producers seeking more critical and marketplace success. “It’s important to have a vision for the world. This is not a wine for Montefalco, this is a wine for the world. Sagrantino is unique – there is no other varietal that is similar. It has a great capacity of longevity. The wine is very rich, with a very strong Italian identity.”



Fratelli Sardi Montefalco Sagrantino "Sacrantino"

Photo ©Tom Hyland

Notes on new releases of Montefalco Sagrantino

Antonelli 2015 - Aromas of fresh morel cherry and rose petals. Very good to excellent concentration. Rich mid-palate, very elegant approach. Well balanced tannins, very good acidity, excellent complexity. One of the most consistent producers of Montefalco Sagrantino. Peak in 10-12 years. **Outstanding**

Bocale 2015 - Black cherry, black plum and charred meat aromas. Medium-full, this has rich, young tannins, very good persistence, good acidity and excellent overall harmony. Peak in 10-12 years. **Excellent**

Collealdole 2015 - Aromas of cacao, black currant, black cherry and oregano. Medium-full with very good to excellent concentration. Rich mid-palate - thick and chewy. Good acidity and complexity with very good persistence. Give plenty of time. Best in 10-12 years. **Excellent**

Lungarotti 2016 - Aromas of morel cherry, black cherry and violets. Medium-full; very good to excellent concentration. Big tannins, so give time, but this is quite elegant in its approach. Peak in 12-15 years. **Excellent**

Paolo Bea “Pagliaro” 2011 - Aromas of morel cherry, hint of soy and allspice. Medium-full, with subdued wood notes, good acidity and firm tannins. Best in 7-10 years. Distinct, subdued, traditional style I greatly respect. **Excellent**

Adanti “Il Domenico” 2008 - Menthol, dried morel cherry and clove aromas. Medium-full with very good to excellent concentration. The tannins are a bit drying, but there is very good persistence and lively acidity, giving the wine a nice freshness. This will hold for some time - enjoy over the next 12 years, perhaps longer. **Excellent**

Arnaldo Caprai “Collepiano” 2015 - Chocolate, black cherry and anise aromas. Medium-full with excellent concentration. Rich mid-palate, big tannins that are well integrated and balanced. Excellent persistence, very good acidity. Impressive, but best with another 2-3 years of aging, peak in 15-20 years. **Outstanding**

Benedetti & Grigi 2014 - Aromas of morel cherry and red plum, with hints of tobacco and coffee. Medium-full with very good concentration. Very good acidity, elegant tannins, excellent persistence. Very graceful wine - nicely stated. Approachable now - peak in 10-12 years. **Outstanding**

Tenuta Castelbuono (Tenute Lunelli) 2015 - This is the Montefalco estate of the Lunelli family, proprietors of Ferrari *metodo classico* in Trentino. Aromas of black raspberry, black cherry, clove and purple iris. Full-bodied with excellent concentration. Rich mid-palate, lengthy finish, excellent persistence, rich tannins, very good acidity, excellent overall harmony. Give plenty of time - peak in 15-20 years. **Outstanding**

Scacciadiavoli 2015 - Black plum, black raspberry and clove aromas, with notes of purple iris. Medium-full with excellent concentration. Rich fruit, excellent ripeness. Rich tannins, elegantly presented. Very good acidity, excellent complexity. Beautifully made in an understated style. Peak in 10-12 years, perhaps longer. **Outstanding**

Tenuta Bellafonte “Collenottolo” 2013 - Intriguing aromas of iodine, black cherry, boysenberry and black-eyed susans. Excellent depth of fruit, very good acidity, round elegant tannins, excellent complexity. The oak notes are well integrated. Stylish and harmonious! Peak in 10-12 years, perhaps longer. **Superb**

Fratelli Pardi “Sagrantino” 2015 - This is a single vineyard Montefalco Sagrantino from a hilltop plot just outside the town of Montefalco. Aromas of red plum, red poppy and black cherry. Medium-full with excellent concentration. Big tannins, but beautifully managed and balanced. Very good acidity, outstanding persistence. Excellent harmony of all components. As big a wine as this is, it is extremely graceful. For me, this is the perfect representation of the elegance and charm that can be attained with Montefalco Sagrantino. Peak in 15-20 years. **Superb**

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