

Marco Caprai

By Hope S. Philbrick

A man of uncommon honesty, when asked what got him into winemaking Marco Caprai responds, "Twenty years ago my family said to me, 'Okay, Marco, it's time that you made something of good. What do you want to do? Textile? Fashion?'" In other words, it was deemed time for Marco to join the very successful family business. But Caprai followed his passion and suggested that he head up the family wine estate instead. In 1989, at age 21, he took charge of Arnaldo Caprai. Since then he's done more than transform the family hobby into a successful business: He is the undisputed leader in the production of Sagrantino di Montefalco wines.

In the world marketplace, Italy's Umbria region has long been overshadowed by Tuscany. Sagrantino, Caprai believes, could change that. The grape is genetically unique and indigenous to the Montefalco district of Umbria; the first written mention of it is dated 1598. From the outset,

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Caprai chose to focus on his home's native grape because "this is my story," he says, revealing that he respects tradition even while striving for innovation.

Since 1990 Caprai has conducted extensive research and experimentation in his vineyard and cellar with help from the University of Milan. He's tried different trellis systems, vine protection processes like the reduced use of nitrogen fertilizers, and clone varieties — three of which he has patented. His goal isn't to find one ideal clone; when making wine he prefers to blend several: "Each one gives the wine a different characteristic. If we use only one genotype, we have a one-dimensional wine. A group [of clones] gives bouquet, a different characteristic." He's also producing plants from seeds instead of relying on grafts, a strategy to improve the overall genetic diversity of crops. Testing vine growing location and density, he's squeezing in 120 more vines per acre than his neighboring vintners.

Caprai is also revolutionizing the marketplace. In 2000 he was the first to bottle a wine exclusively for Internet sales. And in 2006, he became the first winery in the world to use a smart cork, which features a microchip embedded into a synthetic cork that allows access via a handheld reader to information about the wine, including recipes. The chip uses radio frequency identification (RFID) technology. While he used it on a limited edition wine, Caprai predicts the application will soon become mainstream.

A college degree in political science may not come in handy for all winemakers, but for Caprai it has proven invaluable. To protect the integrity of the grapes, its wines and the appellation, Caprai petitioned for a DOCG (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita*) designation, a level reserved for a small group of high quality wine regions — currently 35 in all of Italy, two of which

happen to be in Umbria — that are held to the strictest government standards to produce the highest quality level of Italian wines. "Now the Italian government gave us exclusivity for Italy," he says of the successful bid to reserve the Sagrantino name for use on labels solely by wine producers in Montefalco. Caprai considers the Italian law that he spearheaded a victory to preserve his region's historic legacy: Producers in other appellations "can plant, but they can't use the name. For us the problem is [if others use] the name because it is our brand."

Of course, such a move is justified now that producers — with Caprai at the forefront — are producing elegant wines from Sagrantino. The thick-skinned grape is high in sugar and acidity and has "the highest levels of polyphenol of any grape in existence," Caprai says. In skilled hands, the resulting strong-structured, food-friendly and complex wines can range from powerful dry to intense sweet reds.

Caprai's current production is 750,000 bottles a year from vines that are planted on 336 of the estate's total 388 acres — figures that reflect significant growth. In 1988, when Marco took over, the 145-acre estate produced 300,000 bottles. The first land purchased in 1971 was just 7.5 acres.

Among Caprai's numerous awards are Slow Food's Winery of the Year 2006, Oscar of Wine as Best Producer by the Italian Sommelier Association, and International Award Vinitaly. "We are very proud of Caprai," says Maria Rita Lorenzetti, President of the Umbria Region. "Wine is very connected with the region of Umbria." With Marco Caprai as its champion, Sagrantino di Montefalco is fast becoming the world's next cult wine.

"Behind the Bottle" reveals the human spirit driving production of the world's finest alcoholic beverages. Send comments to hopesp95@yahoo.com. ■