



WINE ENTHUSIAST – 17 NOVEMBRE 2021

Ruchè's Revival: Meet Piedmont's Secret Darling

BY MARISA FINETTI



Among the tapestry of royal reds like Barolo, Barbaresco and Barbera in Italy's Piedmont region, a lesser-known jewel has been enjoyed for centuries in the gentle hillsides around the village of Castagnole Monferrato.

In the province of Asti, where the famous Alpine peaks of Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn lie in the distance, Ruchè warmed the hearts and spirits of locals. Often reserved for joyous occasions, the variety was traditionally used to create sweet wines, and was also blended in limited amounts with more popular grapes of the area, such as Barbera, Grignolino and Dolcetto.

But by the 20th century, Ruchè's future was bleak, as cultivation was reduced to a smattering of vines throughout the Monferrato.

"Fifty years ago, we didn't have variety—we had good, bad, red and white," says Franco Cavallero of Cantine Sant'Agata.

Cavallero describes life in the Monferrato hills at that time as simple and economically challenged, until a new parish priest arrived in Castagnole Monferrato in the late 1960s. Don Giacomo Cauda

came from a winemaking family and became enamored with Ruchè, believing that it had qualities unlike any other grape in the region.



Cauda was known to quickly change out of his Sunday vestments to work in his vineyard. He selected and propagated old vines, refined the wine from sweet to dry, and became the first in the area to bottle it. While his wine sales paid for church restorations, his enthusiasm and know-how reinvigorated the entire growing region and inspired a rebirth of this near-forgotten native grape.

“We said, ‘Why don’t we try *once* to make wine like the priest?’ ” says Cavallero.

So in 1990, Cavallero and his family produced a bottling called *‘Na Vota*, which translates to “once” or “once upon a time” in Piedmontese.

Faithful to the priest’s example, other growers followed. Eventually, Ruchè’s sweet style shifted to pure, dry and reflective of the terroir.

“I loved watching the priest make wine,” says local winemaker Luca Ferraris, who remembers growing up in the area. “But I never thought that I would buy his vineyard later [in life].”

Ferraris produces a suite of Ruchè, including Vigna del Parroco (vineyard of the priest) Ruchè di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita), cultivated from Cauda’s original vineyard. A true custodian of the grape and its history, Ferraris is now president of the local producers’ association and is dedicated to promoting Ruchè while protecting and preserving its history.

While Ruchè’s deeper history is dependent on storytelling from generation to generation, DNA analysis confirms its roots as a crossing of Croatina, a tannic and rustic black grape, and the near-extinct, Muscat-tasting white grape Malvasia Aromatica di Parma, which likely contributes to Ruchè’s aromatic qualities.

“Ruchè distinguishes itself from other Piedmont reds above all for its intense floral aromas, namely of crushed rose petals but also fragrant purple flowers and sometimes geranium that mix with pronounced notes of white and black pepper,” says *Wine Enthusiast* Italian Editor Kerin O’Keefe.

“It’s not as racy as the region’s other reds, but it’s still fresh and energetic, with a good tannic structure.”



Ruchè’s many styles, from fruity and easy-drinking to complex riservas, make it easy to pair with a variety of dishes, from the locally celebrated *agnolotti del plin* (pinched pasta parcels of meat) to regional dishes of the world.

“Thanks to its juicy berry fruit, spicy flavors and structure, Ruchè is remarkably food-friendly,” says O’Keefe. “It works well with typical Piedmont dishes and aged cheeses but also with spicy foods including Asian cuisine.”

“It is also a workhorse in those markets who are not yet accustomed to the acidity and tannins typical of Piedmontese indigenous wines,” says Francesco Davico, export manager of Bersano, which produces San Pietro Realto Ruchè di Castagnole Monferrato.

Ruchè di Castagnole Monferrato was designated a DOCG in 2010. The region is a UNESCO-recognized site producing one million bottles from seven small municipalities in the Monferrato: Castagnole Monferrato, Scurzolengo, Grana, Montemagno, Portacomaro, Refrancore and Viarigi. Approximately 35% is exported, primarily to the U.S. and Asia.



“We hope this growth will continue to new geographical areas as well,” says Franco Morando, owner of Montalbera. He affectionately calls Ruchè the “red prince of Monferrato.”

Morando and other producers have created hospitality-rich experiences to welcome visitors to become more acquainted with Ruchè, from Montalbera’s luxury wine suites to cozy agriturismo and the lavish relais and tasting experiences at Tenuta Montemagno.

Once below sea level, this area is now dominated by calcareous-clay soils, fossils and sand, and is a playground for terroir-driven tasters. Numerous microclimates further diversify the territory and its reflection in the wine.

As the sign reads at the village entrance, “If someone hands you a glass of Ruchè in Castagnole Monferrato, it means they like you.”