

Verdicchio: A Summer Quencher

THIS REFRESHING WHITE WINE FROM THE MARCHE REGION IS ENJOYING THE RESPECT IT DESERVES, THANKS TO SOME TALENTED ITALIAN WINEMAKERS.

BY PATRICIA THOMSON

If you're looking for a refreshing summer wine, look no further than verdicchio. It comes from the Marche, a region that flanks the Adriatic Sea. Living on a hundred miles of coastline, you can't help but make wines that go with seafood.

Verdicchio has been grown in that region since at least the 1500s. It probably came from the Veneto, because the DNA is an exact match for Trebbiano di Lugana. It's likely that it moved to central Italy in the sixteenth century when farmers from the north of Italy fled the plague.

Verdicchio came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s as an inexpensive wine packaged in fish- or amphora-shaped bottles. But those were the bad old days of industrial-scale production, which meant quantity over quality and over-cropping in the vineyards, which led to thin, bland wines. Verdicchio has come a long way since. At its best, the grape can make young wines that crackle with energy. It also makes wines that can age for many years, gaining notes of honey and hazelnut atop the characteristic bitter-

almond finish. The motto for verdicchio is "long-lived by nature." Today critics consider verdicchio to be among Italy's top white wines.

There are 443 grape growers and 102 producers in the Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi DOC zone. I visited three of them, all pioneers of top-quality verdicchio.

In the nineteenth century, pilgrims trekking to Loreto would stop at the osteria of the Garofoli, one of the oldest family-run estates. They got their land as a gift after 1861 because they switched from backing the Vatican, which controlled the region, and threw their support behind the King of Piedmont during the battle in Castelfidardo. Piedmont won and went on to form the modern country of Italy. On that gifted land, the Garofolis started making wine in 1871.

The Garofolis are now on the fifth generation. I met with Gianluca Garofoli, who manages the winery. His father, Gianfranco, is sales director. His uncle, Carlo, makes the wine. Gianluca's sister,



A sommelier pours a glass of verdicchio.

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FOR CLEAN, CLASSIC AND COMPLEX VERDICCHIO,
REACH FOR THE WINES OF VILLA BUCCI. AMPELIO BUCCI
USHERED IN QUALITY VERDICCHIO IN THE 1980S.

Ampelio Bucci of Villa Bucci.
Photo @Patricia Thomson



Caterina, is in charge of marketing and hospitality. Gianluca is father to a nine-year-old daughter, the sixth generation.

In the 1970s, the Garofoli winery was the second to use an amphora bottle, after Fazi Battaglia, its inventor. But by the 1980s, “All the wineries started to use this kind of bottle, but without any care of the quality inside the bottle,” says Davide Redondi, export manager. “So during the ‘80s, this bottle became the symbol of a very bad quality wine.” Chianti’s straw flask suffered the same fate.

In 1981, Garofoli was the first to break free of that tradition, putting the wine in a clear glass Bordeaux bottle instead. That verdicchio was called Macrina. “The message was ‘I don’t want to sell you the bottle, but the quality inside,’” Redondi says. Next they put verdicchio in barrique, one of the first to do so. Thus in 1986, Serra Fiorese was born.

Then came Podium in 1991, which immediately became their most famous verdicchio. They knew they had a special patch of land with a huge amount of sand in the soil, unique to the Castelli di Jesi DOC zone, where the vineyard lay. They subdivided that vineyard into 10 plots and micro-vinified them separately, using slightly overripe grapes.

I can attest to Podium’s longevity. They poured me a 2010 Podium, as well as a 2014. Both were divine. The 2014 showed notes of saffron, while the 2010 had the characteristic scents of an aged verdicchio, with aromas of honey and toasted nuts. Both were still fresh as a result of verdicchio’s high acidity, the essential ingredient to wines that can age.

Garofoli also bought land further inland, on the mineral-rich Apennine slopes in the Verdicchio di Matelica DOC, a smaller and lesser known appellation, compared to the Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi DOC, a large amphitheater open to the Adriatic Sea. The marine influence gives the wines from Castelli di Jesi an appealing salinity, whereas the mountain wines from Matelica have more acidity, body, and alcohol. I find the Garofoli version of Matelica very enticing, with its bracing acidity. It just begs for a plate of calamari.

Altogether Garofoli produces 1.2 million bottles. It has 30 labels, including grappa and brandy. Among those is a full range of verdicchio — 10 in total — from sparklers to passito dessert wines. Few others have autoclaves to make sparkling wine, but Garofoli got theirs in the 1950s, one the first in the Marche to do so. Garofoli probably has the broadest range of verdicchios in the region.

For clean, classic, and complex verdicchio, reach for the wines of Villa Bucci. Ampelio Bucci ushered in quality verdicchio in the 1980s when industrial-scaled production dominated. The Bucci family has farmed these nearly 1000 acres of land since the 1700s, but Ampelio Bucci started his boutique label in 1983.

Known as the Professor in Italian wine circles, due to his having



Above: The Garofoli family, with Gianluca, who manages the winery, third on the left. Photo courtesy of Garofoli winery.
Below: A Slavonian oak cask in Villa Bucci’s cellar. Photo @Patricia Thomson

taught design and fashion at a university in Milan, Bucci strikes me more as a grandfatherly sort, with his greying mustache, gentle manner, and gracious hospitality to visitors. When we sit in his garden, he launches into lecture mode, recalling his start and the predicament verdicchio had found itself in during the 1970s.

“Verdicchio was really horrible in this period, because it was only about quantity,” Bucci recalls.

Taking age-worthy Chablis as his touchstone, Bucci went to see friends in Burgundy to ask for their help. They offered some precious advice: Study the soil. “They said you can make wine everywhere,” Bucci recounts, “but if you’d like to make a good wine, the most important thing is the soil. They explained that with the same grape, chardonnay, they do one wine here and after five miles, the wine is completely different.”

During the ‘70s, he gradually accumulated land for seven vineyards. He found plots with calcareous limestone soil (which white grapes love) with a subsoil of clay (good for retaining moisture). All told, he bought 76 noncontiguous acres of different altitudes and exposures.

“In the beginning, I thought it was a disaster,” he says, because it’s far easier to work one big plot. “Then I understood that could be a good tool. Interesting, because you can make not only cru, but blend [the vineyards].” Now the average age of the vines is 50 years old. He keeps the yields low — less than half the permissible amount required by the DOC rules — the better to concentrate the flavors.

Bucci makes two Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classicos. The vineyard blend is called Bucci and the single-vineyard cru is called Villa Bucci. Both are organic. He uses his own verdicchio clones grown in a tiny nursery out back. The iconic



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Below: Umani Ronchi's Massimo and Michele Bernetti. The father and son enjoy a conversation in the vineyard. Photo courtesy of Umani Ronchi.



Villa Bucci is a Reserve, which ages in large (50 to 75 hectoliter) Slavonian oak casks for up to two years, whereas the Bucci ages only four months. The Bucci is a beautiful wine; richly perfumed, smooth, and persistent, with notes of ripe pear and white flower. It's only 13% ABV.

"I like freshness with complexity," he says.

The Villa Bucci has even greater complexity and longevity, with notes of chamomile, honey, ripe apricot, white peach, and with the typical almond on the finish. It's a wine you can hold for 10 or more years, equal to a white Burgundy.

Umani Ronchi is one of the most important wineries in the region, a pioneer always at the forefront of quality. The winery started in 1957 as a verdicchio producer in Cupramontana,

in the heart of the Verdicchio Classico zone. The founder was Gino Umani Ronchi. When his family moved to Rome in 1968, he sold the company to Roberto Bianchi, a building contractor from the port city of Ancona, who entrusted his son-in-law Massimo Bernetti with the estate. Today Massimo, 87, runs the winery alongside his son, Michele Bernetti.

I visited their headquarters, which lies 37 miles east of the original location, along a busy highway that goes down the coast all the way to Puglia, the heel of the boot. Now owning 518 acres, including properties in Abruzzo, the region to the south, they make 3.1 million bottles divided between 20 labels, four of which are verdicchio.

They began exporting in 1973, when the market was hot for verdicchio, led by Fazi Battaglia's amphora bottles. But in 1983,

Below: The Loreto cathedral in the Marche region is a popular stop for tourists and the faithful alike. It is officially known as the Basilica della Santa Casa. Photo @Patricia Thomson



they made the first verdicchio from carefully selected grapes. Called Casal di Serra, it was a big hit and is now their flagship. Rounding out the four are an entry-level verdicchio, Villa Bianca; one from old vines, Vecchie Vigne; and finally Plenio, a Reserve, 40 percent of which ages in oak cask.

Together with consulting enologist Beppe Caviola, they created the phrase which defines their philosophy as a winery: "*Grandi vini, ma non grossi vini*. Great wines, but not big wines."

As president of the Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi consortium, when asked about promoting verdicchio in the States, Michele Bernetti replies that he wants to do press tours, but first needs to find out how many producers would take part.

Overall the USA makes up the majority

of verdicchio exports at 22 percent. But the general public has not caught on yet to the idea of aging white wine. Anything but the latest vintage is mostly ignored at restaurants and retail shops. So there's lots of education yet to do.

But the future looks bright for verdicchio. There's lots of new blood, as growers start bottling their own wine. The number of wineries have doubled in the past decade — a real boom. So there's plenty of verdicchio to choose from, but you'll be safe with these three names.

Patricia Thomson writes about wine and divides her time between Brooklyn and Piedmont. Follow her @dolcetours.