

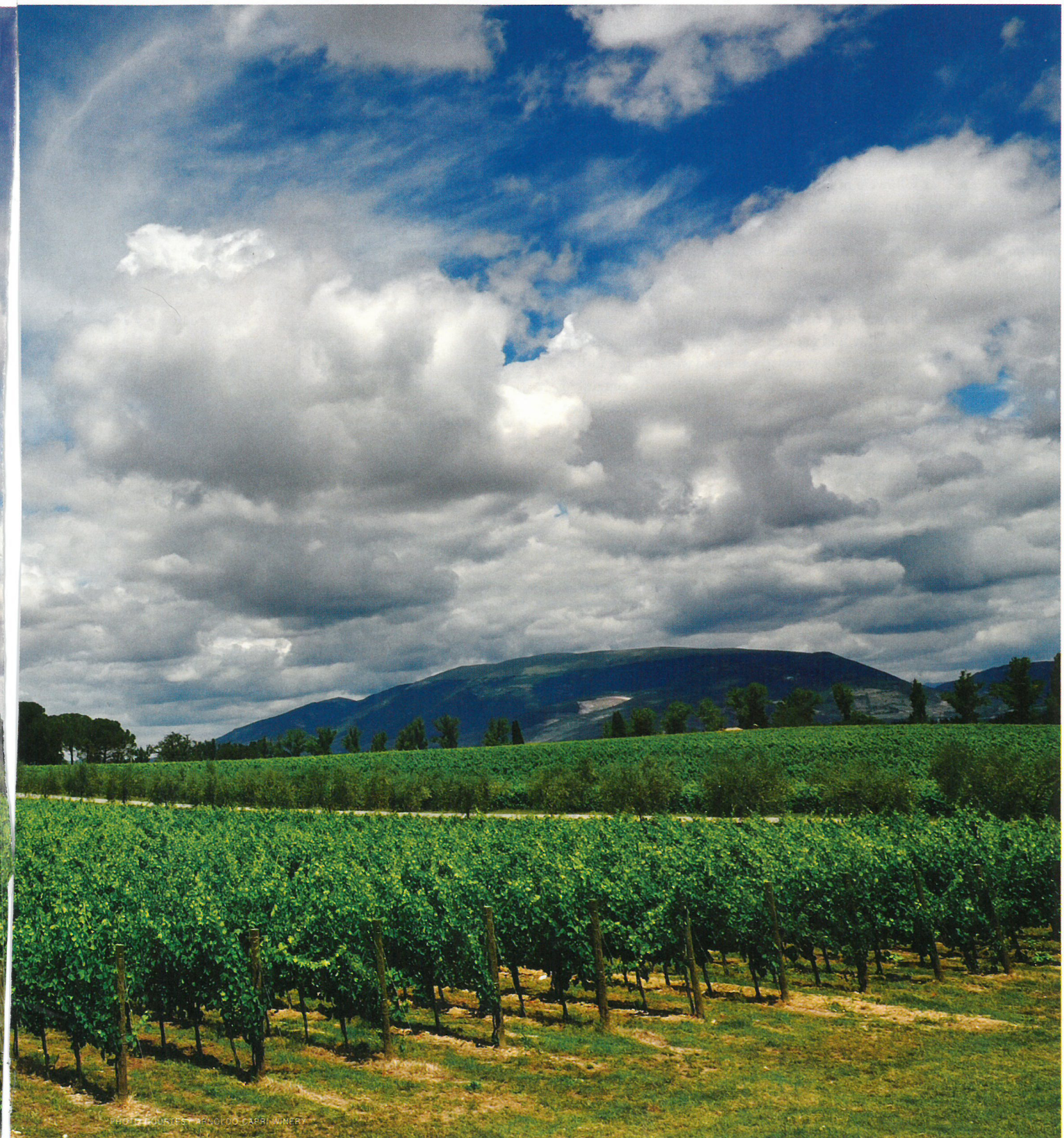
Italian Wines

SAINTS ALIVE! THE REB

Umbria's Montefalco, a hill town between Assisi and Spoleto, produces

IRTH OF SAGRANTINO

a wine whose roots stretch deep into the past. BY PATRICIA THOMSON



VINEYARDS THRIVE at the Arnoldo Caprai winery in Montefalco.

Italian Wines

Maybe it's because Umbria is so identified with the mystic saints, but to my mind the best way to approach Sagrantino, Umbria's signature red wine, is through the portal of a church—and none better than San Francesco in the hilltown of Montefalco, bull's-eye in this wine zone between Assisi and Spoleto.

Sagrantino's ties to the Church are many. Its name probably derives from the Latin *sacra*, sacred, and it was surely a sweet sacramental wine. Some speculate that followers of Saint Francis of Assisi were responsible for bringing this grape to Umbria from Asia Minor (though most likely it was indigenous, maybe even the mysterious Itriola mentioned by Roman historian Pliny a thousand years earlier). But there's no doubt that the ubiquitous monasteries and convents in these parts were key custodians over the centuries, with significant vineyard holdings. The area's oldest documented vineyards, from 1088, belonged to the Convent of Santa Chiara. By 1300, Montefalco wine had enough status that commune officials were issuing regulations meant to "safeguard vines and wine." In the 1500s, a Farnese pontiff, Pope Paul III, was so enamored of it that he suggested the town pay its duty in liquid form. And in 1622, a cardinal established the death penalty for thieves "found to cut a grape vine." These ecclesiasts took their Montefalco wine very seriously. So I'm guessing that Benozzo Gozzoli drank very well when in residence here from 1450-52, when painting the apse of the Franciscan church with a three-story fresco cycle depicting the life of St. Francis. The friars had their own sizable cellar next door, right next to the crypt. Records show they produced wine not just for sacramental use, but sold it too, so it must have been good.

Such tidbits flit through my mind as I crane my neck to study Gozzoli's frescoes. Years ago, I'd come to look at this masterpiece through an art historian's eyes. This time, I'm a wine hound on the scent. And luckily, I've got the best guide one could hope for: Maila Orazi. Author of two books on Montefalco, she ran the town's office of culture and tourism for two decades. Better still, she co-owns the Colle del Saraceno winery with husband Francesco Botti, whose family has sagrantino in its blood, having farmed it for generations.

Orazi points out a detail in the scene of St. Francis with the Knight of Celano. There on the supper table, Gozzoli painted a little homage to sagrantino: a delicate glass carafe filled with blood-dark wine. Beside it sits

SAGRANTINO GRAPES

indigenous to Umbria have a rich history in the region. Page 49: Sisters Chiara Lungarotti (left) and Teresa Severini of the Giorgio Lungarotti Winery.



IN THE 1500S, A FARNESE PONTIFF, POPE PAUL III, WAS SO ENAMORED OF SAGRANTINO THAT HE SUGGESTED THE TOWN PAY ITS DUTY IN LIQUID FORM.



a fruit tart with lattice crust, the very kind you find in kitchens today served with sagrantino passito, the sweet version made from dried grapes.

"There's Montefalco, do you see?" says Orazi, pointing to a fresco of St. Francis blessing the town. She indicates the landmarks: Assisi in the distance, Bevagna on the plain, Mount Sabasio with marshland at its feet, the remnant of a prehistoric lake. Drained long ago, that rocky alluvial terrain is now home to 74 wineries in the Montefalco zone.

Most are like Colle del Saraceno: small and family-run. Botti's production—just 25,000 bottles for four wines—is large by farmhouse-winery standards. So if sagrantino isn't on your radar, that's one reason why: There's not much of it. Altogether, the region produces a scant 1 million bottles of Montefalco Sagrantino DOCG and 2 million of the Montefalco Rosso DOC blend.

But that's way more than a few decades ago, when sagrantino was heading toward the endangered list. The wheel of fortune turns even for wine, and sagrantino had hit its nadir.

"Until the 1970s, sagrantino was in very limited production—made by 10, maybe 15 families," says Orazi back in her wine cellar, which fits snugly under the footprint of their modest, two-story house. "They produced it for themselves—a few liters for marriages, anniversaries, feasts—and only the passito."

The Bottis were among those families. Francesco fetches a photograph of his grandfather Galdino Botti. "He had just a third-grade education, but in 1979—the first year of the DOC—he won first prize at a wine competition mounted by agronomists," the winemaker says fondly. "But the important thing is, we've always cultivated vines, sagrantino above all."

They graduated to a commercial operation in 2000, launching the Colle del Saraceno label, named after a hill where the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II stopped in 1240, accompanied by his loyal Saracen (Arabic) bodyguards.

Botti lines up their wines: a lovely white Grechetto; a red blend; and two sagrantinos, dry and sweet. Typical for the region, the easy-



LEFT TO RIGHT: TOP: A church in Montefalco; Marco Caprai of Arnaldo Caprai Winery; **BOTTOM:** The barrel room at Arnaldo Caprai Winery; author and Montefalco expert Maila Orazi. Photos courtesy Arnaldo Caprai Winery and Patricia Thomson.

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drinking blend is their largest production. Unlike Rosso di Montefalco, which is essentially a baby Brunello, Montefalco Rosso is a whole other species—a blend dominated by sangiovese (60-70%) with a smidgen of cabernet, merlot, or other red grapes. The amount of sagrantino is limited to 10-15%—understandably, since a little goes a long way with this tannic monster of a grape. Botti wanted to goose it up to 30%, so his blend is a declassified IGT named Rosso Galdino, after grandpa.

By DOCG law, Montefalco Sagrantino is pure sagrantino, aged at least three years, including one in oak. Colle del Saraceno's version shows the hallmark flavors: blackberry and prune, touched with vanilla and cinnamon. They aim for a well-balanced, smoother style, says Orazi, "not too tannic and not too aggressive." "Our goal," Botti adds, "is to let it mature until the point where the tannins are velvety and feel like volume in your mouth."

But make no mistake: Sagrantino is a huge wine that needs years in the cellar and hours to breathe. It's a special-occasion wine, even in Montefalco, suited for feasts of wild boar, game, and succulent roasts. Lacking such an occasion, I paired it at lunch with a classic Umbrian tagliatelle al sugo d'oca (pasta with goose ragù) and was a happy camper. As for Montefalco Sagrantino passito, well, this is truly one of the glories of Umbria. Imagine blackberry syrup, minus the cloying character, plus a little backbone. "This passito is different from many sweet wines, because of its tannins," Orazi explains, passing the biscotti. "It's sweet, but finishes dry." Worthy of a hosanna, in my book.

Modern Sagrantino

The current chapter of sagrantino began in the 1970s, when it went from farmhouse wine to commercial enterprise.

Giorgio Lungarotti paved the way by putting Umbria as a whole on the map. I hear the story from his daughter Chiara Lungarotti, CEO of the Lungarotti winery in Torgiano, a half-hour north of Montefalco, who, along with her sister, Teresa Severini, heads the 2.2-million bottle winery—Umbria's largest. As we drive up a ridge to visit some vineyards, she tells me about her father's field trips with DOC committee members in the 1960s, when Italy was creating its denominazione di origine controllata classification system.

In addition to lobbying for a Rosso di Torgiano DOC to honor their Rubesco, Umbria's first high-profile red, "My father used to bring them to visit all of Umbria, to show them that Umbria was a great wine area," she says. "He'd drive around with Paolo Desano, the senator from Piedmont who made the DOC law in the 1960s, and Professor Piergiorgio Garoglio, an important professor of viticulture and enology from Turin." That laid the groundwork for the Montefalco DOC in 1979.

But it wasn't until Marco Caprai arrived on the scene that Montefalco began to break out of its chrysalis and assume its modern identity. He and his father, a textile industrialist who founded the Arnaldo Caprai estate in 1971, also fought for the DOC. But when Marco took the company reins in 1988, he pushed it further. It was he who propagated the dry style of sagrantino, which now dominates. He drew up the rules that allowed its graduation to DOCG status in 1992. Most importantly, he saved the vine from extinction.

Partnering with University of Milan, Caprai immediately embarked



on a sorely needed clonal study, collecting samples of "mother plants" from old or abandoned vineyards and everywhere in between: squares and alleys, gardens and parks. Now there's a sizable bank of genetic material, plus its progeny, to study or plant. In his own two experimental vineyards, Caprai is mixing and matching sagrantino clones with rootstocks and trellising systems, to the benefit of all and sundry. Today, with about 1700 acres in the region, sagrantino is off the endangered list. In the 1990s and early 2000s, as interest in indigenous grapes took off, wine companies from other parts of Italy rushed into Montefalco, including Cecchi from Tuscany (Alzatura), Ferrari from Trentino (Castelbuono), and Livon from Friuli (Colsanto).

Lungarotti arrived too, purchasing property in 1999 after a decade-long search. They chose a parcel with 360° exposition, giving sagrantino just what it needs to fully ripen. That's the trick to wrangling this bronco, along with perfectly calibrated yields.

"Until the 1970s, sagrantino was usually vinified as a dessert wine because the sugar could cover the green tannins. You can still find some bell pepper taste in sagrantino today, if you don't control the yields," Lungarotti says. "You have to pursue a balance between crop and vegetation. If you take away too many clusters, you have an explosion of vegetation and don't get your intended results. You have to get to a full ripening. Then it becomes a matter of how you extract tannins." Such variables lead to a range of styles.

For a classic but accessible Montefalco Sagrantino, look for Antonelli. Founded in 1881, it's among the oldest properties, once belonging to the Bishop of Spoleto. For contrast, try a single-vineyard sagrantino from Tabarrini, the only estate to produce several cru. Bottling since 1996, this family winery is now headed by a younger, motorcycle-jacketed generation, which goes for a riper, more extracted style. Then, in addition to Caprai, Lungarotti, and Colle del Saraceno, I recommend Colpetrone, Goretti, Milziade Antano, Le Cimate, and Perticaia. If you're thinking of dinner tonight, choose a Montefalco Rosso.

But since the holiday feasts are right around the corner, why not splurge on a Montefalco Sagrantino? There's no better time to do it justice.

Wine writer Patricia Thomson divides her time between New York City and Italy, where she runs wine tours through her company La Dolce Vita Wine Tours.