



TIME LORD

In Marsala, Marco De Bartoli rejected shortcuts, fashion and even the law – resurrecting a wine the world had written off

You have to keep going south – past the Alps, past Piedmont, past Chianti. Once you get to Sicily, don't go east towards Etna but all the way west, to the calcareous plain outside Marsala. The city itself is asleep under a blistering sun, raw and molten even in late September. On a Sunday morning, you better hope you have your own coffee machine, because everything's closed.

Standing in front of the Cantina Marco De Bartoli in the Samperi district, 20 minutes south of the city, the silence is so profound it has a sound all of its own. Last night it rained heavily – precipitation makes Sicilians nervous – and the electricity has gone off in the winery, which smells of oxidation, old wood and dust, like a library. That would be a fitting metaphor for somewhere in its twilight – except I'm standing in one of the most revolutionary places in the winemaking world. I've come here to resolve a quandary: what makes a visionary winemaker keep going when virtually nobody knows about the wine any more?

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It was in 1773 that the Liverpool merchant John Woodhouse discovered a distinctive local

wine being made in Marsala in a 'perpetual' or solera system, as in Jerez in Spain, which he knew from the Sherry trade. (In a solera system, new wine is made from a fractional blend of previous vintages, which age in a tower of barrels, younger wine replenishing the old.) Land and labour were inexpensive, so Woodhouse reasoned that if he fortified the wine with alcohol to survive transport back to England, he would have a lower-cost alternative to Sherry and Madeira. He was right and Marsala became a sensation. Thomas Jefferson declared it "an excellent wine, and well worthy of being laid in stocks to acquire age".

However, the industry had already passed its peak by the early 20th century, and the postwar shift from oxidised and fortified wines to fruitier flavours, together with general patterns of industrialisation, saw Marsala turn from a more artisanal product into cheap cooking wine. "It was a black period for Sicilian wine," Gipi De Bartoli, Marco's daughter, told me. Marco De Bartoli was born into industrial Marsala royalty: his mother was a Pellegrino, one of the large Marsala houses to this day. But there's no rebellion like one from within and after five years at Pellegrino, Marco wanted to find out more about what had been lost – not only when Marsala industrialised but also when the British imposed fortification on local winemaking traditions.

In 1978, he struck out on his own, embarking on a radical quest for authenticity that cast itself in opposition to the Marsala DOC guidelines, established in 1969, which made alcoholic fortification a requirement. Typically, DOC regulations serve as a mark of quality, guaranteeing production standards. But for De Bartoli, they codified a foreign intrusion.

He had two weapons at his disposal: the barrels his grandfather had made in the old style, for family consumption, until 1950, which were waiting in the family winery, and the hero grape Grillo. You can make Marsala using either

Catarratto, which is cheaper and easier to grow in volume, or the higher-maintenance Grillo, which holds on to its acidity; achieves the kind of ripeness that doesn't require artificial sugaring or much alcoholic fortification to reach the DOC-mandated 18 degrees; and can withstand oxidation, a critical element of Marsala, without turning to vinegar – the qualities that allow wine to age without spoiling.

There were choices to be made. Whether to fortify the natural, partly fermented must of grapes and their juice, or to adulterate the must by cooking it so it became more of a syrup? Whether to let the natural ripeness of the grapes do the talking, or to add sugar? Whether to add caramel to simulate the browning caused by slow, natural oxidation, or to age the wine slowly and naturally?

Even with his fortified wines, De Bartoli was obsessed with the question of how to transmit the local terroir, and the varieties indigenous to it, without manipulation. He returned to the old methods: hand-selected grapes, careful pruning, low yields, no chemicals, only natural yeast. "My father felt it was important to show the world what this territory could do," Gipi said. "A wine to drink and not to cook with. In our Marsala, we want you to smell the saltiness, the acidity, the complexity of the Grillo and the territory."

But De Bartoli didn't stop there. Turning to the "treasure" of his grandfather's barrels, he began to produce 'Vecchio Samperi' (Old Samperi), an unfortified oxidative Marsala with no sweetening, not even from natural, uncooked must – the way it was made before the British arrived. After these wines finished fermenting, they spent decades ageing in large barrels in which the wine gradually evaporated but wasn't replaced, slowly oxidising from microscopic intrusions of oxygen. There are only a few grapes in the world that improve in such conditions. Grillo, which nearly disappeared before De Bartoli revived it, is one of them.

MARSALA'S NEXT GENERATION

NINO BARRACO

You know a good European wine shop because it stocks wines by Nino Barraco. Barraco does not use chemicals or fortify, and has redefined what's possible from Sicilian grapes historically regarded as workhorses or easy pleasures, including oxidative wines that, like De Bartoli, decline to make a fetish of the oxidation; 20-year-old Grillos and Zibibbos as vibrant and tense as when they were made; and a Grillo grown by the sea that smells indelibly of sea urchin. "Everyone has a certain light inside," Barraco says. "This is mine. It's rare for Sicilians to understand that our wine can be alive after 20 years."

MANFREDI FRANCO

Elegant natural wines – indigenous yeasts, minimal sulphuring, tiny production for a classic palate from a former Milan attorney.

FABIO FERRACANE

Ferracane had to study biochemistry to understand that "real wine is not chemistry but territory" before taking over and expanding his father's Marsala vineyards to produce dazzling wines that include an amphora-aged skin-contact Catarratto that tastes like apricots doused in sea salt.

VINCENZO ANGILERI

A pioneer in the production of low-yield, hand-harvested, dry-farmed wines made according to traditional growing practices, including an old-vine Grillo/Catarratto blend made using a 40-year-old 'perpetual' system, Angileri has also been instrumental in mentoring Marsala's newest winemakers, such as Manfredi Franco.

"If you put Chardonnay in these barrels, in this condition," Gipi said, "it becomes vinegar in a week. With this wine, the only ingredients are time and oxidation. The windows are open all day every day – cold, hot, wind, day, night, summer, winter. We consent to the operation of the oxygen in the wine."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, De Bartoli venerated experiment as much as tradition. He was the first to make a non-oxidative table wine out of Grillo.

On Pantelleria, a Sicilian island closer to Tunisia than to Sicily, he began to produce *passito*, a wine painstakingly made from hand-picked, sun-dried grapes harvested at three stages of ripeness and manually turned for a month in the sun before vinification. He was the first to use Zibibbo (AKA Muscat of Alexandria) for dry rather than sweet wines. His older son, Renato, joined in by making the first skin-contact Grillo, and the first sparkling wine made from Grillo, using the Champagne method.

Marco was so particular about terroir that he refused to grow Zibibbo in Marsala or Grillo on Pantelleria, to say nothing of more popular Sicilian varieties such as Nero d'Avola. To this day, Cantina De Bartoli seems to make its single red from a grape locally known as Pignatello for no other reason than that it's indigenous and was at risk of extinction.

It wasn't enough for De Bartoli to challenge what had become local tradition. In 1993, he also took his gospel on the road as the president of Sicily's winegrowers' association, but in doing so he made many enemies. Two years later, after a local complaint, the authorities shut down De Bartoli for supposedly mislabelling its wines. Production didn't return to full capacity for five years, when De Bartoli was cleared of wrongdoing, but the experience unravelled him. A *bon vivant* who had raced cars before turning to wine, De Bartoli died in 2011 at 66. "There is a bright side to Sicily and a dark side to Sicily," as the Marsala winemaker Nino Barraco said to me.

De Bartoli's untimely death still hangs over the winery. Tragically, his younger son, Sebastiano, who looked after the wines on Pantelleria and pioneered a skin-contact Zibibbo, died last year too. When Gipi recalled him during our tasting, she fell silent and had to fight back tears. However, there's something at Cantina De Bartoli that continues to express itself with primal, life-giving force: the wines.

The 'Vecchio Samperi' – which cannot legally be called Marsala because it is unfortified – that we tried first was the golden-brown of my daughter's arms after a summer in the sun. On the nose, it was an argument for tension and harmony. Here, as in other De Bartoli wines, a dominant element, in this case the oxidation – which can be a bludgeoning note in Sherry and Jura whites – had been brought into perfect assemblage with the fruit and the acidity, which had not waned despite decades of ageing. I



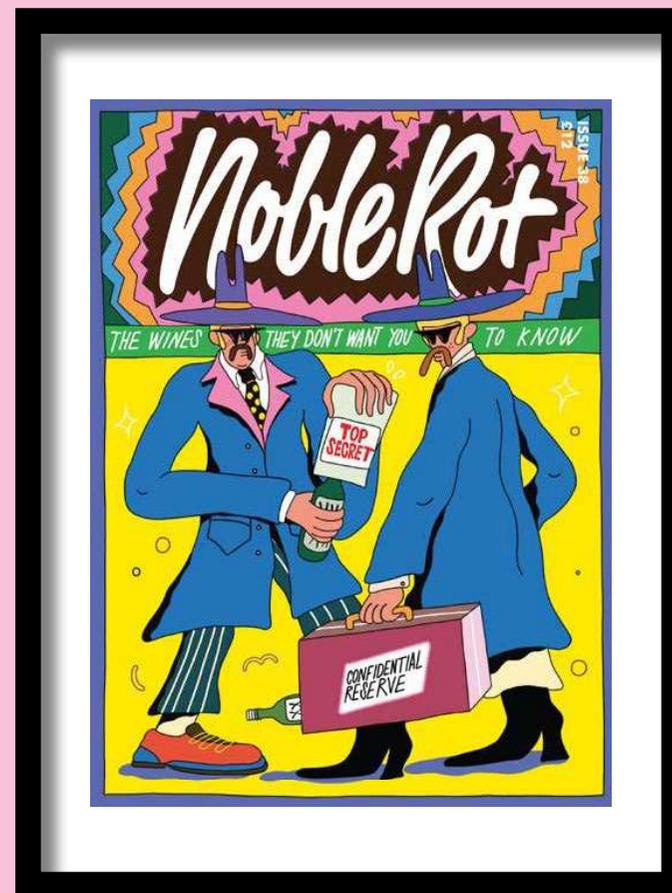
tend to process wine visually; tasting it, I felt like I was reaching very far down into some well. "It's a gastronomic wine, a polyhedric wine," Gipi said. "Sicilian *bottarga*, anchovies, roast meat, oysters, blue cheese, veal, dishes with fat, dishes with sweetness."

We finished with fortified Marsala Superiore Riservas from three standout vintages: 2019, 2009 and 1988. The 2019 was an inversion of De Bartoli's Zibibbo, which has the knee-weakening perfume of Muscat on the nose but is startlingly dry on the palate; the 2019 Marsala was dry on the nose and subtly sweet on the palate, with the oxidative element hovering in the background. In the 2009, it was as if someone had rearranged the palate: the oxidation had moved forward, the sweetness had taken a step back and the tension between them and the acidity made the wine hum with an aliveness unmatched by the 2019.

"That is the son," I said, meaning the 2019, "and this is the father."

"Then this is the grandfather," Gipi said, pushing forward the 1988. "But the grandfather is younger than the son. There comes a moment in the ageing when it starts to feel fresher and fresher. This is a grandfather who can dance." After we finished the 1988, we listened to the silence. The finish lasted for minutes.

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