

Marco de Bartoli

Profile

Marsala production dates back to the 1770's, when the Englishman John Woodhouse accidentally stumbled across the local wine made in a method called *il perpetuum*, basically a fortified wine. He immediately shipped it back to England, where it was successfully received. In the following decades more British-born merchants arrived, production increased, a harbor and nearby warehouse was built for ease of transport (based on the Oporto model) and most importantly the solera system was imported from Madeira and Xeres. This prosperity continued through the next century and beyond 1860, when the Italian states unified (Garibaldi landed his unifying army of exiles in the port of Marsala - the rest is history). At that point, an important business man named Vincenzo Florio started bottling Marsala independently and under his own name. The wine steadily rose in popularity over the years, and by the early 1900's there were a 100+ wineries in the city of Marsala, most located right on the coast for easy exporting.

By the 1960's, local wine cooperatives had grown considerably and production started focusing on quantity instead of quality. Instead of using the indigenous and traditional Grillo, coops started blending all types of white grapes indiscriminately. Furthermore, fortification, chaptalisation and the addition of caramel food coloring or cooked must to give the illusion of advanced oxidation became commonplace. Predictably, the increasingly poor quality of Marsala slowly killed off the reputation of what was once highly distinguished wine. Even today, many still consider Marsala little more than cheap cooking wine for the staple recipes of Italian-American restaurants.

Enter Marco de Bartoli. In his youth, Marco had worked with his father on his family farm near the town of Marsala. But his obsession with cars and a need for speed proved too strong, leading to a first career as a professional race car driver (how many times do you hear that??). Towards the end of this career, however, Marco was ready to turn a new leaf. Thinking back on his youth, he felt a deep sadness that the once proud tradition of Marsala had sunken so low. He decided he wanted to change this.

First, Marco reconstructed his family's old cellar on his mother's farm in the contras of Samperi. Then he searched high and wide for old solera barrels of Grillo from local *contadini*. Much to his surprise, many were eager to part with these ancient relics, some even happy to give them to him for free! Next came the vines, planted progressively and exclusively in Grillo, which in Marco's eyes was and is THE ONLY grape to make Marsala due to its high acidity, ability to reach high degrees of alcohol and aging potential. Finally the wines: *Vecchio Samperi* represented the unfortified, traditional style of Marsala while the *Superiore* line was fortified with mistella (sweet must and eau de vie) as a statement that the cantina was not only rooted in the past, but well versed in the present and future.

In 1984, Marco started a new project on the island of Pantelleria, originally producing only a Passito. By the early 1990's, his had garnered a stellar reputation for being alone in making truly stunning expressions of Marsala terroir.

But the story doesn't end there. By the mid 90's, Marco's children Renato, Sebastiano and Giusippina had all joined him in this work. Youthful energy led to new experiments, most notably dry white wines from Grillo and later Zibibbo from Pantelleria. While chemicals had never been used in

the vineyards and the Grillo for the Marsala was never yeasted, conventional yeasts were used on the dry whites until 2006. Sebastiano elaborates on working organically and using native yeast fermentations:

*"Our idea was always to make wine as a product of the land so we have always eschewed systemic chemicals. I do not remember a particular date we followed this course (**organic**), but I can tell you that about ten years ago I personally began to follow this campaign and have been sure of it ever since. I distinctly remember that even before then my father did not want to do intensive agriculture and prevented the farmer who worked our lands from using fertilizers, herbicides and so on..."*

Up to now we did not seek organic certification because it did not seem a serious approach and my father's point of view was never to have "organic" be a selling point for his work. But my dad was extreme and today organics seem to be a more serious issue. We understand the need for people to have the certification, so we are now seeking it.

For the indigenous yeasts, the key was the production of the Integer in 2006. I am not reneging the selected yeast used in the 90's because it allowed us to understand an innovative form for the Grillo and Zibibbo. But with the experiments of the Integer we understood the potential of the land was far more important than so many other things, knowing also that it was more risky. It may not always be the same for the tastes and aromas of the wine, but it certainly enhances the territorial typicity."

For more a more in depth look at how the Marsalas and dry whites are produced, please refer to the two visit recaps below.