



## A Surprise from Umbria

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Sometimes you don't know what you are missing.

Not so long ago a friend introduced me to a wine I hadn't heard of, the Rubesco Riserva from Cantine Lungarotti. Actually, introduced is not quite the right word. He poured 11 older bottles of it in a remarkable retrospective that included vintages ranging from 1982 all the way back to 1964. Now, I don't mind admitting that I don't know a lot about more than a few wines, although I am a fast learner. The world is too vast not to offer a few welcome surprises. And Cantine Lungarotti is a great example of the gems that await everybody who can keep an open mind.

It's not that Lungarotti is a new producer. Far from it. Lungarotti is one of the pioneers of Umbrian red wine, which may seem like a small thing since the region is better known for innocuous white wines like Orvieto. But Umbrian reds can be really good. Up to now, most of my personal research has been limited to Sagrantino di Montefalco, a rich, powerful, delicious wine, and producers like Arnaldo Caprai, Adanti and my favorite, Paolo Bea. But Giorgio Lungarotti, it turns out, was the producer that first gave Umbrian reds an identity, back when he first started making wines in the 1960's. And the best of Lungarotti's reds is the Rubesco Riserva.

Rubesco is a proprietary name. The wine itself is 70 percent Sangiovese, the grape of Chianti and Montalcino, and 30 percent Canaiolo, a Tuscan grape that was traditionally blended with Sangiovese in Chianti, but is no longer a required component, though some producers still stick with it. All the grapes come from the Monticchio vineyard, and the wine is sometimes called Vigna Monticchio. The wine is aged in barrels for two years and then for even longer, three years, in bottles, meaning it is not released until five years after the vintage.

The result is a spicy, intense yet elegant wine that is highly aromatic and can age, as our tasting demonstrated, for decades.

The tasting was held at the restaurant Barbuto in the West Village. We sat at the chef's table in the kitchen. I've never sat at a chef's table before, and I learned something very important. Whatever you are wearing you will immediately have to take to the cleaners and you will want to take a shower when you get home. All the kitchen smoke and grease saturates your clothes and hair. It was sort of like hanging out in a bar before the smoking ban.

Anyhow, I want to give you the highlights of the 11 bottles of Rubesco Riserva we tried, beginning with the youngest, the 1982. If you had served this wine to me blind, I never would have guessed its age. It seemed far younger, not deeply colored but juicy and fruity, but with a graceful balance. My initial favorites included the 1980, which was lighter bodied than the '82 yet more intense with a distinct floral aroma; the 1978, which was richer and spicier than the 1980, and both the 1974 and the '73, which were similarly floral and spicy.

Until that point, I had some questions about how the wines were aging. In other words, even though the wines were different, they all seemed to retain a primary fruit character. Did this wine evolve as it aged? Or did it merely endure? That question was answered with the 1969 and the 1966, which both had developed a distinct and delicious truffle aroma and earthy character, similar to what you find in older Burgundies and Barolos, yet singular as well. Question answered.

Sadly, the 1971 and the 1964 were both corked. We also tasted a 1979 and a '77, which were good but not as distinctive as the wines I've described. Nonetheless, it was an extraordinary tasting, made even better by the fact that we could drink the wine with a very good meal that included gnocchi in a mushroom ragu, stuffed sardines, roasted lamb shoulder and a slow-cooked pork shank.

Giorgio Lungarotti died in 1999, but the work at the winery is carried on by his two daughters, Teresa and Chiara. And Lungarotti is not only a winery but a complex that includes a wine museum, an olive oil museum, a hotel and a restaurant. Umbria itself requires further exploration. Riccardo Cotarella, the best-known Italian wine consultant, has made some excellent, if modern, wines from Umbria. I've long wanted to visit Montefalco, and I think now I'll have to plan on at least a couple of side trips.

Eric Asimov



The Umbria region of Italy is home to Lungarotti, one of the pioneers of Umbrian red wine. (Nick Ysenburg for The New York Times)

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