



Issue 145: July/August 2009 > Ian D'Agata on the Best Wines of Central Italy > Lungarotti

Lungarotti

By Ian D'Agata

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Back in the '70s, practically the only decent Umbrian wine came from Lungarotti. New and exciting wineries have surfaced in Umbria in recent years, but Lungarotti is still a recognized quality leader and one of Italy's most important estates. Led by two sisters—the more laid-back and soft-spoken Maria Teresa (the first woman from Umbria to graduate with an enology degree) and the high-energy Chiara Lungarotti's future and past go hand in hand. Examples of their innovative mindset include a project with the University of Perugia aimed at developing thermal energy from vine cuttings in an effort to gain energy self-sufficiency for the estate, and the attention paid to old local grapes such as canaiolo nero, a variety that almost everyone else around them (and in Tuscany as well) is ripping up. Recently, Chiara told me that she felt canaiolo nero is a much better partner for sangiovese than merlot or cabernet, which tend to take over in a blend. Interestingly, the Lungarotti sisters and their top-rate winemaking team manage to wring out character and quality from other lesser grape varieties such as grechetto and trebbiano as well.

92 points - 2004 Lungarotti Vigna Monticchio Rubesco Torgiano Rosso Riserva

(\$55; a 70/30 blend of sangiovese and canaiolo nero) Deep ruby. Rich but brooding aromas of black cherry, redcurrant, violet, smoke and cedary oak. Dense and pliant but lively, with penetrating flavors of dark berries, cola, licorice and spices. Finishes ripely tannic and persistent, with an intense flavor of black cherry.

90 points - 2003 Lungarotti Vigna Monticchio Rubesco Torgiano Rosso Riserva

(\$55; a blend of 70% sangiovese and 30% canaiolo nero) Moderately saturated red. Utterly pure if a touch oaky on the nose, with suave floral and mineral-tinged strawberry and red cherry aromas complicated by tar and subtle smoke notes. The palate offers similar flavors and manages to avoid the overripe, almost cooked character of many reds from the furnace-like '03 vintage. Finishes with a lingering mineral note.

90 points - 2003 Lungarotti San Giorgio Umbria Rosso

(\$62; a blend of sangiovese, canaiolo nero and cabernet sauvignon) Medium-deep purple-ruby. Captivating aromas of dark berries chocolate and balsamic vinegar. Downright silky in texture, this full-bodied wine is loaded with complex flavors of dark cherry, dried herbs and smoky underbrush. This ripe, long wine can be drunk now or over the next 10 or 15 years. An amazing result for a 2003.

90 points - 2006 Lungarotti Vigna II Pino Riserva Torre di Giano Torgiano Bianco

(A blend of 70% trebbiano and 30% grechetto) Medium straw-yellow with a gold tinge. Very ripe, vaguely musky aromas of lemon drop, butter, honey, oatmeal and vanilla. Fat, ripe and sweet, with a chewy quality to the buttery exotic fruit flavors. But surprising acidity and minerality give shape and grip to the long finish. This boasts terrific flavor intensity and impressive depth for a wine in this price range.

88 points - 2007 Lungarotti Torre di Giano Torgiano Bianco

(\$14; a 70/30 blend of trebbiano and grechetto) Good pale, green-tinged yellow. Intense, sharply focused citrus, apricot and pear skin aromas are underscored by vivid minerality. Fresh and lively on the palate, the flavors taking a tropical turn and picking up hints of honey and bergamot. I'd drink this over the next year or two at most, but it's an impressive wine for the money.

88 points - 2007 Lungarotti Pinot Grigio Umbria

(\$15) Good pale straw color. Textbook pinot grigio aromas of pear, ripe citrus and beeswax. Offers more stuffing in the mouth than the base Torgiano Bianco, with energetic citrus and pear flavors and a refreshing minerality that reminded me of Friuli. Finishes on a bright, ripe note, with excellent purity and length. A rather amazingly varietally accurate pinot grigio from Lungarotti, considering Umbria's rather warm climate.

88 points - 2006 Lungarotti Chardonnay Aurenate Umbria

(\$45; 90% chardonnay with 10% grechetto) Medium gold. Leesy, smoky yellow apple and pineapple on the nose, with hints of banana and toffee. Supple, concentrated and rich, with soft, varietally accurate flavors of banana and pineapple complicated by caramel and hazelnut. The fruit really comes out on the persistent finish of this densely packed wine, but not so much so that it turns into a fruit cocktail.

Also recommended: 2005 Rubesco Torgiano Rosso (85).

Other wines tasted: 2004 Sagrantino di Montefalco. (Bedford International, Larchmont, NY)

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(L to R) Teresa Severini and Chiara Lungarotti in Torgiano, Umbria (Italy)