

A labour of Love

Every year, an important tradition binds the community of Salento to the culture of the vine and wine. A handful of women rise before the sun every September to pick grapes and sing traditional songs of love. **By Josephine McKenna**



AS A CHILD Grazia Elia recalls running barefoot through the dusty vineyards of southern Puglia at the height of the harvest season.

Today the 56-year-old is one of a handful of women who rise before dawn every September to pick the season's succulent grapes while singing traditional songs of love in what is known as the "women's harvest".

Like their mothers and grandmothers, these women sing about romance in their poetic dialect – with a curse or two for the lovers who have betrayed them – as they move through the vines in a stunning region near Brindisi and close to the Adriatic Sea. Their songs also celebrate the deep love they have for their land.

"My parents taught us how to pick grapes by hand when we were young, because they were afraid to give us shears," says Grazia. "So it's a great tradition and it's a beautiful experience for me to take part in the women's harvest."

Grazia began working in the vineyards of southern Puglia at the age of 15. She is now employed year-round by Tenute Rubino, one of the region's most dynamic winemakers, and involved in everything from thinning, topping and leaf removal.

"We just planted 25 new vines. They are beautiful. When you see them grow it's spectacular," she says.

The highlight for Elia and her team is the harvest, and more than 20 women of various ages take part in it every year.

"We all work in harmony. We are so happy to work together," she says. "Even my daughter-in-law, who comes from northern Italy, loves to join us. She's very good at it, too!"

Tenute Rubino was founded 15 years ago by Luigi Rubino who established the winery as an offshoot of the family agricultural business run by his father, Tommaso. He explains why women play such a critical role in the harvest.

"Wine for us Italians was considered an important element of life, integral in our diet like bread or pasta, and the whole family used to be involved in the harvest – husbands, wives, brothers, cousins," says Luigi.

"Women have always taken part



"The work of the women in the fields in Italy takes on a unique value of great symbolic significance and perspective."

in the harvest, which was the most important activity of the season," he continues. "Now these women are keeping alive the ancient bond between wine and communities that has always been expressed in this land.

"The work of the women in the fields in Italy takes on a unique value of great symbolic significance and perspective."

Tenute Rubino has four estates on the Adriatic Coast – Jaddico, Marmorelle, Uggio and Punta Aquila – spanning a total of 200 hectares.

Scorching summer temperatures and the proximity to the sea give the company's wines a unique Puglian taste.

As Rubino shows visitors around

the vineyards with his Australian-born wife, Romina Leopardi, he shares his enthusiasm for winemaking and talks about the local conditions that help to produce a top wine.

Wine has been produced in the so-called "heel of Italy" for centuries. Rubino says the sea provides constant ventilation and moderates the thermal range between sometimes searing daily temperatures and cooler nights, providing ideal conditions for the ripening of the grapes.

In this region, wines produced from the same grape variety planted in different locations can often produce wines that are remarkably different from one another. The results depend on altitude, exposure to the sun and proximity to the sea.

The company produces 11 different varieties, including whites, rosés and the hearty reds that are the signature of the region. Among them are four single-variety wines – Primitivo, Negroamaro, Negroamaro Rosato and Malvasia Bianca – produced from particular grapes cultivated in the Brindisi hinterland.

Luigi says investment in the vineyards, as well as the company's state-of-the-art cellar, is critical for improving the winery's high standards and fuelling its expansion.

"Today our wines are appreciated all over the world, they are definitely ambassadors for their land," says Luigi. "We strongly believe in the potential of this territory, its rich soil and long tradition of a wine culture."

Over the years the Rubino wines have generated a great deal of national attention and the company also offers wine tours and tastings.

"In just a few years, the Rubino family has created one of the most important wineries in the Brindisi area," described the highly respected Gambero Rosso wine guide. "This is not only true in the quantitative sense, but above all in a qualitative sense with a series of labels that speak of their heritage and are rightfully at the top of the oenological culture of Puglia."

Tenute Rubino has picked up a string of awards including a 'Tre Bicchieri' or three hats from the latest Gambero



Rosso wine guide for its hearty 2012 Torre Testa, a robust red wine made from the Susumaniello grapes found only in Puglia.

"We started the wine business from nothing in 2000," says Rubino. "In 15 years we have had 15 harvests. We are now selling our wine all around the world."

Seventy percent of Tenute Rubino's wine is now sold abroad and 30 percent in Italy. The company has a strong international focus and is looking for new markets.

"Our production has grown from 50,000 bottles in 2001 to 1.2 million bottles a year and we now sell to 35 countries, even Australia," he says.

"We're getting better known and have expanded our range of wines. Our strongest market is in Europe, but we're also growing in China, South Korea and plan to return to Japan in 2016. But we would like to export more to Australia."

Luigi and Romina fell in love in 2008 and have since married and have five children. Perhaps it's that personal connection that's given Luigi an added drive to gain a stronger foothold in the Australian market.

"It would make me happy and proud to sell more of our wine in Australia, but I haven't found the right distributor," he says. "We need to find



the right one who distributes quality wines at the right price."

As the harvest begins, Romina, who is the winery's marketing manager, expresses her admiration for the women who play such a crucial role in making it happen.

"This is hard work, work that requires these women to rise early in the morning and work all day in the fields," she says. "They do it with enthusiasm because they believe in it deeply. Now we are seeing the next generation as the work is being handed down from mothers to their children."

Luigi has high hopes for this year's vintage and there is plenty to celebrate when he and his family join their workers in a traditional *festa*.

"The harvest has a symbolic value – it's a ritual in Italy," Rubino says. "All the effort and exhaustion ends with a party with all of us together, people of all ages from young kids to the elderly. It is a really great thing."

The party is not only a celebration, but a culinary feast that showcases the best in Puglia's rich traditional cuisine and plenty of wine.

There is freshly made *burrata*, cheese made from mozzarella and cream, as well as octopus, eggplant *parmigiana*, chickpeas and shrimp, chicory and fava bean puree. After the meal, the partygoers sing and dance to traditional folkloric music and toast the Rubino family.

"We dance and sing together," says Grazia. "It is a really beautiful party."

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