

**ODDERO**

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## Piedmont's Women Take Charge

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They talk about what it's like to be a woman in a business traditionally dominated by men. Several lament that for years when dining out locally, the wine list was always given to a male at the table. Enrica Scavino, who with her sister Elisa is responsible for the brilliant wines at Paolo Scavino in Castiglione Falletto, recounts an experience in which a male server came around with the bottle and asked her, "Do you drink?"

Fortunately, the days when waiters assumed that women were not interested in or knowledgeable about wine are largely behind us. Women have been successful in all aspects of the wine industry, from production to distribution to sales.

In the regions I review for Wine Spectator, women have taken the helm at many of the most important wineries. In Tuscany, for example, the Antinori company is led by sisters Albiera, Allegra and Alessia; Castello di Volpaia is run by Giovanna Stianti and her daughter Federica Mascheroni Stianti; Elisabetta Gnudi Angelini owns Altesino, Caparzo, Borgo Scopeto and Doga delle Clavule; and Donatella Cinelli Colombini oversees her own namesake estate. In Burgundy, Lalou Bize-Leroy of Domaine Leroy and Claude de Nicolay-Drouhin of Chandon de Briailles lead their own wineries, as did the late Anne-Claude Leflaive at Domaine Leflaive.

Piedmont is in many ways a deeply traditional culture. A tight-knit community of small towns and small wineries, it has only recently become a major tourist destination (since its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site) and is yet to be fully outfitted with hotels and restaurants. An older way of life survives in the rolling hills of the Langhe.

Yet in Piedmont today, it's very common to find women directing the wineries and making the wines. I wanted to explore why this shift has occurred and whether it means something important for Piedmont in particular and the wine world in general. So I invited some of the women winemakers I knew best to join me for dinner and conversation.

After weeks of preparation, the night arrives. Along with Enrica and Elisa Scavino, the table includes Chiara Boschis, Silvia Altare, Claudia Cigliuti, Daniela and Monica Rocca and **Isabella Oddero**. A number of other invitees, including Gaia and Rossana Gaja, Bruna Giacosa, Maria Teresa Mascarello and Marta and Carlotta Rinaldi, were unable to attend.

And there are many more in addition to those mentioned above. Giuliana Clerico now runs Domenico Clerico, having taken the reins after the death of her husband last year; Barbara Sandrone works alongside her father, Luciano, and uncle Luca; and Anna and Valentina Abbona manage Marchesi di Barolo. Luisa Rocca of Bruno Rocca, Elena Mascarello of Giuseppe Mascarello, Elena Penna-Currado of Vietti, and Lorella Zoppis of Antoniolo in Gattinara are other important names to mention.

In all, these women represent the best *terroirs* of Barolo and Barbaresco, and they are making many of the region's top wines. (A chart of selected recent releases appears on page 53.)

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Chiara Boschis, 58, owner of Pira Chiara Boschis, was one of the first women to join the winemaking ranks in Barolo. Boschis' debut vintage was 1990, after her parents purchased the E. Pira estate in the commune of Barolo in 1981.

Like others at the table, Boschis was born into a winemaking family; her grandmother inherited the well-known Borgogno winery in 1968 and, with Chiara's parents, instilled in Chiara a passion for vineyard and winery work despite the poverty they endured during the post-World War II era. But at the time, the custom was to pass the properties on to the males in the family.

"I saw how much love they put in this work, so I fell in love as well," Boschis recalls. "But the family was leaving the winery to the boys, not to the girls, because it was already a big mess to split, you know, so the girls were never involved. The Borgogno winery was left to my brothers."

But she persevered, and when the opportunity to purchase a nearby estate arose, Boschis convinced her parents to buy it.

"I knew my father was in love with this property because it was a jewel," she says. "Strategic location, beautiful location. Beautiful old cellar, great vineyards. So I pushed him. I said, 'Look, Dad, if you help me, I want to take care of this winery, and I promise as soon as I finish my studies, I will put all my heart and my soul into this.'"

Boschis fulfilled that promise. But there were headwinds along the way. Not only was she a woman in a man's world, she was an innovator in a traditional community.

She fell in with a group of young winemaker friends known as the Barolo Boys, who in the 1970s and '80s had begun questioning the traditional techniques of the area and were instrumental in a surge of innovations and the introduction of more modern-style, approachable Barolos. When Boschis began implementing new ideas such as lowering yields and experimenting with barriques, it created tension in the local winemaking community.

"Like the barrels, you know," she says, referring to the barriques. "I remember here [at Pira], my parents already changed the barrels, because there were some barrels that were 200 years old. But they were also using older barrels. So, these changes really created friction between the older generation and the new generation. The fact that I was a woman that was doing all these crazy things, it was a little bit of an impact in the beginning."

Boschis, along with her contemporaries Maria Teresa Mascarello, 51, and **Maria Cristina Oddero, 57**, helped pave the way for the younger generation of women winemakers.

"I am truly inspired by Chiara Boschis," says Silvia Altare, whose father, Elio, was one of the Barolo Boys, smiling at her mentor across the table. "I have her picture on my nightstand; I give her a kiss every night. She's my superhero."

Altare, 39, officially joined the family business in 2003 but notes that she has been around it "since I was a kid." That means a deep knowledge of every aspect of the estate. "I can see what's happening, from the vineyard to the sales. It's not easy, but that's the way it is in a family business."

In 2016, Altare's parents gave her and her sister Elena the winery. "At Easter dinner, my father raised a glass and said, 'I've made a final decision. You get the winery.' I didn't get too excited, figuring that by dessert, he would change his mind."

He didn't. And because Elena lives in Germany and was not involved in the business, Silvia eventually bought her shares and is now the sole owner.

During my visit with Chiara Boschis a day before our dinner, a young couple from the United States came to visit. They were newly married, and Boschis counseled them, "If you want to have girls, drink Barolo."

She was joking of course. But a lot of producers in the Langhe have daughters, and those daughters have grown up with wine and are now either winemakers or principals in the

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company. While none of them felt forced to join the family business, in many cases they were the only ones who could keep the business in the family.

In the 1980s, about the same time Boschis was studying enology and preparing to take control of the Pira estate, Bruna Giacosa started working with her father, legendary Langhe vintner Bruno Giacosa.

Impeccably dressed, Giacosa looks like she stepped out of a fashion magazine, and in fact, she wanted to study fashion. But her taciturn father, who died earlier this year, hated traveling, preferring to spend his time among the vines and in his cellar. So Bruna became the face of the winery, promoting its wines around the globe in addition to tasting them alongside her father and consultant Dante Scaglione.

"Since I was eight, my father said to me, 'Bruna, when are you going to work with me?' " she says.

Today, she is solely responsible for the business, sharing ownership with a sister who is not involved in the winery. As a teenager, she often wished she had a brother, but today, she doesn't regret her career decision. "In my life, my father was the most important thing. I loved him very much. It was nice to work with him even though he was difficult," she says.

For Maria Teresa Mascarello, joining the family business in 1993 was also her choice. Her grandfather and father were strong personalities, and though her grandfather wanted her to go to enology school, she says her father never influenced her decision. "I probably came back to the family business because I had this choice," she recalls.

"I learned from my father, not only about winemaking, but life lessons," Mascarello explains. "It wasn't only a question of making wine but principles, like respecting nature, our roots, our traditions. The currents in life are reflected in the wine."

The summer of 1993 was a transitional period for Claudia Cigliuti, 43, who had finished high school and by harvest had decided to join the family business.

"My parents never obliged us," she says, referring to herself and her younger sister Silvia, 38, who became the winemaker in 2000. "I thank them, because if they obliged us, I probably would have chosen a different business. In fact, my father never believed me and my sister would continue in this business," she adds.

Yet the gravitas of Cigliuti's roots, her family history and the estate's tradition weighed heavily in her decision. "I started that summer to think about the future and that if I didn't continue with this business, my father would sell everything. So, thinking of not having the opener to the gate to go inside the yard where I grew up, where my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather were born, it was something I couldn't accept," she remembers. "So even if I had a few doubts immediately, thinking about that helped me make the decision, 100 percent."

Born into winemaking families, some with long histories of grapegrowing and winemaking, these women had experiences that were similar, the themes familiar: family, humility, passion and tradition.

Gaia Gaja, now 38, began working with her parents at the Gaja winery in 2004. She had big shoes to fill following in the footsteps of her father, Angelo, a master marketer and salesman who established the reputation of his own wines and helped bring the entire regions of Barbaresco and Barolo to public attention. However, Gaia does not feel that there were obstacles to her success specifically because she is a woman.

"I'm not in a weak position like other women can be, because I am one of the owners of the winery, so I don't have to pursue an [outside] career," she notes. "It's my winery and this is taken for granted. I'm listened to when I talk and not put in second place. I have an easy position, so no, I never had problems."

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Nonetheless, she did have an unsettling experience once in Macau, during a casino visit promoting her winery's 150th anniversary. She had organized a wine dinner and brought exclusive older vintages from the 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s to host a vertical. "This happens very rarely that I open very old bottles of wine. But that was the plan," she says.

One of the casino's most important gamblers wanted the dinner only for himself and his friends, so he paid double the price. He didn't want other people around and he didn't want a woman explaining the wines to him. "So that night, that I was very much looking forward to, I spent it in Macau at a bar with my importer. And this guy tasted all my wines without me because he didn't want a woman to explain the wines," she laughs.

Scavino sisters Enrica, 44, and Elisa, 36, agree that being a member of a wine family is a big advantage. Elisa recalls a woman who graduated from enology school with her but wasn't the daughter of a producer. She was offered office, sales and marketing jobs, but no positions in vineyards or cellars.

But despite all the advantages it may confer, the family situation can be difficult to navigate.

Two of the youngest female winemakers in Barolo are the Rinaldi sisters—Marta, 33, and Carlotta, 30, of Giuseppe Rinaldi, a producer of traditional Barolo. Working in the family business is very complicated, admits Marta Rinaldi. "After having the experience of working with my father in the cellar, I don't have problems with anyone," she says.

Silvia Altare felt that she had to prove herself to the older men who worked at the winery as well as to her father. "My dad, this was at the very beginning, he would say, 'Silvia, good job, you're good, you're cool, great job. The only problem, you're a woman.' So I grew up thinking it must be a disease, being a woman. That's why I always felt I have to work like a guy. Maybe that psychological pressure my parents put on me, it helped me, because I feel superstrong."

That kind of pressure is unrelenting, they say.

"All my life, I understood that certain girls were not competitive enough," says Boschis. "To be assertive like a man, like a boy, I had to act like a boy, in the sense of competition-without any compromise, without any shortcuts. I remember I always got the respect of my companions in school, in sports, and finally in my work. I had to compete with big lions, so I had to work hard, I had to be tough," she adds.

"If you want to do this job, you have to be available all the time," says Giacosa. "You can't think about going to the hairdresser or going shopping tomorrow. You have to be available for the winery."

It helps if you have allies. While Altare, Giacosa and Mascarello are all the sole managing proprietors of their respective estates, others have siblings for help.

In the case of Albino Rocca, a producer of elegant Barbarescos, three sisters—Daniela, 46, Monica, 44, and Paola, 36—share the responsibilities, along with Paola's husband, Carlo.

Despite being the youngest, Paola was the first to join the family business, after attending enology school in Alba. "While I was a child, I always spent time with my father [Angelo Rocca] in the cellar, and it was fascinating for me to follow him during the different steps of the vinification of a wine," she says. "I worked with my father first, even if it was not so easy to discuss with my dad, because he had strong and clear ideas about the wines. Today, I work with my husband, Carlo, in the cellar, sharing together impressions about wines, vinification style and vineyard management practices."

Monica, a lawyer who worked on social and economic development policies of the region, joined her sister and father in the family business in 2008. Daniela arrived in 2011, utilizing her banking experience to fill administrative and commercial roles at the winery. The three sisters found themselves suddenly and fully in charge after their father died in an ultralight plane crash in 2012.

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But ground has been gained. Today, being a woman and making wine is kind of cool, according to Silvia Altare. "Fifty years ago, it was a shame to be a farmer. 'Oh, you stink.' You couldn't even find a husband or a wife if you worked on a farm," she says. "Now, if I go to Alba dressed up with boots and my hands black from the harvest, you have guys coming up to you and saying, 'Oh, you work in a winery?' So now it's cool to be in the wine industry."

Many of these women took over their wineries from strong fathers. But motherhood also plays an important role, both for vintners who are juggling winery responsibilities and child-raising, such as the Cigliuti sisters, Rossana Gaja, Maria Cristina and **Isabella Oddero** and Enrica Scavino, and for those whose own mothers were primary influences on their lives and careers.

"Very influential and more and more is my mother," Gaia Gaja explains. "Not only because she is my mother but because she is a very good example of how you can be a wife, a mother, a businesswoman, because my mother is the first one to get into the office and the last one to leave. She's really doing things my father is not able to do. My mom has to take care of the problems every day."

Claudia Cigliuti's mother, Dina, worked alongside her father building the family business too. "My mother worked in the vineyards during the day, helping my father, and was cooking during the evening, making clothes for me and my sister. I really admire her," she says. "I couldn't do what she did, because she slept very few hours during the night. She worked like crazy. My father always told me she worked harder than a man."

At Paolo Scavino, Enrica and Elisa speak about their mother's role, which included not only looking after the orders and paperwork, but serving as a taster, to confirm the quality of the wines with their father, Enrico.

"Women have a great palate and are very sensitive to perfumes," says Enrica. "We remember very well when we were young children, my father, before he bottled the wines, always tasted with my mom and my aunt. He always had great respect for their palates. When my mother said, 'Hmm, I don't think this is perfectly clean,' he was racking one more time."

The cultural and emotional influences reach beyond immediate families. Maria Teresa Mascarello cites Juliette Colbert as a role model. A noble Frenchwoman, Colbert married Carlo Tancredi Falletti, whose family owned the castle in Barolo. During the 19th century, Colbert was instrumental in several types of philanthropic work, developing a school for women, advancing prison reform and undertaking other charitable endeavors for underprivileged women in the area.

I was particularly taken by a story told by **Isabella Oddero**, 34, who represents the seventh generation to run her family's business. Her grandmother Carla Scanavino held a pharmaceutical degree and owned the first pharmacy in Alba. "All she dreamed about was a house near the sea," Isabella recalls, "but she spent all her money on vineyards."

Thanks to Scanavino, three of the most important crus in Barolo—Vigna Rionda, Brunate and Rocche di Castiglione—are included in **Oddero's** holdings. Yet in the winery's history, she receives no credit; she's not even mentioned on its website. At the age of 70, she finally got her house by the sea, in Liguria. She died a year later.

And yet, however firm their foundations, the younger generation of women at the helm of wineries in Piedmont play a more integral role in the viticulture, vinification and promotion of their wines than their mothers did. They are the public faces and make the crucial decisions both financially and in the farming and production of the wines.

Women have worked hard and achieved much to advance the development of the Langhe area, raising quality as well as awareness of Piedmontese wines in this new era, in particular Barolo and Barbaresco. Many represent the future of the region for decades to come.

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As one of the pioneers, Boschis is enthusiastic: "I love the women who are now in the wine business," she beams. "They are all fantastic girls and tough girls as well. I'm very proud, I'm very happy for the Langhe future."

"We're not farmers anymore," says Silvia Altare. "Well, we are still farmers, but it's much broader." When I comment that they are rock stars now, she pauses for a moment and smiles: "Not yet, but we will be one day. We will."