

# AN ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

When a parish priest explored his new church, he discovered vines on the property. Stephen Quinn looks at what happened next.

When Giacomo Cauda was appointed parish priest to the village of Castagnole Monferrato in Italy's Piedmont region in 1964, he discovered his church had 1.3 ha of vines. Those vines included 10 rows of a grape he grew to love. Fortunately for that grape, Don Giacomo, born in Roero, a major wine area in Piedmont, knew something about winemaking.

The next year he began what he called his "adventure" as a priest-winemaker – though he only made 28 bottles that year. The wine became known locally as *vigna del parroco* or "vineyard of the priest". Don Giacomo also gave cuttings to locals and secured the future of one of Italy's most beautiful varieties, Ruchè. When drunk in moderation, Don Giacomo wrote, "it frees the soul and opens the mind". And when DNA testing became available, scientists discovered the grape was unique.

Ian D'Agata, author of *Native Wine Grapes of Italy*, believes Ruchè is the one Italian grape that wine lovers really ought to know. For him it is a rare example of an aromatic red variety that makes wines impossible to confuse with any other.

## Treasure find

Don Giacomo's superiors in Rome told him to give up winemaking and concentrate on being a priest. Don Giacomo ignored them. In his last years the priest sought forgiveness for focusing on winemaking, maintaining that the wine paid for repairs to the church and food for his congregation. "May God forgive me for having sometimes neglected my ministry," he wrote. "But I know that God has forgiven me because with the money earned from the wine I created the oratory and renovated the parsonage."

In 1993 Don Giacomo gave the land to a parishioner, Francesco Borgognone. By 2016, Borgognone was an old man and Luca Ferraris, winemaker at the Agricola Ferraris estate in the same village, bought the 1.3 ha.



Ferraris said all of the current 170 ha of Ruchè in Italy came from those original 10 rows. The grape received DOC recognition in 1987 and DOCG in 2010; it is one of the smallest DOCGs in Italy. In the past 15 years the grape's reputation had "reshaped the hills of Monferrato", said Ferraris, describing Ruchè as an "agricultural masterpiece". His flagship *Vigna del Parroco* is named in memory of Don Giacomo and the first vintage, the 2017, was released at Vinitaly in April.

## Where did it come from?

The grape's origins are uncertain. One theory suggests it was indigenous to the hills north-east of the town of Asti in Piedmont. Another hypothesis – possibly the most credible – suggests the name is derived from "San Rocco", a community of French monks devoted to Saint Roch, who introduced it during mediaeval times by planting it around a monastery that no longer exists. Others claim the name derives from the Piedmontese word *roche* meaning a vineyard cultivated in rocky areas.

Ruchè is known by a variety of names. The Piedmontese speak a dialect that is a mix of French and Italian. Ruchè is pronounced "roo-kay" in Italian. The French pronounce it "roo-shay" and spell it *rouchet* or *rouché*. The

grape shares some similarities with the major grape from Piedmont, Nebbiolo. Both produce very tannic but low acid and light-coloured wines with pronounced aromas of cherries, rose and violets.

Of the 170 ha of Ruchè in Piedmont, the Montalbera estate and Agricola Ferraris grow the majority, 80 and 25 ha respectively. Montalbera sells it both on the export market and to Italian restaurants and wine shops. Their Ruchè La Tradizione sells for €12.00 to €14.00 in Italy and their Ruchè Laccetto for €16.00 to €18.00. "Montalbera owns 50 percent of all the vineyards of Ruchè, so we are considered by the market as the main producer of this appellation," said spokesman Daniela Gasparri. "Everybody should try Ruchè once in their life. We guarantee they will fall in love with the wine."

Agricola Ferraris makes three more Ruchè apart from the priest's wine mentioned earlier, including an entry-level version called Sant'Eufemia that's picked young to enhance the floral notes, and a flagship – the Opera Prime – that's only made in special years and retails for around €25.00.

Ian D'Agata wrote that Ruchè had always been held in high esteem locally, and wines made from it were reserved for special occasions. "When well made, Ruchè is a thing of beauty." ■