

the producer: Fattoria La Valentina

The Prestige of Tradition



In the hills of Pescara,
a winery with uncommon
business smarts
is producing globally
appreciated products made
exclusively from local grapes

He who works for himself does the work of three? Well, in the case at hand, that could very well be true, particularly if we look back at the history of Fattoria La Valentina. The winery was owned for some time by a Pescara-based insurance businessman, who had built himself a villa with a few rows of vines in the Spoltore hills, from where he enjoyed a lovely view over the gently rolling Abruzzo countryside, with the Maiella massif looming in the background. Output was hardly significant, barely

enough to qualify for what the French call "vin de garage." The miniscule production was made with the bare minimum of equipment, but it sprang more from passion than need, and the quality was better than passable. One day, through a chain of friendships, acquaintances, and business relationships, two other businessmen, Di Properzio and Fantinel, joined the owner. Di Properzio, from Abruzzo, was involved in the energy sector, while the Friulian Fantinel was already successful in the wine business, with many

well-respected products. The three formed a partnership, with the goal of raising the bar even higher for La Valentina and agendas that included diversifying investment portfolios, extending existing product lines, exploring interests and satisfying passions. The joint effort marched for a while, perhaps two or three years, then two of the three partners abandoned ship. Fantinel already had a full head of steam going into the deal and was after more substantial production numbers than La Valentina offered. The insurer,

Montepulciano grapes at Santa Teresa, the cru-selection vineyards near the winery that yield fruit for Bellovedere.

on the other hand, had expected a profit on his initial investment in practically record time, despite the fact that anyone who enters the winemaking business knows full well that quick profits should not be anywhere on your list of objectives. So the only hand left on the La Valentina tiller was Lorenzo Di Properzio's. Now partnerless, he was nevertheless determined to succeed with a business that he saw as a way to promote not simply fine wines made from traditional local varieties, but insights into local history as well, and the labor of hardworking country folk, and places little known but easily able to compel the appreciation of visitors. In a word, Abruzzo.

"We ended up by purchas-

the producer

ing all of the shares," recalls Sabatino di Properzio. His father Lorenzo immediately made Sabatino managing director, and gave other positions to his other two sons, Roberto and Andrea.

Giant steps

Sabatino and his brothers, though mindful that Nature must be coaxed and not forced, set about with great gusto to reorganize and plan, and in less than four years achieved surprising results. Production and revenues shot up fourfold, and La Valentina's market position was strengthened. They sourced all of the grapes at first from the vineyards down the hill from the winery, but soon expanded their horizons and finally had 20 hectares of estate vineyards and another 20 under long-term lease. One section of vineyard is located in the rural outskirts of Spoltore, where the winery itself stands with its handsome new cellar completed in 2008, while the other vineyards stretch between San Valentino and Scafa, close to the imposing Maiella, where the surroundings are much wilder. Among the mountain-side vines are four hectares of montepulciano that go to produce Binomio, which is the name of a wine as well as of the winery that was created specifically to grow

Flanking the modern main complex is the older cellar, where Binomio and Bellovedere are aged.

these grapes and produce the wine. This was another project that grew out of a friendship, this time between Sabatino Di Properzio and the noted Veneto producer Stefano Inama. Some time back, Inama fell under the spell of the montepulciano grape and of the wines it can yield, if handled with sympathy.

"In 1998, we made our first vintage of Binomio," recalls the constantly active Sabatino, with enthusiasm in his voice. "We sourced the grapes from a vineyard at 350 meters' elevation, near the village of San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore. It's a vineyard that gets a good working-over by nature, since winters there are really cold, and in the other seasons the wind, after whipping through the entire length of the gorges of nearby Popoli, just pounces on those vines. But that vineyard is tough; it's been rooted in clay and rocks for almost 40 years now, and we like that kind of stubbornness. Apart from its character, we were struck by the kind of montepulciano those deep-rooted vines produced, small berries with very few seeds and thick skins. The old grape-growers of the area still



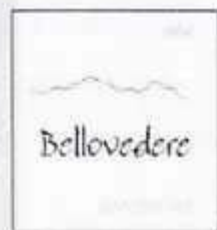
called them 'uva d'Africa,' since the cluster looks like the continent of Africa." "To tell you the truth," continues Sabatino, "we made a couple of experimental vintages of Binomio from the vineyards just below the winery. It wasn't exactly a finely focused trial; we just wanted to see what mature, well-exposed montepulciano vines could give. Both tries yielded a very good wine, and that was great, since if the results had been just so-so, we probably

wouldn't have continued. Stefano and I reckoned that if the results were so good from this vineyard, who knows what we could expect from a really special vineyard, with small berries and old vines, such as the uva d'Africa? So we made the leap. When we vinified the Africa grape we got an outstanding wine. We opted for a single vineyard for a single wine, but together that made a binomial, just as Stefano Inama and I were a duo by that time as well. All things considered, though, we hadn't done very much. We had just followed the dictates of nature, as we have dutifully been doing in the years since."

Four unmissable wines

Leaving aside the superb Binomio, which boasts a separate winery of its own, we singled out four delicious offerings from Fattoria La Valentina, all obtained from grape varieties traditional to Abruzzo, of course. The leader, as always, is Bellovedere, sourced from two hectares of

montepulciano near the winery. It's priced at \$56 in wine stores. Next is a Bianco IGT from pecorino, at \$15. Another fine white is Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, at \$10. Another Montepulciano with breed is Spelt, from outstanding old vineyards. \$23 in the stores.



The thrill of making wine

Binomio is something of a wine apart, enjoying a winery all of its own, but its winemaker (Tuscan Luca d'Attoma, who studied at the Conegliano Veneto wine institute), grapegrowers, cellarworkers, wine-making facilities and sales organization are shared with La Valentina. For its wines, La Valentina utilizes



only native grape varieties, essentially three: montepulciano, trebbiano and pecorino. "We do have the odd few chardonnay vines growing right in the middle of all of our trebbiano, and at harvest we pick them all at the same time," explains Sabatino. He earned his university degree in economics and business, and divides his responsibilities between wine and fuels, the other branch of the family business interests. "I prefer the former; at least you can drink it, and put some real enthusiasm into making it, whereas with fuels and energy sources in general I would say that there isn't really much emotional commitment to or relationship with the production territory. And if you can't get emotionally involved with your job, you end up without much soul. It's inevitable."

The "house wine" that Sabatino Di Properzio likes best – as did most of our tasters – is Belovedere, another monovarietal montepulciano cru selection from the vineyards in Santa Teresa. The vines wind

about the clayey slopes just beneath the winery and enjoy the light-filled landscape of the Abruzzo mountains, whose undulating profile adorns the front label. Its partner is another Montepulciano, Spelt. The name does perhaps conjure up Spoltore, the main commune in the area, but it derives in fact from "spelt," the German term for emmer wheat, a grain widely cultivated in the area and whose popularity is such that its ear graces many local coats of arms. De rigueur here, as it is at any Abruzzo winery mindful of tradition, is Cerasuolo. First made in 2007, it bears the name Effe, the first letter of Federica, Sabatino's very young daughter. This crisp, cherry-hued wine is a fragrant blend of various lots of montepulciano harvested and vinified at different times.

Details matter

Fattoria La Valentina's wines do well in international markets, with 55% of the overall production going abroad, most of it to the US. The reasons are not hard to

Delicate & Delicious

Pinot Grigio *Blush*
A natural rosé color and
crisp, light, soft fruit flavors.



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The winery sources from 40 hectares of vineyards, half estate-owned and half leased, planted in two different locations.

find: the wines are good, they are very attractively packaged, and they smartly tell brief but interesting stories, starting from their names, which effectively communicate their place of origin. The remaining 45% is distributed in Italy to a select list of wine stores and restaurants, which in turn do an excellent job of marketing the wines to their customers. Nothing must be left to chance. To the contrary, every effort is made to ensure that the qualities of the wine as well as the characteristics of its source are understood and appreciated. True quality is a mosaic of details, and all of the pieces must fit together flawlessly.

La Valentina's wine facility is luminous and ultra-modern, making working there efficient and comfortable. It will also allow for some expansion, and the Di Properzios are in fact planning to re-plant some rows of trebbiano. Some may look down their noses at this variety, but in Abruzzo and similar areas it has served as the liquid foundation of many rural economies. *"This grape is another intimate part of our local traditions, and it would be a shame not to develop its potential, if you have the land, facilities and labor. Then it's our job to deploy our expertise to make sure that the market recognizes its true worth."* Sabatino di Properzio may have started down other roads, only to find himself making wine and learning the art on the job, but he took the measure of his fellow producers right from the start and certainly shows every sign of knowing everything about the other binomial that many talk about but find hard to master: tradition and the market. ❧