

Tree Huggers: The Tale Behind Italy's Hot New White

A rustic Umbrian grape is reborn—and it could be Montefalco's next wine hope



Photo by: Robert Camuto

A row of Trebbiano Spoletino vines "married" to maple trees

Camuto from Europe

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Something is happening around Montefalco.

And it's not just the rising quality of hefty red Sagrantino, the signature wine of this town in Central Italy's Umbria region.

A quirky heirloom white grape variety called Trebbiano Spoletino has been rediscovered in recent years by winemakers who have brought it out of local family farms and into international distribution.

In the past dozen years, the number of producers of Trebbiano Spoletino has grown from a handful to more than 30, making examples that are deliciously bright and complex, layering fruit, minerals and salinity.

You may have heard that Trebbiano is one of the most planted grapes in Italy. But the Trebbiano name is actually shared by widely varied grapes in different regions, such as Trebbiano Toscano, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo or the Veneto's Trebbiano di Soave, most of which likely aren't even genetically related, according to DNA studies.

Trebbiano Spoletino is an Umbrian grape found in the flatlands below the hilltop-perched town of Spoleto. It was traditionally planted at the edge of family farms, grown in a system that defies modern vineyard-management techniques. The vines were planted *maritata*—literally "married" to maple or elm trees—with the canes climbing up to the high branches and using them for support. To give the vines even more room to grow, farmers strung wires between the trees.

In other words, these vines are monsters, each of which can produce hundreds of pounds of grapes. They are so productive that the wines made from them, by conventional wisdom, should be awful.

Not necessarily so. In *Wine Spectator* blind tastings of vintages from the past decade, Trebbiano Spoletino wines, including several from *maritata* vines, scored 84 to 93 points, or good to outstanding, on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale. Not a bad start.

A couple of Montefalco producers who have been part of Trebbiano Spoletino's new wave—Tabarrini and Paolo Bea—were both inspired by the white wines traditionally made by their families.

After Giampaolo Tabarrini took over his family's winery in the late 1990s, he focused on red wines, but continued to make white wines, blending Trebbiano Spoletino with local Grechetto.

Tabarrini harvested the Trebbiano Spoletino from the century-old *maritata* vines of his uncle, also his cellar master. He quickly realized the grape, with its bracing acidity and surprising complexity, comprised the best part of the blend. "We used to say all the time the Trebbiano was supporting the Grechetto," Tabarrini says.

In 2005, Tabarrini bottled his first pure Trebbiano Spoletino, called Adarmando. Aged in stainless steel tanks on its lees for a year, the wine (2015, 88 points, \$32) is fresh, light- to medium-bodied and straw-colored.

Working with the University of Florence, starting in 2003, Tabarrini isolated clones from his uncle's vineyard, later selecting a pair with which to plant a 7-acre plot—of more conventionally spur-pruned, cordon-trained vines—below his winery. In 2016, he began blending fruit from the new vineyard with that of *maritata* vines scattered through the area. Tabarrini has been happy with the results of his first two harvests and expects the quality of the fruit to improve with the vineyard's age.

After Trebbiano Spoletino achieved critical success, Italy established a tiny Spoleto appellation in 2011 allowing for dry, sparkling and sweet wines made from a minimum of 85 percent of the grape variety. Ironically, the designation is not used by either Tabarrini or Paolo Bea, both of which label their wines as Umbria Bianco.

Paolo Bea, located on the hill close to Montefalco's village center, takes an entirely different approach with Trebbiano Spoletino, using skin contact to make an "orange wine" from old *maritata* vines. Called Arboreus, it debuted with the 2004 vintage; the 2010, priced at \$50, scored 93 points.

Giampiero Bea, who runs the estate, ferments the wine with wild yeasts, like Tabarrini. But Bea leaves his Trebbiano Spoletino on its skins for three to six weeks during and after fermentation, then on the lees for more than six months after pressing. The result is a golden wine with some heft and smoky depth.

His family's secret, he says, can be found in the attic of his modern winery, where he dries a small amount of the white grape bunches with the *appassimento* technique to use in the fermentation of the wine. "With Trebbiano Spoletino you have characteristic acidity; the *appassimento* makes the flavor more harmonic," Bea says.

Bea is an architect by training and a restless experimenter. A decade ago he planted a half-acre of selected Trebbiano Spoletino in spur-pruned, cordon-trained fashion and blends the grapes into Arboreus today. But he says, "I am not happy with the result."

Bea says the modern-style hillside vineyards can't seem to compete in quality with the rustic and productive *maritata* system. So, he recently purchased valley farmland to replicate the old style, with planting to start this year.

"There seems to be a symbiotic relationship between the vines and the trees," he says. But with at least a decade needed to grow trees in addition to vines, he is designing a treelike substitute from concrete and bamboo.

"I am searching for an artificial solution," he says. "But I don't know if it's possible."

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