

Italy, Tuscany: Icons

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The Isole e Olena 2018 Cepparello – by Paolo De Marchi

1. What was the first year of production for this wine?

The first vintage of Cepparello was 1980.

Since 1976 I have been in charge of Isole e Olena and ever since my second harvest I made a small production of pure Sangiovese. That, however, was not bottled on its own but rather put into the Chianti Classico Riserva that I was producing at the time. They were the grapes of the vines I was selecting in the old vineyards, so the history of Cepparello is closely linked to my work in selecting our clones.

2. Which vintages have been released (or vintages in which the wine was not made)?

Cepparello was not produced in 1981, 1984 and very few bottles in 1987 (only 1,800 bottles of 375 milliliters that were selected for a Dutch customer). Little [was produced] in 1989; [it was] not produced in 1992 and very little in 2002. In the others, it was produced, albeit in variable quantities, in the different vintages.

3. What was the name of the winemaker at the beginning and the name of the current winemaker if changed?

The enologist in the beginning was Paolo De Marchi. Since 1995, I have been using the laboratory of Donato Lanati, who also helps me with the blending, but I continue to make the wine myself.

4. How many bottles are produced per year?

Between 25,000 and 55,000, depending on the quality of the vintage

5. Is the wine a single vineyard or a blend?

It is a collection of the best grapes that each specific harvest has to offer, always a selection of certain vines within each selected vineyard.

6. Could you tell me about the spirit/identity of this wine? What is its significance to you?

I started selecting pure Sangiovese from our vineyards in 1977. I was young and not Tuscan, so I felt the need to understand the potential of Sangiovese by choosing the best grapes. The second step had to be to bring all production to a certain level by having a yardstick for comparison. Once the vineyards improved, there would always be a selection of better-than-average grapes: I began to call that selection "my moving target," the lighthouse to show the way forward.

In 1980, I decided to bottle that selection in a table wine, which was the birth of Cepparello.

So, as Cepparello grew, I kept working on the selection of the vines (and the grape clusters) for its production (at Isole e Olena, all the vines were mapped.) In the mid-'80s, when I started to do a survey of the soil (what we now call "zonazione"), I began to understand that by selecting the grapes for Cepparello, I was certainly working on genetics but also on the soil. To my surprise, when I had the first map of the land, I discovered that the grapes chosen came mainly from similar soils, galestro and flysch (another schist that is characteristic of the San Donato area).

For me, therefore, Cepparello truly represents a trajectory of my professional history and taught me to refine the concept of the "origin" of a wine, which is very different from

"provenance." That is, not the pure certification of where the grapes were produced (DOC, DOCG) but the uniqueness of the fusion between nature (soil, climate, genetics) and man who works with nature.

7. Could you tell me about the evolution (in the vineyard or in terms of enology) that the wine has undergone over the course of its lifetime?

Vineyard: Replanting. Now almost all the vineyards of Isole e Olena have been replanted. This has been done with my selections, much greater planting density, respect for the soil with reconstitution of terraces and limited earth movements [grading]. Pruning, refined with great attention in the training of employees, search for the balance of the vineyard that leads to limiting the leaf thinning as much as possible, etc. Minimal use of conventional products (however, we are not yet certified organic).

Enology: As the new vineyards gave us more mature and softer tannins, I lengthened the macerations, I began to ferment in open oak vats, I better understood the use of barrique and improved the choice of oak use by extending the aging period.

At the beginning of the 1990s, I introduced the practice of *délestage*. With oncoming climate change, however, the situation is now rapidly changing in the opposite direction: much more delicate and shorter macerations (higher alcohol content leads to more intense and faster extractions, one must be careful), lower and lower fermentation temperatures, length of stay in barrique, followed instead by a few months in cask in the final resting period.

8. Could you mention two or three bottles (Italian, French or others) that were a direct inspiration for you when you started this project?

I was very young and had just started studying agricultural sciences when I made my first visit to a wine-growing area, Beaujolais. I remember that I was impressed by the abysmal difference between "Beaujolais" as known in Italy at the time and wines from Moulin-à-Vent, Brouilly, Morgon, etc. It was a small, distant experience that opened my head and eyes in search of differences and typicity. Then, I could remember the experience in California, in Diamond Creek of the '60s and other great "early days" (Beaulieu's Georges de Latour, among others), drinking and discussing with Darrell Corti in Sacramento what was happening on the North Coast...and what I dreamed of doing in Tuscany at Isole e Olena!