

Apulia and the Strength of Its Youth

Francesca Pili, Letizia Airos Soria (May 24, 2019)



With Maria Cavallo, a young representative of Cantine San Marzano. After studying law in Ferrare, she decides to return to Puglia and dedicate herself to the family business and to the promotion of the area. “New York was a great challenge but for me it’s just one step.”

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We meet Maria at a dinner in a renowned New York restaurant. It’s not just any event: it’s the opening dinner inaugurating Italian Haute Cuisine Week in New York, dedicated to Puglia. The wines being served come from her family cellar: the 2017 Edda Bianco Salento IGP, the 2015 Talò Malvasia Nera Salento IGP, and the star of the collection, the 2014 Sessantanni Primitivo from Manduria.

She describes them in great detail before they even arrive but regrets that the labels aren’t showcased adequately.



This is how we meet her, the extremely young representative of a Pugliese wine production house, and we are struck by her genuine enthusiasm.

Unity Makes Strength

The story of [Cantine San Marzano](#) [3] begins in 1962, a time preceding not only her birth but also the existence of the DOC. Nineteen winemakers, including Maria's grandfather, united to create a cellar, located in San Marzano di San Giuseppe, in the province of Taranto, at the heart of the zone of the famous Primitivo di Manduria.

Today the company counts 1200 partners and 106 employees, some of them very young, "even in the country fortunately," Maria tells us. It holds the exporting record in Puglia since 2000, when, realizing that their wine was vastly appreciated at international fairs, they understood that they could also make it on the global market. "Now we are present in 80 countries," she says proudly.

Maria comes to see us in our office, and tells us about her land, her business, her family history over coffee, with great warmth and enthusiasm.

The cellar's most recent success that of the Sessantanni Primitivo di Manduria DOP. "I was a great victory. Papà had an intuition: he wanted to make wine with the trees planted by his father. Harvesting has to be done by hand, the trees are short, it's difficult. In 3 years it became huge, and this year Gambero Rosso gave us the 3 glasses."

Francesco Cavallo, Maria's father, became the President of the cooperative in 1982. "My father always tells him that having a wine cellar was his dream. At first I didn't think it could become mine too."

Back to Her Roots

In fact, at 18, Maria moved to Ferrara to study Law. At the time the pollution caused by ILVA in Taranto was a hot topic and to someone so deeply in love with her land the idea of specializing in environmental crimes felt like the best way to do something concrete. "Every time I came home though, I increasingly felt that my roots were there: tied to the land, to the wine. After completing my studies I understood that my life was the cellar. Hiding it was futile."

And so Maria dedicated her life to a new goal: developing and promoting the land.

The Importance of Communication

The fact that her family owned the cellar doesn't mean that she came into the industry through the front door. "My father made it immediately clear that since I was the last one there, I would have the



least say. So I followed him, observed, and now I am focusing on communication.”

The mission is to use pictures, videos, and the right words to tell people what Puglia is, what the South is. And in order to do that you have to really live in this land. For this reason, she also aims to help develop the local economy, “we try to assign communication to local agencies,” Maria tells us, “Lately, many celebrities have purchased masserie in Puglia, and thanks to their economic strength and notoriety, they immediately positioned themselves on the market. But this has nothing to do with the tradition.”

Maria says that the strategy is instead to bring attention back to the Taranto region. “Because telling the story of a cellar like ours, which has been for the last 60 years tied to the region of Puglia and to 1200 families, requires the help of the local youth. They’re the ones who will create a network.”

Their logo represents a network “We are a network of farmers tied to their land, and the land creates a network. We want to do this even though it’s very hard amongst producers. We always have to explain and convince people that building a network will allow us to finally open up to the world in an effective way.”

Many are the projects carried out by Cantine San Marzano to achieve this goal. An example is ‘World Menu,’ a week during which the company hosts chefs from all over the world and takes them fishing, harvesting, and making cheese.

To learn about the land, which Maria passionately describes as “wild, filled with olive trees that remain green all year long. With those short drywalls, the colors in contrast with the perennial blue sky. You still find trattorie where an apron-clad signora welcomes you in, her hands covered in flour.”

An American Training

She came to New York to understand and learn from Americans. She wasn’t off to a very enthusiastic start though: “I was expecting America to be light years ahead of us, smarter, cleaner. It wasn’t always like that. It served as a great challenge though. New York is a city which, whether you like it or not, pushes you to become stronger.”

And New York is only one step for her. For the future, Maria plans to undertake other formative experiences, “in South Africa, or in New Zealand, areas which are now producing excellent wines.”

Now more than ever, the final goal is clear to her: returning to San Marzano. “Puglia is genuine, and it has everything. It’s an explosion. Life there is not frenetic, and it’s experiencing a cultural awakening. It’s up to us, the younger generation, to protect it. I’m optimistic because I believe there is a lot to do.”



Her eyes say it all. There is a lot to do. And young people like her can do it.

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