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RATTI'S HERO



MAZE ROW

WINE MERCHANT

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IN WINE, WE FIND LIFE

In wine we seek truth, craft and the passion of discovery. In life, we seek to build a community connected by a love for wine and wine culture. We are Maze Row Wine Merchant. We inspire a culture of fine wine discovery, a life that talks of people and their sense of place, of truth, craft and endeavor. An enriching journey, encompassing heritage, terroir, culture and philosophy. Through our curation of wines, stories and immersive experiences, we share the best of life with the adventurers, the bon vivants, the passionate connoisseurs.



MAZE ROW
WINE MERCHANT



“This is my last land. I came here on a day like this and just fell in love. It is so isolated, the views so spectacular. I knew I had to buy it.”

Pietro Ratti

The Ratti winery is in the commune of La Morra in the Barolo appellation, with the cool air and gentle breeze from the mountains and nearby sea creating an ideal climate for viticulture



“I feel deeply connected to this land. You see, with wine, you get the transformation of land into taste. With wine, you can really understand the sense of a place. There are few products that can do this,” says Pietro Ratti, owner of the eponymous winery and the son of Renato, the legendary vintner who put Barolo on the map.

We have travelled to Piedmont and to the heart of Barolo country, where the principal grape, Nebbiolo, reigns. This particular vineyard is perched high on the hills, framed by the Pennine Alps mountain range that divides Italy and Switzerland to one side and, to the other, woodlands favored by seasonal truffle hunters. Ratti’s land is swathed in grapes, the native Nebbiolo along with the Dolcetto, some of which are still hanging to their vines even though it’s the end of harvest. He grabs a bunch and hands it over to me. The sweetness is intense. He points to the vineyards, now veiled in the golden light of dusk. “This is my last land. I came here on a day like this and just fell in love. It is so isolated, the views so spectacular. I knew I had to buy it.”

Pietro has plans to develop an old farmhouse on site into a guesthouse. “I want our visitors to get a sense of this place, the people, our history. The best way to know a wine is to see, touch and feel the land. Then the taste comes.” I suggest to him his role is much like an artist — creating visceral connections. He nods a few times. “The

land here makes it easier to do so, but it does require effort to make great wine. From a dream to reality is a lot of hard work.”

The Ratti winery sits south of Alba in the commune of La Morra, the highest and largest village in the Barolo appellation, and responsible for 25 percent of the coveted red wine. The cool air and gentle breeze from the mountains, and temperate influence of the nearby sea create a beneficial climate for conventional viticulture. It also allows for a longer growing season, which works well for the Nebbiolo variety.

The terroir in this part of Piedmont is almost entirely dedicated to cultivating grapes for local wineries and hazelnuts for the nearby Ferraro chocolatier. Ratti has around 60 hectares (148 acres) of vineyards spread across the region on which it grows Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Timorasso, Dolcetto, Barbera and Nebbiolo, the latter comprising about 60 percent of plantings.

A SENSE OF PLACE

Ratti’s winery and visitor center opened in 2005. The original space, built by his father in 1968, proved too small to accommodate the company’s growth and is now used as the cellar. The new building is the work of Pietro’s uncle, the architect Marco Sitia. With its clean modernist structure, flowing lines tracing the surrounding hills, and living green roof, it strikes up a convivial conversation with the landscape here.

Inside is an open plan with wide windows framing vistas over the rolling vineyards. The furniture, mostly made of wood and other natural materials, are the work of Milanese designers. The complex houses the Museo Ratti with its collection of ancient viticulture and vinification artifacts. Pietro fetches a key to the library that was established by his father. The room is reserved for special guests and private tastings, for it houses more than 2,000 books on viticulture and local history. Meticulously archived, some are collectables and rare editions in French and Latin — the original language of viticulture — while others are by Renato Ratti, himself a prolific writer and illustrator. His witty drawings light up the walls of the visitor center.

It’s hushed in the library, a place where Pietro often takes refuge to write and reflect. “Our winery is connected to culture through my father,” he explains as he carefully unfolds one of the art books lying on the table. “For him, wine was more than something you drink. He was deeply interested in the culture and the life around it.” Pietro is now in the process of renovating the 13th-century Abbey of L’Annunziata (also known as Monastery of Marcenasco) to create a wine museum dedicated to the La Morra region, with plans to open to the public in June 2023. Ratti benefits from year-round wine tourism, as the area is ideally positioned an hour’s drive from Turin and two from Milan and Genoa. The



main pull is the Barolo, but visitors also come for the truffle season in mid to late fall. The Ratti guest experience is anything but commercial and accommodates no more than five to eight people to ensure a more intimate encounter. A tour of the winery and a visit to the cellars concludes in the tasting room — a generous space with floor-to-ceiling windows offering views of the hushed vineyards, and where visitors sample wines paired with food and small bites.

We leave the visitor center and walk through the cellar where post-harvest production is in full swing. Here, grapes from each plot are macerated in their individual stainless-steel tanks. At the end of the first maceration (10 to 15 days), the team tastes the wines and makes decisions about further length of time on the skins. A second skin contact can take another 20 to 30 days, making a total of 30 to 40 days maceration. “In the process we gain softer tannins and get more dense and complex flavors for wines that are more elegant and complex,” Pietro explains.

The Barolo is kept in barrels for a minimum of 24 months. Ratti works with large barrels — 25 to 50 hectoliters — for Marcenasco and Rocche dell’Annunziata as they offer a more neutral environment and a slower aging process. Conca ages in smaller 225-liter French oak barrels for 12 months, followed by an extra 24 months in the larger barrel. He clarifies:

“Barolo needs to get a body-power complexity for which we do a longer maceration and longer aging.”

Harvest typically happens in October. “Most of the vineyards here are Nebbiolo and in 10 years the whole area will be Nebbiolo. I call it *nebbioloization*,” Pietro says with a chuckle.

A team of three does the tastings. “Developing a sophisticated palate for tasting requires practice,” he continues. “Our skill is always evolving and you never feel like you’ve completely mastered it ... but when you get it, then you get it.”

RENATO AND THE BIRTH OF BAROLO

Renato Ratti’s family came from the Piedmont region. While studying at the renowned oenology school in Alba, he was recruited by Cinzano, the Turin vermouth company, which positioned the young Renato in Brazil. Soon after settling in his new home, he would be joined by his wife, Beatrice (“Bibi”), whom he met in Genoa shortly before he accepted the Cinzano post.

At first the couple enjoyed their time in São Paulo, where Renato became head of Cinzano’s South American operations. Though she was college educated, Bibi found the job opportunities limited and grew restless. The couple returned to Italy, where they felt job prospects for both of them would be more equitable. The year was 1965.

Once in Genoa and with plans to settle in Piedmont, Renato placed an ad in La Morra’s local paper: “I’m looking for a castle,” it read. The young winemaker always dreamed of owning a castle but those inside the wine region were out of reach. But outside the region was something he could afford, a small plot in the historic zone of Marcenasco, adjacent to the Abbey of L’Annunziata. Because monks built the ancient monastery with the intention of making wine, the surrounding land, Renato concluded, must be good for cultivating grapes. It was here where he created his first single-vineyard Marcenasco Barolo.

Bibi came from a sophisticated Genoese family. She was a city girl and reluctant to move somewhere so remote. But when Renato brought her to La Morra, she was instantly charmed. “He showed her this vineyard and she fell in love with the place,” says Pietro, pointing to a pretty plot of land by the visitor center. Over the years, Renato would purchase the surrounding vineyards, often bartering hard with local farmers who were reluctant to sell, gradually building the Ratti winery.

Much of Italy in the 1960s was rural: the wines were not stylish and the industry lacked the sophistication to make them so. “Wine was like food here; it wasn’t an intellectual drink but a simple alcoholic beverage,” explains Pietro. But his father saw an opportunity. He knew that





Pietro Ratti took on the winery in 1988 at the age of 20, when his father Renato passed away at 44



the Nebbiolo grape and the local terroir were able to express a very different wine from place to place, even in a short distance.

Having visited Burgundy and Bordeaux and upon seeing how the appellation system worked favorably there, Renato suggested to a group of local winemakers that they take a similar approach, concentrating on quality and single-vineyard wines with a unique terroir-driven personality. Most importantly, he highlighted the significance of establishing an appellation system for Barolo.

“My father was a man of ideas but he was also pragmatic. He was a kind of messiah: people listened and followed him,” Pietro says. But, Renato ensured a democratic process. The collective discussed the rules and regulations for making Barolo, and working with a cartographer, Renato drew the map to define the appellation borders.

With two sons and a wife to support, he had to create another source of income while waiting for Barolo to age. So, Renato cultivated other varieties, such as Dolcetto, which is bottled a year after its vintage and makes easy,

affordable wines that can be drunk sooner, and thus, provide income.

Smiling, Pietro recalls his father’s ambitions. “His mind was bigger than the wines. He became a leader of the Italian wine movement. When I was a child people were calling him daily for advice. Our home was always full of interesting people, even Robert Mondavi came to visit. My father was a strong figure and everyone respected him.”

Pietro followed in his father’s footsteps, also studying at Alba’s oenology school. His plans to continue his education in social-political science in Milan were interrupted when Renato passed away. He was only 44 years old. The year was 1988 and Pietro had just turned 20. The family made a swift decision for him to run the winery alongside an older cousin who was already involved in the business. Renato had been a pragmatic man, and when he was diagnosed with cancer, he set about directing the transition. “He even wrote a book on how to do this,” Pietro recalls. When the cousin retired, Pietro bought his shares. “I remember telling my mum: let’s keep going in good and bad years.

And she trusted me.”

CONTINUING A FAMILY LEGACY

Pietro has three children — the eldest is almost the same age as he was when he inherited the winery. I ask if Pietro sees his children following in his footsteps. “It’s difficult to say these days. In my time it was mandatory,” he reflects. “But who knows? To be a vintner in the ‘90s was to be a farmer; now you’re a superstar.”

He holds no regrets. “At 20, I had my own dreams, and those have come true. At the end of the day, if you have a direction, put in the effort and you work hard, you can achieve a lot — especially here. This is a land that takes a lot, but gives back a lot, like the Nebbiolo grape. We are not dreamers here. What we do takes a lot of hard work, a lot of tension.”

I ask Pietro what his father would make of Ratti’s current success and the fame Barolo wine enjoys today. “Oh, he would be happy,” he says, his voice charged with enthusiasm. “He enjoyed every minute of his short life and passed away too soon to see the development of Barolo. But I am sure he foresaw its success.”



A collection of ancient viticulture and vinification artifacts are displayed in the visitor center, and the library is dedicated to wine and local history



The Ratti tasting room is a generous space with floor-to-ceiling windows offering vistas of the hushed vineyards



Ratti visitor center opened in 2005 and is the work of the architect Marco Sitia

With its clean modernist structure, flowing lines tracing the surrounding hills, and living green roof, it strikes up a convivial conversation with the landscape.



The Ratti cellar rooms where the Barolo is kept in barrels for a minimum of 24 months, and historical bottles from the museum collection

Renato Ratti was a keen illustrator with his witty sketches lighting up the walls at the visitor center



WINE MADE WITH THE HEART!

RATTI’S SOLDIERS

Renato Ratti used the name of the monastery at first to label his wines, feeling he needed some historical context to market the products. But because the Piedmont region has such deep familial connections, he soon rebranded under his own name. Two years ago, Pietro simplified the name further to Ratti.

The winery logo comes from the crest of the family who originally lived here. The Latin translation is “If you try me, you will know me.” Renato worked with a military scholar knowledgeable in the uniforms of Piedmont’s Savoy soldiers in Napoleonic times to ensure the most authentic depiction. He also added information on the campaigns they were fighting, but Pietro discontinued that story line on the label.



HIGHS AND LOWS

“The 2021 is a fantastic vintage,” says Pietro Ratti. “The summer was dry and warm, so our vineyards were almost organic. At the end of the season we got warm days, cool nights and a little rain, which the Nebbiolo loved.” Despite an April frost that reduced yields, he says, “The quality will be fantastic – from the simple wines to the Barolo.”

The winery’s worst vintage was in 1972. Nebbiolo needs the longest season for ripening and sugar development. That year, it rained solidly for two months. Renato Ratti went to the council and asked the winemakers to collectively agree not to produce a Barolo that year. He wanted to keep the quality. They agreed, making 1972 the only vintage without Barolo.



BAROLO’S EVOLUTION

Barolo started garnering attention in the US in the 1990s, thanks to both the discovery of Italian country cuisine and critics like Robert Parker who gravitated toward the powerful, concentrated wines that pair with regional dishes. Parker, in fact, is credited — rightly or wrongly — with changing the way some Europeans made wine. Says Pietro Ratti, “If you wanted to sell to the US, you had to do what Parker promoted.”

It was around this time that many Piedmont grape growers began dabbling in winemaking. Among them were the so-called “Barolo Boys,” a group in their thirties who jumped at the chance to make market-driven wines in the style promoted by Parker. Ratti, too, briefly went in this direction.

Pietro’s approach now leans more towards the classical. “My take on Barolo is to respect its uniqueness. I was younger then and it was easier for me to take that route. As a winemaker you adapt and change. Now I’m more confident and I can influence others. It’s a different time now: as winemakers we no longer need to prove anything.”

He’s pleased that the new generation of customers comes with knowledge and curiosity, and appreciates the complexity of his wines. “Every region has its own pedigree and our buyers know what to expect from the wines here.

“Barolo is already recognized the world over. So, to me, this means preservation — to keep the integrity of the name and wines, preserving the wines in the time of global warming. It is a big challenge for us.”

STRIVING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

“Being sustainable is a must and we do as much as is possible to achieve this, but to be certified fully organic isn’t possible at the moment,” says Pietro Ratti. Piedmont’s rainy climate, humid conditions and generally poor-draining soils conspire to make organic farming a challenge.

Though he avoids herbicides, summer rains means spraying the crop or “it will be disastrous,” he says. He limits overall spraying to once, after which, targeted backpack sprays are used in a labor-intensive process that pinpoints specific rows or vines. “If in the future we get better materials to spray with, then perhaps we can become fully organic.”

Designed to have a low carbon footprint, the winery is otherwise as sustainable as possible. The site-specific building uses natural light, the living roof controls humidity and huge cement tanks collect rainwater for recycling. The pomace from the grapes is used to make grappa.

Ratti focuses on the wellness of its workers. “The harvest crew tend to move from country to country and there is no guarantee they’ll return,” says Pietro, citing the Piedmont chocolate maker Ferrero as a model of equitable social welfare in Italy. The maker of Ferrero Rocher, Nutella and Kinder, the company provides homes for its employees. Pietro looks to Ferrero for fashioning his own worker-friendly model, with plans to renovate some of Ratti’s buildings into apartments for team members.



PAIRING WITH PIETRO

“We make wines that can be consumed with food, opened straight away or kept in the cellar. Barbera is one of the most food-friendly wines because of its natural acidity and fruit. It’s a good wine to drink young or a little aged to get more of the earthy aromas. It is versatile and works well with easy dishes such as pasta with tomato or meat sauce, any type of pizza, even chicken and meatballs.

“Nebbiolo is the greatest grape — it has a very different personality to Barbera, with more aromatic complexity and good acidity in the mouth. The wines are also versatile with food, even working well with spicy Asian dishes, as it can handle the more complex spices. Barolo is, of course, the king of the table because of layers of personality and complexity. It’s never too much nor is it boring, and it gets better with age, becoming more and more exciting,” says Pietro Ratti.



HOSPITALITY

Ratti guests can stay at the newly restored Villa Pattono, an elegant building that has been in Pietro’s mother’s family for generations. Perched on top of a hill at Costigliole d’Asti, in the heart of the Barbera d’Asti between the Langhe, Monferrato and Roero, it is surrounded by vineyards and picturesque countryside.

Pietro’s great-grandmother, Vittoria Pattono Calissano, lived in Genoa but liked spending her summer holidays here, and would often use the villa to host friends with great food and wine. Ten years ago, Pietro began converting the villa into a 13-room boutique hotel with a spa, swimming pool, and a restaurant serving Piedmont cuisine and Ratti wines.

“It’s a unique place in the area, offering a quiet, relaxed place to stay with top service,” he says as we walk through the halls of the elegant building, its walls covered in old black and white family photographs. “My plan is to continue my great-grandmother’s sense of hospitality here with top-level food and wine experiences.”



From left: Piedmont’s Savoy soldiers decorate the Ratti bottles, the low-carbon winery’s green roof controls humidity, and Pietro and his family pair Ratti wines with his mother Bibi’s homemade pasta



“My plan is to continue my great-grandmother’s sense of hospitality here with top-level food and wine experiences.”

Pietro Ratti



Ratti guests can stay at renovated Villa Pattono, an elegant building perched on top of a hill at Costigliole d'Asti. The 13-room boutique hotel has a spa, swimming pool, and a restaurant serving Piedmont cuisine and Ratti wines



Photography ©Leigh Banks, Helen Cathcart, Roberto Fortunato



RATTI
LA MORRA - ITALIA

Winemaker Pietro Ratti makes elegant wines from high-elevation vineyards in La Morra, combining depth with distinct elegance.



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Cumulus Studio's design for Stoney Rise Cellar Door in Tasmania is a building of domestic scale, with a modest footprint that's sited to provide the best views of the river running through the plot





C A S A
B R A N
C A I A

With organic practices and principled winemaking, winemaker Barbara Widmer at Brancaia is crafting some of Tuscany's boldest wines.



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