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Italy's Wine Women Celebrate the Matriarchy

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Wine is often seen as a man's world, but a group of Italian women are putting their own mark on their wines.

[Kathleen Willcox](#)

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© Borgo Nonino | The Nonino distillery was started by a war widow and is still run by a group of women from the same family decades later.

Stereotypes about the existence of a distressingly patriarchal culture in Italy abound, but judging from evidence on the ground, women rule the roost – at least in the alcohol beverage space.

Women in the drinks business in [Italy](#), just looking at the numbers, have more power than their peers in certain other countries.

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Wine, Women and Subtle Sexism

In California – which produces more than 80 percent of the US's wine – only 14 percent of wineries are run by women, according to the most recent findings from Santa Clara University professors Lucia Albino Gilbert, PhD, and John Carl Gilbert, PhD. In Italy, more than one-quarter of winemakers are women, according to a survey conducted by the Crif Business Information Group.

Research has consistently shown that companies with women in charge – in addition to being more socially responsible, with more rigorous safety standards – are more profitable. And while sales of Italian wine are weakening somewhat, many of the alcohol operations run by women are thriving.

Read on for insights into what some of these female powerhouses are doing to garner intense interest and strong sales in a tough economic environment.

Honoring roots

Barbaresco's [Gaja](#) is one of the most famous, beloved (and vertiginously expensive) brands in the world. Gaja was founded in 1859, but under Angelo Gaja's leadership, the brand grew and evolved rapidly. He took over in 1970 and essentially revolutionized winemaking in his region, introducing single-vineyard [Barbaresco](#), modernizing Piedmont viticulture, rejecting DOCG classifications when he felt he could make a better wine with additions of Barbera to his Barbaresco and Barolo wines, and vastly expanding the brand's footprint with estates and brands in [Montalcino](#), [Bolgheri](#) and most recently, [Sicily](#).

Mamma mia, not easy shoes to fill. And yet Gaia Gaja, and her sister Rossana and brother Giovanni are doing just that – and more. Gaia, the eldest of the trio, while insisting that all three equally share the duties of marketing, winemaking and farming – with plenty of input from the vocal and seemingly inexhaustible 84-year-old Angelo – is the most visible one of the three on the market, and the one with the longest track record, having joined the executive team in 2004, followed by Rosanna in 2009, then Giovanni in 2018.

Her priority, she explains, is in honoring Gaja's history, while poising it for continued success amid climactic and environmental challenges.

"We are seeing some signs that our vineyards are adjusting somewhat to increasingly hot vintages, and we are doing everything we can to support that," Gaia says. "We have been experimenting with different composts since 2014, and now we have different composts that help richer soils, warmer areas, cooler areas and everything else. Some we age for a year. Some we add red worms too. We are also focusing on increasing the biodiversity of our vineyards, and we have custom blends of cover crops depending on location."

Gaja eschews chemical intervention, believing, Gaia says, that "nature is much smarter than man". In addition to the micro-tinkering with compost, cover crops and the surrounding environment, Gaja has embarked on a years-long project in consultation with botanists, geologists, consultants and growers on a project that Gaia believes will transform the vineyards.

"We set out on our massal selection project in 2016," Gaia says. "We focused on our oldest vineyards, like Costa Russi, Sori San Lorenzo, Sperss and Conteisa. We selected rows of Nebbiolo vines to monitor for six years, and we are looking for the ones with the strongest characteristics that we believe will prepare them for a future with increased heat, extreme weather and drought."

After six years, they picked the strongest ones, emerging with more than 250 biotypes. They replicated them, and are in the process of using them for all new replantings, including replacing weaker and more vulnerable vines.

Gaja is also adjusting its focus.

"There are so many interesting indigenous white grape varieties in Italy," Gaia says. "We see whites as our future. A decade ago, we were at 80 percent red; now we are at 70 percent, and we keep planting more whites everywhere. Our next effort will be on continuing to prove how ageable whites can be. In 10 years, we'll be at 60 percent reds, 40 percent whites, and we see that continuing."

[Poderi dal Nespoli](#), another multigenerational winery, this one located in [Emilia-Romagna](#), is also being shaped by a woman who is eager to honor the family's long history, and prepare it for the future.

Winemaker Maria Soledad Adriasola Lang is focused on preparing Poderi dal Nespoli for a climactically uncertain future via symbiotic agriculture based on mycorrhizae, which is not as obscure as it sounds, but certainly as complex.

"It entails the inoculation of fungal microorganisms, which creates a positive association with the roots of the plant, nourishing the soil and creating a favorable environment," Adriasola Lang explains. "The microorganisms are useful for plant growth and unfavorable for pathogens and parasites."

The Cartoon Network version of this complex process goes something like this: these microscopic beasts act like steroids for vines, helping them fight off the bad guys, improving the quality and strength of the vines and fruit in the process, without the 'roid rage.

While the technique has been around for a few decades, she says it underused, perhaps because it cannot be used in tandem with chemical substances.

"Our first biosymbiotic wine, Gualdo Romagna DOC Sangiovese Predappio has been released, and I see it at something that not only respects our future, but preserves our local viticultural tradition," she says.

Tradition and innovation do not, she says, have to be mutually exclusive.



© Marco Felluga | Ilaria Felluga has enhanced her family's Marco Felluga and Russiz-Superiore brands by building on her late father Roberto's strong investment in hospitality

The art of storytelling

Other brands are finding power in the present, and laying the groundwork for the future by sharing their story and history in innovative ways.

And if any alcohol brand is synonymous with strong Italian women, surely it's Nonino Distilleries. While men have also held positions of power, it was Silvia Nonino, widowed by war in 1940, who became the first in a long series of Nonino women distillers (and the first female master distiller in Italy), and Giannola Nonino who persuaded

her husband Benito in 1973 to create the first ever single-vineyard [grappa](#) in the world.

Francesca Nonino, a member of the sixth generation who works with her mother and aunts – Elisabetta, Cristina and Antonella – who run the distillery, the global face of a company defined by strong women. Not that it has been easy, she says.

"Let's not forget that in Italy, the law that granted equal treatment for men and women in the world of work was not approved until 1977," says Francesca, global brand ambassador head of the American market at Nonino. "But as a family business, there is nothing stronger than telling our story, and that is what we invest our energy in."

Francesca has created a number of programs on and off-site to engage directly with current and potential spirits lovers.

"One of the most iconic things we do is offer distillery tours at night," she says. "No one in the world is set up like Nonino, with 66 artisanal batch stills and a mission to distill 24 hours a day for eight to 10 weeks every year during harvest. This commitment to the art of distillation is the strongest proof of our love for our job and our grappa."

She is also active online (Nonino has 19.9K followers on Instagram; Francesca has 21.4K, with short videos that get tens of thousands of views on that platform alone), bringing people who can't fly to Friuli in on the magic with live distillery tours, tastings, masterclasses and educational videos.

Francesca's intense focus has paid off: in the past two years, total brand volumes have doubled, with brand depletions increasing 3.5-fold in five years, and account distribution increasing 2.5 times.

Ilaria Felluga, born in 1995 and the sixth-generation winemaker at Marco Felluga and Russiz-Superiore in Collio, has introduced a decidedly Millennial breath of fresh air into the activities offered by the winery.

In addition to her late father Roberto Felluga's strong investment in hospitality – they added a B&B on-site in 2009 – she began introducing outdoor guided wine group tours at the height of the pandemic, yoga in the vineyards, guided hikes and (yes) sound baths in the winery accompanied by a gong player.

"In 2021, we expanded even more to engage a younger audience," Felluga says. "We also allowed them to book online."

The yoga, cooking classes, sound baths, et al have been a huge boon, increasing sales in the wine shop day-of by 270 percent, she says. Larger events will rev up sales by up to 520 percent.

They also hold a – now legendary, attracting hundreds of revelers – Russiz Superiore night, which involves and intricate dinner, followed by a late-night DJ-led dance party in the vineyards.

Wine, style and art

Wine, to many, represents many things. Women-run brands are going above and beyond to meld the worlds of wine, travel, luxury, style and art, bringing in a whole new sector of the market in the process.

José Rallo, CEO of Sicily's Donnafugata, is continuing the tradition conceived of by her mother, Gabriella, who founded the winery in 1983 with her father, Giacomo.

"She had the wonderful intuition for a new style of wine labels," Rallo says. "They were small pieces of art by artists Stefano Vitale. We were among the first wineries in Italy, if not the first, to use colorful and friendly, artistic wine labels."

Rallo has continued and doubled down on the blurring of lines.

"I have a deep passion for Brazilian and jazz music," she says, explaining her vision for linking music and wine in a multisensory experience, "where the rhythm of the music dances with our wine."

The now-annual event, launched in 2002, draws visitors from around the world to taste 20 labels paired with different music.

In 2021, Rallo took another step, releasing a collaborative wine made with iconic Italian fashion house Dolce & Gabbana.

"Unconditional love of Sicily united us," she explains. "The collaboration is an expression of creativity, tradition and innovation. The wines have a strong Mediterranean personality, and serve as ambassadors of Sicilian colors, aromas and culture."

The line also made a splash with the fashion press, drawing attention and coverage from scores of glossies generally immune to the charms of Sicilian wine.

The partnerships have managed to draw record visitors – 25,000 in the first nine months of last year, already surpassing 2022's numbers, Rallo says, adding that 35 percent are from abroad, led by US visitors.

The O.G. of Italian viticultural tourism is arguably Banfi. CEO Cristina Mariani-May, who joined her family's wine business in 1993, opened luxury accommodations at the Brunello winery in 2007.

From the beginning, Castello Banfi, with 12 luxury rooms and suites alongside the medieval castle, has drawn well-heeled guests eager to wander the hillside lanes, swim in the pool, stroll the castle and luxuriate amid the Federico Forquet-designed interiors, outfitted with rainfall showers, large bathtubs, canopy beds, spacious armoires, et al. But Mariani-May was quick to (somewhat) democratize the offerings, with an array of activities for those who could afford the ticket to Italy, but not entry to the Castello.

There is a farm-to-table Enoteca, a classic Tuscan tavern and the Michelin-starred ultra-premium Ristorante Banfi, cooking classes, private tours, bicycle tours and an array of other Instagrammable opportunities for engaging all of the senses.

This year, Mariani-May says, Banfi will welcome 40,000 visitors.

Correlation does not imply causation, a fact that your college roommate who majored in business ground humorlessly into your head. So yes, there are plenty of butt-kicking brands rising above the rest in Italy that are *not* run by women. But the fresh perspective in an industry not too recently almost exclusively dominated by men is clearly making an impact and moving bottles.

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