

THE ELEGANCE OF CHIANTI RUFINA: SELVAPIANA WINEMAKER FEDERICO GIUNTINI

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Chianti Rufina: Selvapiana Winemaker Federico Giuntini



In medieval times Selvapiana was one of the watchtowers along the river Sieve built with the purpose to protect the city of Florence on the northeast border. Today it is one of the outstanding wineries in Tuscany highlighting the uniqueness of the Chianti Rufina region.

The Chianti Rufina region is close to Florence at the foothills of the Apennines, the chain of mountains that divides Tuscany from Emilia Romagna. The microclimate of the area creates cooler summers and a great delta of temperature between day and night. Because of this, the grapes ripen slowly throughout the summer season, show tremendous balance and are notable for fresh acidity, great finesse and elegance.

Today the winemaker is fifth generation owner Francesco Giuntini's adopted son, Federico, who talks to Monty Waldin about the uniqueness of Chianti Rufina and Selvapiana.

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Photograph of Federico Giuntini by Monty Waldin

CH Monty: Federico, tell us a little bit about the history of Selvapiana.

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Federico Giuntini: Selvapiana is quite an old place. It started as a medieval watchtower over the River Val di Sieve. It was then built as a summer house for the Bishop of Florence, and then it was bought by Michele Giuntini back in 1826.

Were there any vineyards at the time?

There have always been vineyards. The estate was a farm. There were vineyards, olive trees, fruit trees, animals, cattle, everything.

A classic Tuscan mixed farm.

Yes.

Was it the Bishop who planted the vines for the community?

Probably, yes. We don't have the relevant records. Unfortunately, part of the building was destroyed along with all its documents and the history of the estate.

And today, in the modern era, what happened? How did you get here?

Mostly everything changed in the '50s when the corrupt trading system was abandoned. So they planted here. Francesco Giuntini and my father Franco planted the first specialized vineyard. They started to bottle the wine and later in the '70s they started to work mostly on 100% Sangiovese for the single vineyard riserva, massale selection. All these factors brought us to modern times.

So it's a very old estate but quite modernist in its thinking?

We try to do that, we do the best that we can. We work out in the vineyards. I have worked here since late 1987 and in 1992 slowly introduced organic methods. Now the estate is 100% fully organic certified. We work on minimally impacting winemaking, all these things that make the wine the very best that we can.

So what makes Rufina special? In regard to Florence and the rest of the Chianti zone. How does it fit within Chianti?

First of all, the position, the location is much different because we are much closer to the Apennines, the mountains that divide Tuscany from Emilia Romagna, also we have the river Sieve. Both help us to have a very different microclimate, especially very cold nights and dramatically different temperatures between



night and day. So that means we have a very slow ripening season and very well-balanced ripening grapes. We also have very good acidity, good sugar, and good ripe tannins. Compared to the rest of Chianti, these are more a familiar style wine, more elegant, with finesse, and very supple, ripe tannins.

Difficult question now, we're in the Chianti Rufina zone, which is separate from Chianti, which is also separate from Chianti Classico. How did Rufina get its name? Why has it got Chianti in front of its name now?

It's really all about history. Honestly, at the very beginning, in 1716 when the Grand Duke of Tuscany came in with the magistrate and introduced the first law to protect the wine producing areas, half of all the left bank, all the Rufina, was not Rufina, it was not Chianti, it was jus. Then in 1932 with the Chianti law, with the high consumption of Chianti, high demand of Chianti, we became Chianti Rufina. We have nothing to do with Chianti. It's a very special and very unique area. Probably the next generation will be able to prove this, also with a different geographical name.

Instead of being called Chianti Rufina, perhaps it would just be called Rufina again and we'd get rid of this Chianti that was added in 1932?

Not nowadays because we still have to build up the reputation that we deserve as Chianti Rufina, but in the future yes. Probably in a generation, another 50 years perhaps. We still have to prove how good Chianti Rufina wines are.

You said Rufina is in the valley of the Sieve River. Where exactly is Rufina in relation to Florence and the rest of Chianti Classico?

We are northeast of Florence, north of the rest of Chianti. We are in the foothills of the Apennines that divide Tuscany from Emilia Romagna. So we are very inland, and north in climate operation.

In terms of winemaking what is the philosophy at Selvapiana?

First of all we take lots of care with the grapes. Healthy and fully ripe grapes. Ripe in terms of sugar [sugars in the grapes which get converted to alcohol to transform the grape juice into wine], acidity, and polyphenolic [tannin] ripening. We don't use selected yeast, we do long maturation, [leaving the clear grape juice on the red grape skins for] 25 days to 30 days for the Chianti Rufina and 40 days for single vineyard in riserva Bucerchiale. We try to be very hands-off winemakers and to take care of the process of the fermentation.



You say long maturation — that's the red grape skin soaking in the fermenting wine to pick up color?

Yes.

When the wine has finished fermenting where does it go?

The Chianti Rufina is still in the large cask. The 20-25 hectoliters [one hectolitre = 100 litres = 133 bottles].

What happens after the red wine has finished fermenting?

The Chianti Rufina? We still have the large cask, 50-20-30 hectoliters and the single vineyard we use [225-litre] French or barrique, very few of them annually.

In terms of drinking these wines at their optimum what would you suggest?

The Rufina: as soon as it's on the market and it has a proof of like five to 10 years. The single vineyard riserva di Bucerchiale is best seven years from harvest and it has a very long life. We still have all the vintages from 1947 to today, and most of these vintages are good, some of them fantastic, some of them are over [past their best]. The average is very good. Very high, long-aging wine.

Is that because of the cooler climate that you have in this subregion?

I think it's both, cooler climate, the balance of the grapes, and how we make the wine. The three compounds. The famous terroir compounds, the man, the soil, and the weather.

We're in an underground cellar here, directly under the house?

We are exactly two levels below the garden, and it's our historical cellar, it's part of the library.

How old is it?

It's part of the medieval tower. The room behind us is part of the medieval tower and we have all the vintages from 1948 to today. So we have a large library. It's one of the few estates that has all the vintages in such a deep library.

How often do you personally come down to the library just to check on....

Only when we have special guests, I'm not allowed to drink every time of day I want. Only when we have special guests!

Looking at your vineyard, there are a lot of weeds, worms, and insects flying around, what's going on?

That's the result of 20+ years of organic farming. If you look at our vineyard with the eye of an economist it can appear to be badly kept, because they are not gardens, they are a little bit rough, but they are very well balanced in a very healthy environment. So we are quite pleased after all these years.

How do you make that work in terms of organics? What do you do? What don't you do?

The great enemy of the soil is chemical fertilization and grass killer [herbicide]. When you take away these two, you have already done more than 70% for the soil and for the healthiness of everything. Then we moved away from some products. We just used copper and sulfur for many years [to prevent mildew forming on the grapes]. Now we are trying to reduce the amount of copper that we are allowed to use, so instead of using the six kilo per hectare we try to use four by using other products made from algae [seaweed] or from other vegetable extract. Slowly we will try to reduce these two as well, the copper and the sulfur.

Have you noticed a difference in yield? Are you getting fewer bottles of wine per vine as a result of going organic?

There were three or four years where the vines had to be realized and then the crop is much more consistent. Probably we don't reach the big amount [potential grape yields] that the law allowed us but that's not impossible, but it's much more consistent. For sure much healthier.



Is that the case with changes in climate? Growers are reporting big changes in yield from one year to another. Do you think organics is a benefit in that regard?

For sure. We didn't see this happen. The only year that we really saw a drop in production was 2008. That May was very, very rainy and humid so we lost some of the crop due to an early mildew attack, but it was the only year. Then we really don't see this happen now due to the climate. The climate, for sure, is not our great friend anymore; every year is different. We don't have the same protocol though that we used to have, every year is different.

So you have to be more reactive?

You have to think more, you have to gamble a little more with the weather, and you don't do the same thing every year at the same time.

Doesn't that make it a little more interesting? Or is it just more stressful?

Both. For sure, when we see the results in the vintage, like 2014, that had been very challenging [a very wet season], we make very serious types of wine. We are very proud. During the season we were very stressed.

In 2014 it rained a lot, so you had a lot of wines that were very diluted. Is it hard when you go out and sell the wine to convince people "Look our wine actually is really quite ripe, and fruity, and concentrated despite the weather?" Or do people say "No we don't believe you?"

First of all, even if it changes a lot, when people taste the wines it still counts something. Second, in 2014 we worked very hard in the vineyards, we did all the things that had to be done, that needed to be done, and those we dropped 80% of the riserva into the Chianti Rufina and so the result is quite ... It's one of the few vintages that I'm really proud of.



Let's discuss the classic image of Chianti —

a wine in a flask shaped bottle with straw around the side. How hard is it for you making a wine that's more serious, more expensive shall we say, when people still have that old fashioned, if not negative, image of Chianti?

In the last 30 years there's been a tremendous effort to build a reputation for Chianti and Chianti Rufina and the other areas. I would say the image of the straw flask is a little bit passé and the new era for Chianti, and Chianti Rufina, and Classico is here. Some of the best wines in Tuscany come from Classico, Rufina, and the rest of Chianti. I think we are over that, now we have to get consumers aware that Chiantis aren't only Chianti, there's Chianti Rufina, Colli Senesi, Colli Fiorentini. We have to do the next step. The Chianti and the other operation of Chianti Rufina, again Colli Senesi, Colli Fiorentini.

How important is tourism? Have you gotten people coming to the region? Florence is just down the road, it's one of the world capitals of tourism, how can you leverage your brand?

That would be fantastic, only 2% of the people who visit Florence will visit Chianti Rufina, it's a process they started. We see more and more people coming over for the wine. There's lots of people coming over for the area, because it's a fantastic place, full of art and very unique. Now there's more people coming over for the Chianti Rufina wines.

Rufina as a Chianti zone is known for making very aromatic, very elegant wines, why is that?

It has to do with where we are. We are in a valley and close to the mountains, we have very dramatic temperatures between night and day, so the grapes ripen very slowly. They keep all their freshness, that's why the wines are so aromatic. So open flower, open fruit, ripe fruit, but not too ripe. Always on the fresh side.

These wines are coming back into fashion, we've gone through an era of big over-ripe oaky monster wines. Do you think there's an opportunity for Rufina to exploit?

I hope so, because we have been very honest to our place. We always make the wines that the place has given us. We never gamble with the wines, we never follow fashion. Now we hope that these wines, which are much more consumer friendly, with a much greater sense of place, will be back on many wine lists and many wine shelves.

Do you think the fact that it is slightly cooler here that the danger is the grapes are not fully ripe and then they can become wines that are quite hard, and tough, and tannic? How are growers making sure that they manage to pick everything ripe so that the wines are juicy instead of austere?

First of all we have to work in the vineyards, so when the vintage is okay just delay the harvest. When the vintage is more challenging, just drop some fruit. That's very easy.

Going for a lower yield but more concentration.

Not too much concentration, just a little bit. Just to avoid the austere and hard tannins that we used to have in the '70s, and a little bit in the '80s as well.

Are you a popular man when you say that to your fellow growers? Maybe cut a few bunches off, just so the ones that remain are a little bit more concentrated?



Yes here in Rufina nowadays there's a high level of knowledge in the vineyard, lots of skill. I would say the quality has never been so high. Now the appellation is showing some of the best wines ever made. And very unique, very honest to the place and where they come from.

Just in a nutshell, how many growers are there, how many hectares are there, and how does that compare to Chianti Classico?

We are only 4% of what Chianti is and we are 20 producers.

So you're quite tiny?

Very tiny. Except one producer who is one of the biggest players in the wine industry in Italy, all the other estates are mid-sized properties. From 60 to 15 to five hectares kind of situation.

What is special about the soil here?

The soil is very diverse if you talk all the operation. There's two main geological metrics, the northern part of the operation is connected to the Masicho de la Penino, and the rest is connected to the Masicho de Chianti. Some of our area is very similar to the Chianti Classico soils. Clay, limestone, in the middle of the valley. Going up [the slopes] you find the schist, the galestro soil.

What's the difference between wine grown on schist, on galestro as you call it in Tuscany, and grown on limestone?

Here we have clay and limestone together, so the wines are much richer. I will say fatter, more juicy. The wine on the galestro tends to be a little more tannic and a little more austere, but on both sides you have very elegant and fine wines.

Your vineyard is quite small relatively, how many hectares of land do you have?

Selvapiana is still quite a large estate because all together it's 250 hectares with 60 under vines. Of the 60 hectares, 54 are cultivated with Sangiovese, and some of the Sangiovese is quite old. The oldest part is the Bucerchiale vineyard which was planted in 1968. Then all the other vineyards have been replaced and replanted starting in '87. So the original goes from 47, to 27 to 30 year, and 15 and 20 years old.

So apart from the vineyard what else do you have? Do you have any other crops?

We just have forest and olive trees. We produce quite a unique extra virgin olive oil.



You do make one of the most famous olive oils in Italy, what makes it so special?

It's this place—we don't do anything special. It's just where we are because we are at the border of the cultivation of olive trees in the center of Italy. We work a lot with green olives, we process as soon as they are picked. We have changed some things in the last five years, we filter immediately to take away all the sediment, a little with sugar, water. So we give an extra couple of years of life to the

extra virgin olive oil.

When you say you're on the limit, do you mean on the climatic limit for growing olives?

To find olive trees after here you have to go around the Lake Garda.

Which is right in the north of Italy right?

Yeah, because the Lake Garda area makes the climate more suitable for olive trees otherwise you don't find any more olive trees.

So you're in the northern limit of central Italy for olives?

Yes.

I didn't know that. What makes your olive oil so special? Is it its acidity?

It's the fruitiness, the spicy, green tomato flavors. It's not good for every kind of food of course. It's very unique on vegetables but not for fish, meat, soup, that kind of thing, because it's very rich, very aromatic. Sometimes it's even too spicy, but fortunately enough the consumer palate has changed a lot in the past few years.

If I'm having a meal with Selvapiana wine and Selvapiana olive oil, what should I be eating?

If you are drinking the Chianti Rufina you can have just pasta and a little olive oil. If you are drinking the single vineyard wine [Bucerchiale] you need probably the steak with a little bit of olive oil on top.

As well as making your red wines, you make some Vin Santo, what is that?

Vin Santo is very unique. It's really part of the culture or way of life of the Tuscan people. It's a wine made with long term dried grapes. We use Trebbiano grapes. We dry the grapes from September to February.

So how do you do that?

You pick the bunches in couples, and you hang them and let them dry from September to February.

Do you hang them outside or inside?

Oh indoor. We have a large room, an old granary, with lots of windows to have the drying process as natural as possible [natural airflow through the room in which the grape bunches are carefully hung]. Then after a month you press [the by now shrivelled and thus more concentrated, much sweeter-tasting] grape[s], and you have very little juice. You go down 20% of what number you have and then [after pressing the grapes and fermenting their juice into wine] you age it for seven years in a very small cask, here in Tuscany we call them caratelli. The casks are not completely full but completely closed with [a] cement [bung] and you don't touch them during the aging period. It's a very unique wine, no winemaker intervenes and it's a welcoming wine. If you are coming to visit farmers, the first thing you are offered is a glass of Vin Santo wine.

*Monty Waldin was the first wine writer to specialize in green issues. JancisRobinson.com (<http://jancisrobinson.com/>) said of Monty's latest book, *Biodynamic Wine* (2016, Infinite Ideas Oxford) that "it made me realise I knew next to nothing about biodynamics." Buy it on Amazon (https://www.amazon.com/Biodynamic-wine-Classic-Wine-Library-ebook/dp/B01HOF76GY/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1468412204&sr=8-3&keywords=biodynamic+wine).*

More from Monty Waldin on Grape Collective (https://grapecollective.com/author_pages/monty-waldin)