

GIOVANNA CHESSA (Italy, Sardinia, Sassari)

BACKGROUND: Sardinia, to paraphrase Lawrence's words, is like freedom itself, where there is nothing granted and defined. A land to be discovered, like its' wines, which displays countless different facets. Chessa's vineyards and cellar are located in Usini (prov. of Sassari), in north-western Sardinia in the heart of Logudoro, an area strongly devoted to viticulture. The main varietals planted are Vermentino and Cagnulari, an ancient autochthonous red that risked extinction and that today is having a well deserved critical acclaim. This awesome viticultural project was established in 2005 (with the first ever family bottled wines released in 2006), elevating itself as a guardian of the local winemaking tradition and the untamed environment by producing strongly terroir driven wines. To keep thing more interesting a woman leads the family project and her name is Giovanna.

A LIQUID POSTCARD FROM SARDINIA: Usini is a small village of 4,000 souls only. *"Being a wine grower in a small secluded area is more like being an ambassador, as we don't just sell wine - Giovanna is convinced - The bottle is a "liquid postcard" through which the consumer and the wine tourists can learn about our millennial history".*

Giovanna's commitment is entirely aimed at enhancing the territory by creating authentic, original and "not boring" wines. For this reason she likes to pick up some fancy names to brand her wines.

Her Vermentino is **Mattariga**, from the Sardinian expression for "bushes tangle" which is the original name of the place where the vineyards are located. The red wine **Lugherra** refers to the ancient lamps, used centuries ago to lighten the paths and found in the



vineyards are raised. **Kentàles** means "dawn" or "first light of dawn". Giovanna considers this wine non just a dessert companion obtained from overripe Moscato grapes, but more like a meditation sign of the endless flow of the time. *"It evokes sun's sensations and natural perfumes: the sun of*

our island and the first scents of the morning".

Giovanna had a strong vision since her childhood: *"The wine world has always been part of me as I belong to an ancient family of local growers and winemakers and I believe that the passion and the art of "making wine" is learned from the ancient gestures handed down by the past generations, including my dad Luigi. Since I was a child I have always been very attracted to the earth and nature's mysteries and I often stopped to contemplate, with extreme amazement, the composure of the vineyards and the grapes bunches that were like a holy fruit to me. After the harvest period, I loved walking among the rows and watching the leaves changing color as the fall season was knocking at the door. Already since then, I thought that one day my job was making wines".*

CAGNULARI, THE LOCAL HERO: Cagnulari is the name of the grape variety most closely linked to the territory of Usini. Giovanna explains why, in this case, she gave up her fantasy approach and did not brand the wine with any peculiar name: *"This variety has been recently revalued so it seemed right to call it by its real name in order to snatch it from oblivion. I didn't want to use any fancy name here to brand my wine as I liked this grape as it is: naked and whimsical!"*

Many international wine experts aren't aware that in this Northern west corner of Sardinia Cannonau is not the king and takes a back seat. Cagnulari rules here and is such a difficult grape to cultivate as it is prone to botrytis due to the tight clusters and the delicate skin. Its remarkable vigor requires to contain yields, otherwise the wine can result bland. It's very territorial at best and requires special soil, altitude and exposure conditions. It doesn't travel well and planting it without a good supporting research won't pay off. Giovanna says: *"It's such a pain in the neck to be honest, but at the same time so amazingly challenging. You have to take care of it from the very beginning of the vineyards' cycle and in the cellar you have to deal with a lot of extraction and sugar levels with potential reduction problems. Destemming must be done in a very gentle way, as the grape's skin is really fragile. Same thing for the pump over which must be done frequently and for short periods. If you want to produce a remarkable wine, working hard with no shortcuts is the only way. A lot of growers in Sardinia have turned their back to this variety, but here is Usini and in the Sassari province we are stubborn enough and have preserved the grape from a total decadence"*.



The Cagnulari varietal is present in a significant proportion in the vineyards of the Sassari province (13%), but poorly in other Sardinian provinces, and that is the reason why it has been ignored by many wine importers. There is a certain genetic resemblance to the Graciano grape, planted in Rioja, Navarra and in the Toledo province in Spain and thus we assume a common Spanish origin even if Cagnulari evolved in respect to the original

clone. In Gallura it is called Caldarello or Caldareddu, and in Alghero it is called Cagliunari, which is its synonym regularly recognized. Most likely this grape has the highest acidity levels compared to all the other varietals planted in Sardinia.

Cagnulari is often vinified together with other red varieties: for example in the Mejlogu area it is blended with the Cannonau and Pascale giving a wine of an interesting structure. In 1995 Cagnulari was recognized as a main grape in wines coming from the DOC Alghero. The berry is black, medium, spheroid with pruinosity, delicate black-purple skin. The bunch is medium, cylindrical-conical, sometimes winged, semi-tight with a large, three-lobed leaf. Cagnulari variety has a good vigor and time of medium-

late maturing. Cagnulari vine gives a ruby red wine. The nose is fruity with hints of berries. The palate is structured and complex, typically warm and soft.

THE MICROCLIMATE: Chessa small family owned estate is planted with roughly 15 vineyard hectares and the production levels are round 60.000 yearly bottles on average. Giovanna keeps selling excellent amount of fruit to other producers because she prefers to limit her production with the goal of having the whole vinification process under control. The grapes planted are entirely indigenous: mainly Vermentino and Cagnulari, plus some Moscato and Cannonau.

The microclimate is unique and the wind always caresses the plants, removing the extra moisture, giving way to an healthy crop and perfect ripening season. The soil does the rest with the Guyot trained vines averaging between 7 and 25 years of age, sitting at 250 meters of altitude. To keep things more interesting the estate has some hectares planted with the traditional old school alberello system (bush trained) as well. Furthermore the sea is not far away and the brackish breezes, especially when the Mistral blows, intensively affect the bunches and protect them from diseases allowing to reduce treatments and abandon any sprayed synthetic chemicals. The soil here is limestone-rich (with presence of clay and red clay), in contrast to the soil of the Gallura district (in north-eastern Sardinia) which is granitic, so the Vermentino grown here is distinctly different being a bit less mineral and slightly more herbal. A refreshing acidity makes this varietal the perfect match for a wide array of foods and a natural choice with seafood and shellfish.

Giovanna's love for Vermentino has pushed her to explore a path for this grape and from the 2017 harvest she has been producing a Vermentino fermented with the indigenous yeast and macerated on the skins. The name chosen for this wine is C'era Una Volta (Once upon a time) and this wine is a tribute to the past when wines were made with less intervention. The whole packaging presents itself with a very suggestive label focused on a light and captivating fairytale style that integrates with the golden color of the wine bottled in a clear glass burgundy bottle. It represents the light heartedness of a young girl who flies on the fantasy's wings in order to pursue her dream.

THE WINES IMPORTED: Giovanna's house hosts on the ground floor (here where you would expect maybe a rustic kitchen) barrels, steel tanks and the winemaking equipment. Everything is very clean, impeccably organized and with the classic wine scent typical of all the cellars. *"This is my kingdom - Giovanna tells us - here I do everything, my cellar is very small, but the real work is done in the vineyard"*. Small, but perfectly cozy, tidy and with just the right equipment for the vinification of five wines: two whites, two reds and a sweet dessert wine from the Moscato grapes. Steep Hill imports all of them!

Vermentino Mattariga 2019: The fruit sourced for this wine comes several vineyards averaging 15 to 25 years and planted on chalky soils and red clay, along with olives trees and the Mediterranean scrub. Some of this vines are bush trained in order to resist the strong winds. Vermentino is the beloved variety widely planted in Sardinia. The grapes are hand harvested in small bins of 20 kg during the last week of September. The two weeks long fermentation takes place in stainless steel tanks where the wine, after the racking, continues to age for 5 months on the fine lees. The short distance to the sea provides a high tone of minerality along with the classic Mediterranean flavor profile: some herbal notes (rosemary), flowers and dried fruit wrapped around a core of salinity.

It's an island wine and you should enjoy it with friends and a good meal. What about a rich antipasto, cod fish, salads or white meats?

Cagnulari 2019: Cagnulari is an indigenous variety not planted elsewhere in Italy and lesser known as well in Sardinia. It's a tough kid and requires a lot of work as it is prone to fungal diseases and oxidation. The grapes are hand harvested in small bins of 20 kg during the last week of September. 15 days of skin contact followed by a soft pressing. Fermentation takes place in stainless steel tanks where the wine, after the racking, continues to age for 10 months on the fine lees. The short distance to the sea provides a high tone of minerality along with the classic Mediterranean flavor profile: spiciness, some herbal notes (rosemary) and wild red fruit. It's an island wine and you should enjoy it with friends and a good meal. What about well cured cheeses, grilled vegetables or grilled meats?

Lugherra 2016: Lugherra is Giovanna's blend (Cagnulari 90%, Cannonau 10%) with fruit sourced from two different vineyards averaging 25 years old and planted on chalky limestone soils, along with olives trees and the Mediterranean scrub. Cagnulari needs a lot of attention both in the vineyard and in cellar as its' skin is very fragile, prone to fungal diseases and oxidation. The two varieties are processed separately during the fermentation which takes place in stainless steel tanks and, after the racking, the blend is made. The 24 months ageing process is partially done in tanks (70%) and used tonneaux (30%). The short distance to the sea provides a high tone of minerality along with the classic Mediterranean flavor profile: spiciness, tobacco, some herbal notes (rosemary) and wild red fruit. It's an island wine and you should enjoy it with friends and a good meal. Cheers!

C'era Una Volta 2017: This is Giovanna's most experimental wine ever produced made entirely with Vermentino. The grapes are hand harvested in small bins of 20 kg when



they are slightly overripe in the 1st week of October. 4 days of skin contact followed by a soft pressing. The spontaneous fermentation (only indigenous yeast) takes place both in stainless steel tanks and used French tonneaux, where the wine, after the racking, continues to age for one full year. The short distance to the sea provides a high tone of minerality along with the classic Mediterranean flavor

profile: chamomile, ripe stone fruit, wild flowers and nuttiness wrapped around a core of salinity. Try it even with truffle pasta or roasted swordfish and meats.

Kentàles Moscato Passito 2017: The overripe Moscato grapes are hand harvested and naturally air dried on racks under the sun for two weeks. After a brief maceration, followed by pressing, the must undergoes the very delicate phase of the fermentation done at low temperature in order to preserve the aromas. Expressive orange zest, cinnamon and dried flowers grace the palate lifted by a refreshing acidity. Pair it with dry patisserie, almond and hazelnut desserts and blue cheeses.