



A MOUNTAIN of DIFFERENCE

BY DANIELLE CALLEGARI

ILLUSTRATED BY NATALIA SANABRIA

What a growing group of non-Italian female winemakers from around the globe have learned living and working in Italy.

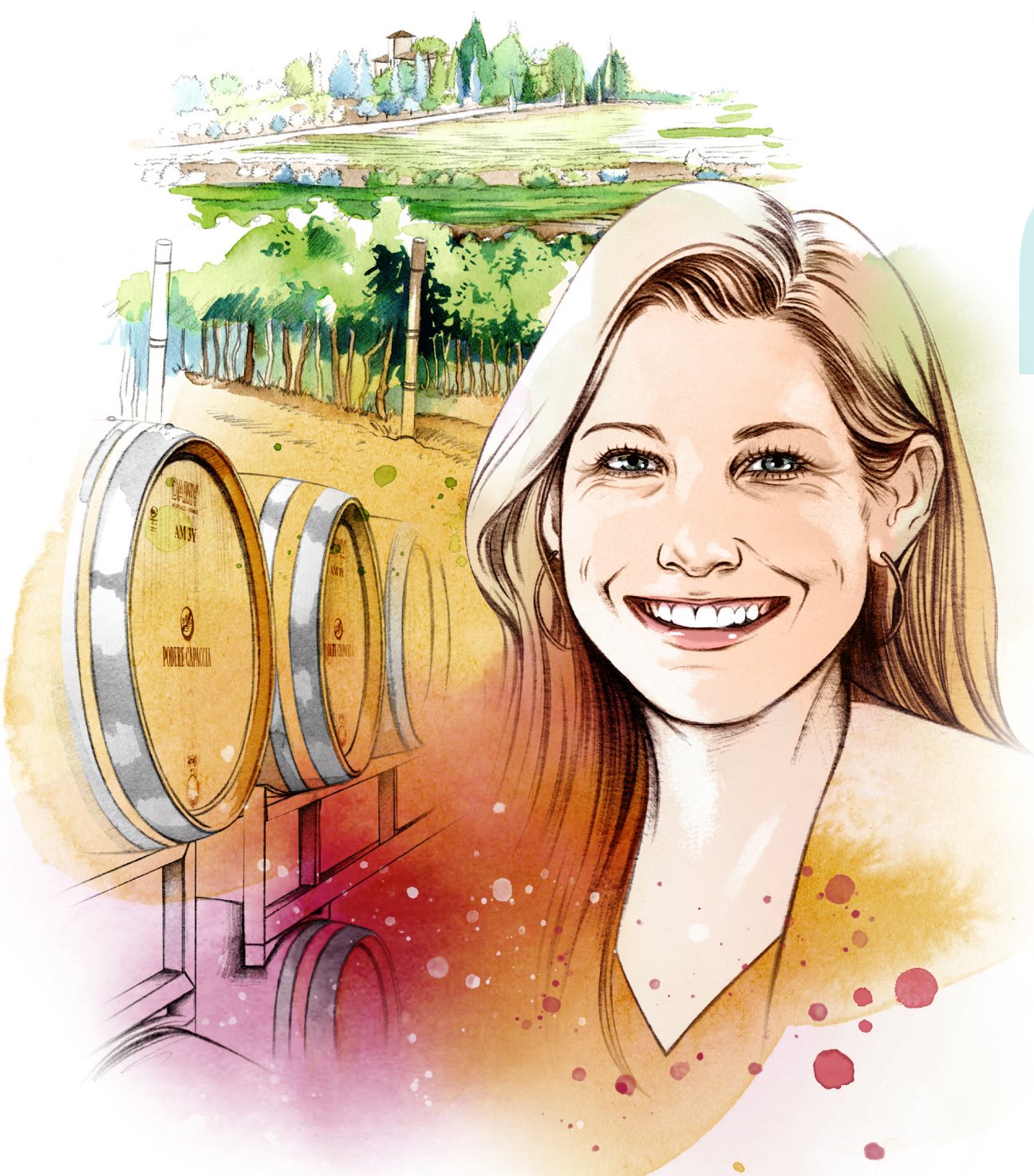
When

Alyson Morgan first arrived in Italy more than 20 years ago to make wine, she was an unusual addition to the landscape in more than one way. She was young, she was American, and she had trained as a scientist at UC Davis. And she was a woman. Then, even more than now, the world of wine was known for being male-dominated and exclusionary, but the world of Italian wine—with the peninsula’s reputation for machismo—might well have been expected to be an utterly misogynist cult. Yet what Morgan ended up encountering did not match that stereotype. “To be honest,” she says, “I experienced

more hazing in California,” where she had worked in wineries in Mendocino before deciding to cross the Atlantic. Morgan says, “When I arrived in Italy, I wasn’t just ‘not a man’; I was different in every way, and they actually seemed to like that, or at least to find it interesting. They were pretty welcoming.” By way of undeniable confirmation, she points out that she ended up getting married, having children and staying in Tuscany for the next two decades, where she still resides, now making wine at Podere Capaccia in Radda in Chianti.

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—Joy Kull

Morgan is, in fact, part of a robust group of non-ethnically Italian women who have come to Italy since the turn of the last century to make wine and have successfully integrated themselves into the Italian wine business despite having little to no preexisting relationship to the place or its culture. The presence of this group of outsiders



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All in the Family

in a place known for its attachment to history and tradition provides peculiar insight into the ways in which otherwise closed communities slowly open to new presences and new perspectives. The “extreme” otherness of these new entries—women, yes, but also foreigners bringing unique experiences and specialized professional expertise—has perhaps allowed them to get a foot in a once sealed door and begin to pry it open.

Joy Kull, owner and winemaker at La Villana in Lazio outside of Rome, has experienced friction on the business side of things as a result of her gender. “People often can’t believe I’m the final stop when it comes to decision-making,” Kull says, “and they’ll ask if I need to discuss something with my husband first.” The practical side of it

doesn’t bother her much, as she can shut down that line of questioning pretty quickly, but the fact that other business owners and winemakers are putting her credibility in doubt can be tough, especially because it might well have real ramifications on investment. On the other hand, Kull notes that the fact that she is a foreigner has been less of a problem and more of a curiosity—even an appeal. Kull laughs, “They think it’s weird that a New Yorker would want to come to live

“People just listened because they didn’t really know what else to do with me.
—Patricia Toth”



in this part of the Italian countryside,” but the unlikelihood of her presence there, and her appreciation for this unexpected place, generates good will.

This was the experience, too, of Patricia Toth, a Hungarian woman who first spent time in the northeastern Italian wine region of Friuli in 2003 as part of a study abroad program for agricultural studies. She later went to Piedmont to try her hand at Nebbiolo before finally accepting what was meant to be a six-month position in Sicily to work for the winery Planeta. More than 15 years later,

her collaboration with Planeta continues, and Toth reflects that she wasn’t very sensitive to her gender difference when she first arrived. She suspects it was partly because of her upbringing in a very gender-equal household, where she and her brother were treated with parity by her father, but she feels it was also because she was “so strange”—female, foreign, focused on new developments in viticulture—that “people just listened because they didn’t really know what else to do with me.” Whatever doubts they might have had were fully dispelled when they witnessed Toth’s dedication to the craft and the territory, and in particular when she showed them how serious she was about being a fully enfranchised member of the team. As Toth put it, “We work very closely and very intensely together. It’s like a bubble. You’re either in or you’re out, so when I’m here working, I’m totally immersed.”

Melissa Di Giovanna, an American woman who works with her husband and his family making wine at Di Giovanna winery near Agrigento, affirmed this perspective. “We’re in this as a family,” she observes, adding that the word family is capacious here, to include not only blood relatives but everyone who works to help make their wine a reality, “so there’s a sense that everyone has to contribute once you’re part of the unit.” For Melissa this has meant taking on the roles that she’s best suited to—in this case sales and marketing, given her ability to speak with the American consumer more fluently—but also, perhaps counterintuitively, having clear opinions and ideas and expressing them. Having come from another cultural context, she can see things her colleagues and relatives can’t, and she has leaned into that strength. Di Giovanna pushed for

the creation of a pétillant naturel, knowing from an outsider’s point of view that it would be a crowd pleaser and a unique offering that helps Di Giovanna stand apart. Like Toth, Di Giovanna’s wholehearted investment and desire to contribute in concrete ways, despite not being from the territory, is perceived as a sign of her well-deserved place there.



Soledad Adriasola Lang worked hard to learn the vocabulary that her colleagues and neighbors used.

The “Right” Kind of Different

If some markers of difference can be repurposed as strengths, others are more malleable and can represent opportunities to vault what might otherwise seem an unbridgeable gap. Soledad Adriasola Lang joined the team at Poderi dal Nespoli in Emilia-Romagna in 2013 and, after a brief hiatus in Piedmont and then Sicily, returned to Poderi dal Nespoli to stay. A native Spanish speaker from Chile, Soledad said that people assumed she would master Italian easily and be immediately comfortable. In fact, she realized quickly that her unfamiliarity with the Romagnolo dialect that was spoken in the

area put her at a distinct disadvantage when trying to understand others and make herself understood. To make a connection with the strong local identity reflected in that dialect, she worked hard to learn the vocabulary that her colleagues and neighbors used to most naturally express themselves. She found that they were incredibly receptive to her ideas once they saw that she was serious about forging a relationship with her new home, all the more because Romagna doesn’t have the cachet of other major Italian winemaking regions. They gave her the reins on the production of a skin-contact wine that took advantage of her previous work with biodynamics and her love of playing in the space between tradition and innovation, and Rubicone IGT Bianco, an orange wine, was born. In the latest release, her team surprised her with a new front label that features a transparent circle in the center, allowing the orange color of the wine to show through and look like a sun—a play on her name (“Sole”), meant to represent her.

Acceptance is also contingent on being the “right” kind of different. As Joy Kull also observed, her status is privileged given her background and appearance: “They don’t really care about me being an immigrant, probably because I’m American and not from a developing nation.” With this comment Kull gives more contour to the question of moral licensing at play here. In one sense, certain kinds of otherness are sometimes awarded reverence rather than suspicion or exclusion, based on larger schemes of class, race and social-cultural capital. In another, a mountain of difference—like the individuals here who set themselves apart via age, gender, nationality and professional preparation—can create an anomalous scenario where standard barriers don’t hold up, simply giving way to curiosity.

As with any complex cultural phenomenon, the erosion of gender inequality in the Italian wine business—or the wine business in general for that matter—can’t be interpreted through a single lens, not least because the process is ongoing, but as these non-Italian women winemakers have found success making wine in Italy, they’ve also cast a light of a different hue on that

space and its participants. To be sure, the increasing number of non-ethnically Italian women working in Italian wine aligns with an increasing number of Italian women working in Italian wine. The Associazione Nazionale Le Donne Del Vino (National Association of Women in Wine) now counts more than a thousand members, and while coincidence isn’t correlation, it’s certainly the case that as women from beyond Italy have arrived on the scene women from within Italy have started to find more traction. Attention from the outside, the sense of being in conversation with an international audience and a part of a larger reality not bound by immediate local traditions can spark a desire to be more conversant and more open. It can also prompt self-interrogation and the questioning of practices or modes that remain in place as much as a result of laziness as insistence.

As the new winemaker and cellar master at the wildly famous Masseto estate, 30-year-old Gaia Cinnirella points out that her age is probably more commented upon than her gender, although she is very frequently still the only woman in the room when wine-makers gather. “There’s a lot of pressure on me,” she acknowledges, “even more because they see I don’t look like the usual kind of person in this position.” Being named one of *Fortune Italia*’s 40 Under 40 Wine Industry Leaders may have helped instill some confidence, but she underlines that she relies on her colleagues to make it all come together. In line with what the other women in her field say, Cinnirella emphasized that building a strong community, however it might be composed, provides the foundation for overcoming any obstacle: “We work as a team. Because you know at the end of the day, it’s about the wine. If the wine is good everyone forgets the rest.”



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—Melissa Di Giovanna