

## In Mom's Footsteps

Women winemakers and their children discuss motherhood in the wine industry. Plus, 10 wine picks from Italy and Argentina



Photo by: Courtesy of Elena Walch

Karoline, Julia and Elena Walch in their Alto Adige cellar. Elena married into a winemaking family, but then launched her own company.

*Esther Mobley*

Posted: May 1, 2015

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Working mothers everywhere are all too familiar with the difficulties of balancing professional life with family life. Mothers in the wine industry face their own particular challenges, such as grape harvests that refuse to observe children's bedtimes and frequent travel for sales trips.

For Elena Walch, who started her namesake winery in Italy's Alto Adige region, and Susana Balbo, who founded Argentina's *Dominio del Plata* in Mendoza, the trying years of winemaking-plus-childrearing have paid off with what they say is the ultimate gift: Their children have joined the family business. In honor of Mother's Day, which falls on May 10 this year, we spoke with Walch and her two daughters, Karoline and Julia, and Balbo and her two children, Ana and José, about their experiences.

"It is never easy for a mom to do both—to work and have a company and to raise a family," Balbo says. "You feel guilt on a daily basis. When you're at work, you're thinking of your kids. When you're with your kids, you're thinking about work."

Walch notes that her demanding job made her daughters more independent. "I wasn't sitting with them doing their homework, like many women who are at home," she says. "But now I'm very proud, having these girls with such independence, and choosing something that I never told them they have to

follow.”

To call Walch and Balbo trailblazers is no exaggeration. Both had family ties to winemaking but broke with tradition when they set off on their own ventures. When Balbo graduated from university, in 1981, she became the first woman in Argentina to hold an enology degree.

Walch, who trained as an architect, found herself suddenly immersed in the wine business when she married the proprietor of the Wilhelm Walch estate, which had been in his family since 1869. “Why don’t you let me do my own business inside your business?” she asked her husband, envisioning a wine brand that would be more *terroir*-focused, and a little higher-end, than his.

The decision to launch her own company, Walch said, was met with considerable skepticism. “It was not only unusual for the wine business, it was unusual at that time for women to lead any business,” she says. “There aren’t very many women winemakers in Alto Adige, not at all.”

Balbo is grateful that she was often able to bring her children to her workplace when they were small. They would run around the winery while she worked; thank goodness wineries are kept so clean, she says. This exposure to the world of wine at such an early age instilled a passion for the business in Ana and José.



Sara Matthews

*José and Ana Lovaglio Balbo love working with their mother, Susana.*

“From early on, I decided that I wanted to build upon my mother’s work,” says José, now 30. “The idea has always been to give a continuity to all that my mother has done.” In 2009, after training formally at the University of California, Davis, he assumed the responsibilities of winemaker, under his mother, and export sales. José now also runs his own wine label, called Vaglio.

Karoline Walch, 27, also knew for as long as she can remember that she wanted to join her mother’s enterprise. “Our bedroom was above the cellars,” she says of her childhood on the winery property. From her window, she heard cellar workers rolling *barriques*; the wafting aromas of fermentation were comforting to her. Living in her mother’s place of work allowed her to better understand her mother’s life, Karoline says. “It wasn’t like she was a doctor and came back late at night. Every day I knew what she was doing and how she was doing it.”

Karoline and José’s siblings took a more roundabout route to their mothers’ wineries. Though lifelong

wine lovers, Julia and Ana, both 28, each moved away to larger cities and worked in different industries before realizing that they wanted to devote themselves to carrying on their mothers' work.

Ask any of these children what they admire about their mothers and they can't stop gushing. "My mother is really open-minded, because she has an entrepreneurial spirit," says Ana. "I said, 'Mom, I want to open a restaurant.' She said, 'OK, let's do it!'" After working in Buenos Aires at a large corporation, Ana, who is now Dominio del Plata's marketing and communications manager, was impressed by her mother's ability to bring both intimacy and professionalism to her small business.

Balbo "never says, 'No, it can't be done,' and she has a high tolerance for failure," adds José. "That allows her to take a lot of risks. It's essential to success."

Julia Walch admires her mother's indefatigable work ethic. "She gave 120 percent to her wines. That example was the main thing she gave to us," says Julia. "Not to separate the winery from private life, but to have a full life dedicated to wine."

Working together as mother and child is not always easy. Walch jokes that her children love to refuse her instructions in the workplace. "I have to learn to step back," says Walch. "I tell them, 'You can go your own way, but if you do something wrong, it's up to you to make it right.'"

"Receiving orders from your mom is something you need to get used to," laughs José. "But at the end of the challenge is something very rewarding, to build a project that is an expression and an extension of your family."

Although they don't yet have any grandchildren, both Walch and Balbo dream of their legacies being passed down to a third generation. No matter what happens, they feel confident that their life's work is in exceedingly capable hands.

For Mother's Day (which in Argentina falls in October; Italy shares the same date as the American holiday), both families spend the day relaxing over good food and wine. Balbo looks forward to lunch that Ana and José will prepare.

For Walch, the greatest Mother's Day present is simply that her daughters have chosen this career of their own volition.

"I told them I was happy with this life of wine," Walch recalls. "I lived my way. You should find a way to be happy, too."

## Wines Made by Mothers and Their Children

*Recommended wines from Elena Walch and Dominio del Plata*

### Elena Walch

#### **ELENA WALCH Alto Adige Beyond the Clouds 2012 Score: 92 / \$65**

An elegant yet expressive white, with seamless integration of the sleek acidity and rich minerality. An exotic thread of myrrh and bergamot winds through the finely knit flavors poached quince, chalk, tea rose and pink grapefruit zest, while hints of fleur de sel, raw almond and smoke echo on the finish. Finely wrought and distinctive. Predominantly Chardonnay. Drink now through 2024. 1,200 cases made.—A.N.

#### **ELENA WALCH Gewürztraminer Alto Adige Kastelaz 2013 Score: 89 / \$35**

A zesty white, with hints of smoke and candied orange zest accenting flavors of melon, dried apricot, salted almond and orange blossom. Well-knit, light- to medium-bodied, with a fresh, stony finish. Drink now through 2019. 1,200 cases made.—A.N.

#### **ELENA WALCH Pinot Bianco Alto Adige 2013 Score: 88 / \$16**

Fresh and svelte, this lively white features pink grapefruit zest and ground ginger notes accenting the Fuji apple, stone, salted almond and star fruit flavors. Drink now through 2018. 2,000 cases made.—A.N.

#### **ELENA WALCH Pinot Grigio Alto Adige 2013 Score: 88 / \$18**

Fresh and well-knit, with a stony undertow and flavors of ripe pear, candied lemon zest, ground ginger and yellow plum. A hint of salinity shows on the finish. Drink now through 2017. 7,500 cases made.—A.N.

**ELENA WALCH Sauvignon Alto Adige Castel Ringberg 2013 Score: 88 / \$24**

Bright and fruit-forward, with lively acidity and exuberant flavors of guava, pink grapefruit pulp, star fruit, ground ginger and anise. Clean-cut and tangy, with a stony finish. Drink now through 2017. 1,250 cases made.—A.N.

See more Elena Walch wines in our [Wine Ratings Search](#).

## Dominio del Plata

**DOMINIO DEL PLATA BenMarco Expresivo Mendoza 2011 Score: 92 / \$35**

This dark red features crisp acidity to its candied plum, dark cherry and cassis fruit, with red licorice, spice and mocha lining the vibrant finish. Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Tannat, Bonarda and Petit Verdot. Best from 2015 through 2018. 750 cases imported.—N.W.

**DOMINIO DEL PLATA Cabernet Sauvignon Mendoza Susana Balbo Signature 2012 Score: 91 / \$25**

A flashy red, showing ripe cassis and racy cherry coulis notes, wound with a structured layer of spice, mocha and licorice. Drink now through 2017. 3,000 cases imported.—N.W.

**DOMINIO DEL PLATA Malbec Mendoza Susana Balbo Signature 2012 Score: 88 / \$25**

This ripe red shows a candied to its edge the dark cherry and plum sauce notes, leading to an aftertaste of licorice and mocha. Drink now. 8,000 cases imported.—N.W.

**DOMINIO DEL PLATA Malbec Mendoza BenMarco 2012 Score: 87 / \$20**

Juicy, with forward plum pudding and cherry puree notes, followed by hints of mocha and spice. Drink now. 19,000 cases imported.—N.W.

**DOMINIO DEL PLATA Malbec Mendoza Bodini 2013 Score: 87 / \$13**

Fresh plum, blueberry, smoke and spice notes mix on a medium-bodied frame. Drink now. 15,000 cases imported.—N.W.

See more wines from Dominio del Plata in our [Wine Ratings Search](#).

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