

SHARE: [f FACEBOOK](#) [TWITTER](#) [g+ GOOGLE+](#)

THE FUTURE OF GAJA: REFINING FINE WINES

By Adam Lechmere on November 27, 2015

TAGS [Italy wines](#) [People](#)

Gaia Gaja is working on fine tuning the family company's wines. Photo courtesy of Terlato Wines

Story highlights:

- Gaia Gaja will lead the Barbaresco-based producer into the future
- The 35-year-old is fine-tuning her predecessors' work
- Latest efforts focused in the vineyard rather than the winery

It is early morning in the little Italian town of Barbaresco, and Gaia Gaja has lost her dog. "Have you seen him?" she asks the man setting out his cheese stall. He looks concerned but unsurprised as Gaia disappears along the cobbled street, her voice echoing back in the morning stillness.

When the dog – a tiny, manic thing of indeterminate breed – is found, we sit down to talk. Our interview lasts nearly two hours, during which time Gaia scarcely draws breath, covering every aspect of the winery she runs along with her sister Rossana and her father Angelo – possibly Italy's most revered proprietor.

There's an extraordinary, focused energy to the 35-year-old Gaia. She speaks fast, in accented but near-flawless English, about her respect for her grandfather, her working relationship with her father, and the infinitesimal but important changes she's steadily introducing.

Later, we visit the vineyards, driving at exhilarating speed through the soft green valleys of this exquisite corner of Piedmont, the dog bouncing about in the back. "That's the way he learns," she says cheerfully as he tumbles to the floor for the fifth time.

Focus, and ceaseless experimentation, has been the hallmark of Gaja – Barbaresco's, and Piedmont's – most renowned winery since Gaia's great-great-grandfather Giovanni Gaja first started selling wine from the family's tavern (the front door is still there) in Barbaresco in 1859. It was Gaia's grandfather – also called Giovanni, the charismatic mayor of the town – who first started buying land in the region, recognizing that it was the surest way to ensure the quality of the grapes.

"The mission of his life was to put Barbaresco on the map," says Gaia. "There were very few visionary people buying vineyards here. Most people couldn't have cared less about Barbaresco because Barolo was historically considered the most respectable and ageworthy wine. Barbaresco was never as powerful."



Gaia is the fifth generation to work at the Barbaresco winery.

Photo courtesy of: Terlato Wines

The Gajas have always been pioneers. Giovanni, the grandfather, was an early adopter of branding, stamping his name in large letters on his bottles, but Gaia doesn't like being pigeonholed as an innovator. "It's frustrating – it's almost as if you don't respect tradition if you're an innovator. Yes, we introduced barriques, but what we have done is far more complex than that."

It's impossible to overestimate the importance of Giovanni Gaja's role in creating the reputation not only of Piedmont but also of Italy as a whole. And what he started, his son Angelo continued when he took over the winery in the 1970s. He introduced stainless-steel tanks, replanted vineyards, and caused lasting controversy when he started aging wine in small barrels.

Italian winemakers are a famously cantankerous breed, but mention Angelo's name and the response is always the same – a raise of the eyebrows and, "Gaja? He is a genius." The renowned winemaker Walter Massa of Vigneti Massa, who champions the almost-forgotten Timorasso grape in nearby Alessandria, compares him to that other great Italian iconoclast, Piero Antinori – with an important distinction. "Antinori has more interest in markets, but Angelo Gaja is a grower, a man of the soil."

Like father, like daughter. For Gaia, soil is of paramount importance. "Our goal is not to take care of the vines but to keep the soil alive. The focus has to be underneath. You have to work the land and not the plants; the plant is only one element."

Gaia employs a French botanist to "read" the cover crop, giving an insight into soil composition. "We know that mint grows where there is a lot of water; this yellow flower loves magnesium; this is a flower that grows where chemical products have been used; and so on."



*The Gaja family has helped to put
Barbaresco on the world wine map.
Photo by: Giovanni1232/iStock*

Gaia's forbears worked to a big canvas; her focus is sharper. Instead of grand gestures she makes fine adjustments. She has noticed, for example, that the "intriguing perfume" of the great single vineyard Barbarescos – Sorì Tildìn, Sorì San Lorenzo, Costa Russi – has less staying power in certain vintages.

"Sometimes they shut down earlier. Why is that?" A tasting along with Angelo, winemaker Alessandro Albarello (the heir to veteran Guido Rivella, who retired last year) and her sister Rossana is prepared, and Gaia states her case. "I try to prove my point. How can we enhance the perfume and get more freshness and elegance in the wine? Perhaps we could try not topping the vines this year. And so we go ahead with the experiment." If successful, new practices are then extended to Gaja's other holdings in Barolo, Montalcino and Bolgheri.

Another goal is self-sufficiency. There is a fully functioning nursery for Nebbiolo and now Gaia has turned her mind to the non-indigenous varietals, the 35-year-old Chardonnay vineyard that produces Gaia & Rey, the Cabernet Sauvignon for Darmagi, and Alteni di Brassica Sauvignon Blanc. "We think that now we have enough experience to start our own clonal selection so that we can be totally self-sufficient."

There are a few wine producers around the world that can claim responsibility for the success of their region: Robert Mondavi and Napa, for example, or Torres and Penedès. There are fewer that *define* their territory in the way Gaja defines Barbaresco. There are formidable neighbors – Bruno Giacosa, Marchesi di Grésy – but none that are so synonymous with this part of Piedmont. Gaja has world renown, but it is also utterly local.

"My grandfather had a great sense of belonging here," says Gaia. "He wasn't from Piedmont, he was from Barbaresco. If he had a piece of news he would say, 'Do you hear what's happening in Piedmont?'"

This sense of place shows no signs of dilution with the generations, and it breeds a natural conservatism, but the Gajas have found a balance between tradition and change. While they respect the past, they are certainly not bound by it.

Angelo did things that might have infuriated a more inflexible patriarch (the name of the Cabernet Sauvignon, Darmagi, means 'shame', which is what Giovanni said when his son planted foreign vines on perfectly good Nebbiolo land). "But as soon as my father came up with an idea, my grandfather took a step back and never forbade him," says Gaia.

And Angelo is no different in his relationship with his daughter. "My grandfather understood, and my father understands in the same way today, that the winery was much more the winery of the son and not of the father."

BY ADAM LECHMERE

Adam Lechmere launched Decanter.com in 2000 and was editor for 11 years before going freelance in 2010. He has since written for a number of wine titles and lives in London with his wife and three daughters.
