

# A 'Nobile' Idea

How winemakers in Montepulciano are demanding respect



Photo by: Andrea Chioato

Avignonesi's Max de Zarobe (right) and winemaker and CEO Matteo Giustiniani are both part of an effort to revive the reputation of Tuscany's VINO Nobile di Montepulciano.

Camuto from Europe

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VINO Nobile di Montepulciano—a storied Sangiovese-based red from Tuscany that has fallen on challenging times—is getting a face lift.

This week, the Consorzio del VINO Nobile di Montepulciano is expected to approve a new set of labeling guidelines that for the first time will allow producers to headline the word "Nobile" in large type.

"The main word you will see on the shelf will be 'Nobile.' It's cosmetic but it's very important," says one of the idea's initiators, Max de Zarobe of [Avignonesi](#).

VINO Nobile was one of Italy's most esteemed wines for centuries, though it has been eclipsed in recent times by other Tuscan wines. The "noble" change is designed to help reclaim the Montepulciano area's past glory and solve twin problems.

VINO Nobile di Montepulciano is frequently confused with the oft-disrespected Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, which has no relation to the Tuscan town; that wine is made primarily from the Montepulciano grape and comes from the Abruzzo region of east-central Italy. Among those who know it's made from Tuscany's signature grape, Nobile is often perceived as a weaker cousin of Brunello di Montalcino, which is 100 percent Sangiovese, to the west.

"There is a lot of myth out there—positive for Montalcino and negative for Montepulciano," says de Zarobe, speaking from Avignonesi's hilltop headquarters in a former 19th-century agricultural school. "We have to destroy the myth and slay this dragon once and for all."

Some of Montepulciano's more than 70 wine producers believe they can make Sangiovese as high in quality and as ageworthy as their Montalcino counterparts. The two towns are 20 miles apart, separated by the undulating Val d'Orcia. Montepulciano has a continental climate with soils that tend to have more clay, while Montalcino has more Mediterranean influence and more limestone.

"In most cases, the quality of the wines is the same," de Zarobe claims. "We want to put ourselves in competition with Brunello."

To that end, de Zarobe has also led the creation of "The Alliance" of six Nobile producers—Avignonesi, Antinori's **La Braccasca**, **Boscarelli**, **Dei**, **Poliziano** and **Salcheto**—who, according to the group's manifesto, aim to "restore Nobile's badge of honor."

Starting with the 2015 vintage, set to be released this fall, each Alliance member has committed to producing a single-vineyard cuvée from 100 percent Sangiovese that will bear the group's logo. The Vino Nobile di Montepulciano **DOCG** requires only 70 percent Sangiovese, which can be blended with Canaiolo Nero and other local grapes.

Avignonesi's version, "Poggetto di Sopra," from the vineyard that produces some of the estate's most elegant and complex wines, will fill 250 cases. To further show off its *terroirs*, the estate also plans to release three more single-vineyard, all-Sangiovese Vino Nobile bottlings with the 2015 vintage.

De Zarobe, 61, a France-born Basque, is the husband of Virginie Saverys, the Belgian lawyer and shipping scion who bought Avignonesi a decade ago, and helps run the business side of the winery, though he doesn't hold any formal title.

"It all began as a mistake," de Zarobe says of the couple's Tuscan adventure.

At his 50th birthday dinner in Tuscany in 2007, the couple discussed with Alberto Falvo, then the co-owner of Avignonesi, the idea of buying out his brother. Soon after, Saverys, who had retired from law, took a 30 percent share in the estate, **renowned for its Vin Santos**. After wrangling over business details with Falvo, she bought the entire company in 2009.

"The entire market was convinced we didn't know what we were doing. And they were right," de Zarobe says with a laugh.

The couple dove into the estate, studying wine in Bordeaux and recruiting young talent in winemaker (now CEO) Matteo Giustiniani, who worked with late Bordeaux consultant and educator **Denis Dubourdieu**, and in agronomist Alessio Gorini, who came from Burgundy's **Olivier Leflaive**.

Saverys, who has taken a lead on the agriculture side, transformed Avignonesi with her young team and new ideas. She tripled the size of the staff and began buying up vineyards in prime *terroirs*, allowing them to increase the percentage of Sangiovese in the wines. In 2012, as the Italian economy tanked, the couple bought more vineyards, along with the modern state-of-the-art cellar built by **Ruffino** for its Vino Nobile. While more than doubling the size of their holdings, and increasing production to more than 42,000 cases a year, Saverys has undertaken the daunting task of converting all their vineyards—totaling more than 400 acres—to **biodynamic farming**.

"At one time, it seemed like Nobile was going to die," says de Zarobe. "For us, this became a challenge."