

THE POUR

The Wine Heiresses Apparent

It used to be rare, but around the wine world, and with a particular concentration in Chianti Classico, daughters are taking on leadership roles.

By [Eric Asimov](#) in The New York Times

Reporting from Gaiole-in-Chianti, Radda-in-Chianti, Lamole and Castelnuovo Berardenga in the Chianti Classico region of Italy.

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As a young woman growing up in the Chianti Classico town of Radda-in-Chianti in Tuscany, Angela Fronti was sure of one thing: She did not want to join her family's business, doing agricultural work for wineries.

She was far more interested in making wine herself, so she earned a degree in winemaking and found jobs with wineries elsewhere in Tuscany.

But she felt drawn to Radda-in-Chianti, where some of the most ethereal Chianti Classicos are from. Like many families there, the Frontis owned a vineyard with sangiovese, the main grape of Chianti, as well as a few vineyards in other parts of the region. They made wine but sold it in bulk to merchants who bottled it.

Having proven herself at winemaking, she took over the family vineyards to make the wine for [Istine](#), her new Chianti Classico label. The first vintage was 2009. Today, they are critically acclaimed around the world, and she has begun to bottle single-vineyard wines from each of the family's plots.

"The family company was all male," she said. "I needed my own experience to feel strong enough. I demonstrated my skills, and I have a vineyard and winery thanks to them. But it's a new project."

Image

Before Ms. Fronti started Istine, her family sold the wine in bulk to merchants who bottled it under their own labels. Credit...Clara Vannucci for The New York Times

All over the world of wine, women like Ms. Fronti are taking charge of family businesses and pushing them to new and unexpected heights. They have generally been the first generation of women to routinely take the reins from older male relatives.

Women long ago demonstrated remarkable abilities in wine. But those allowed to take over family enterprises were historically the exceptions. Often, they stepped in after the

unexpected death of a father or spouse, like Corinne Mentzelopoulos, who led [Château Margaux](#) in Bordeaux to make great wine for decades after her father died in 1980.

She has followed a template dating back at least to 1805, when Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot took over her husband's Champagne business after he died at a young age. It continues to thrive today under the name [Veuve Clicquot](#), French for "Widow Clicquot."

Other exceptions are easy to find, including influential leaders like [Lalou Bize-Leroy](#) and [Anne-Claude Leflaive](#) in Burgundy and Cathy Corison in Napa Valley. But typically, family businesses went reflexively to sons or even sons-in-law if no son was available.

That is rapidly changing throughout the wine world, and Chianti Classico in particular has a concentration of women like Ms. Fronti who have taken charge of family enterprises and led them to heights they had never achieved before, despite the obstacles that many women still face.

In addition to Ms. Fronti, women heading excellent Chianti Classico estates include Lorenza Sebasti of [Castello di Ama](#) in Gaiole-in-Chianti, Sofia Ruhne of [Terreno](#) in Greve-in-Chianti, Susanna Grassi of [I Fabbri](#) in Lamole and Giovanna Morganti of [Podere le Boncie](#) in Castelnuovo Berardenga, each of whom I visited last November.



In 2010 it was considered unusual for women to be in charge of Chianti estates, said Sofia Ruhne of Terreno. "Now it's completely different. It's changed a lot and very fast."

Both Ms. Fronti and Ms. Ruhne, who took charge fairly recently, owe something to predecessors like Ms. Sebasti, 58, who had to overcome the sorts of doubts that were even more prevalent in earlier decades.

Ms. Sebasti was not expected to run a wine estate when she joined Castello di Ama in 1988. She was born in Rome and her father, an engineer, had been one of four families that together in 1975 purchased Ama. Like many Tuscan estates, it had been abandoned in the mid-20th century, when the system of mezzadria, or sharecropping, which had long sustained big agricultural estates, faded.

Photo Credit...Clara Vannucci for The New York Times

Her father, she recalled, loved the place, which included a largely abandoned village and manor house, more than he loved wine. His partner in Ama was the visionary for wine, and his son was supposed to take it over. Her father was skeptical of her making a life there.

But Ms. Sebasti loved Ama, and felt called to wine. She wanted to make Ama her life, and the heir, she believed, was not as devoted to the place as she was.

“He felt entitled because he was a male,” Ms. Sebasti said. “He didn’t put in roots at Ama. You have to give everything to make this happen.”

Ms. Sebasti prevailed in the power struggle and her rival eventually sold her his shares in Ama. Ms. Sebasti, who had married the winemaker Marco Pallanti, became the chief executive in 1993. Their son, Arturo, 26, will be among the next generation leading Ama, which makes graceful, long-lived wines.

“I have been a fighter,” she said. “Some would say, ‘stubborn,’” Arturo added.

Lorenza Sebasti overcame resistance to taking over Castello di Ama and became chief executive in 1993. Credit...Clara Vannucci for The New York Times

In Lamole, a tiny hamlet in the highest part of Greve-in-Chianti, Ms. Grassi’s family has grown grapes since 1620. Her great-grandfather was among the first small farmers in the region to bottle his own wine in the 1920s, and the first to bottle under the I Fabbri label. But her father focused instead on engineering work and rented out the family estate. The wine was sold to big négociants.

Ms. Grassi went into the fashion business in Florence, but in 2000 she felt called to return to Lamole to make wine. As her family vineyards were under contract, she bought her own vineyards. Her father, she said, supported her decision.

“I thought this place had lost its identity without us here,” she said, as we walked in her vineyard, surrounded by forest and silent except for bird calls.

She undertook big projects, restoring abandoned terraces, converting international varieties like merlot, which the market demanded in the 1990s, back to sangiovese, her preference. She brought back the I Fabbri label and began to bottle her wines, fresh, transparent and full of finesse.

“It wasn’t easy to work with them and be accepted,” she said of her team, all males. “I had to work more than them to be credible in their eyes.”

Her father died in 2021 and left her his portion of the family vineyards, which she will take over when the rental agreement ends. He left the family house to her brother.

“Always to the male member,” Ms. Grassi said.

Susanna Grassi revived I Fabbri, her family's label, after leaving the fashion industry to make wine. Credit...Clara Vannucci for The New York Times

Ms. Ruhne of Terreno does not have such roots in Tuscany. Her family is from Sweden, where her father owns a shipping company. In the 1980s, he bought Terreno, an estate that dates back to the 16th century. Their first vintage was in 1988.

In 2010, when the family began to consider the question of succession, Sofia, the youngest of four daughters, was working in Washington, D.C., promoting Swedish culture. She was more interested in Terreno than her siblings, having spent the most time there as a child, and moved there with her husband and children permanently in 2012. She spent three years learning the business before taking over in 2015.

Terreno had been making relatively simple wines, but Ms. Ruhne had her own vision. She wanted to raise the quality and lower alcohol levels, making wines that reflected their terroirs. She pushed to farm organically, promote biodiversity and improve pruning methods. And she shifted to indigenous grapes from the international varieties that the earlier generation had favored. But she faced opposition.

"The people working here resisted change," she said. "When I started, one person said, 'I will never take orders from a woman.'"

Gradually, she replaced intransigent workers. She brought in her own enologist, Giacomo Fioravanti. Terreno's wines today are elegant and pure.

Ms. Ruhne has seen major changes in the region and in the larger world of wine.
Image

She has taken strength from the other women of Chianti Classico, a "sisterhood," she said, with whom she gets together for tastings and discussions.

Ms. Ruhne mentioned another crucial change for women in wine. On sales trips around the world, she would plan lunches rather than dinners or evening events, which were fueled by alcohol and men with sexual designs.

"The [#MeToo movement](#) changed the game," she said. "It's far less threatening today."

Some things, however, have not changed. Ms. Fronti, of Istine, has achieved great things. She has increased annual production from 3,000 bottles to 100,000. She has shifted the family focus from quantity to quality, and her vineyards are now certified organic.

But she needs her family's agricultural company to replace a fence on one of her vineyards.

"I hope they will do it soon," she said, "but it takes time because I am the sister."