

WINE STAR AWARDS

Wine Enthusiast's 2015 Wine Star Award Winners

BY WINE ENTHUSIAST



His influence on Italian wine extends to far-flung global markets.

It is impossible to talk about the Renaissance of modern-day Italian wine without mentioning Angelo Gaja. Trailblazing, creative and influential, during his half-century career, Gaja has been a fundamental force in ushering in the New Age of Italian wine and in raising its image around the world.

Gaja's quest began in 1960, when he graduated from the Enological Institute of Alba with a diploma in enology.

In 1961, at the age of 21, Gaja joined his family's winemaking firm in the heart of Barbaresco. Founded by his great-grandfather in 1859, it's the region's oldest producer. Before Gaja took the reins in 1969, his father had already improved winemaking practices and acquired some of the area's top vineyard sites. Gaja took a more drastic approach to upping quality, including advocating short pruning and lowering grape yields—unheard of in Italy at the time. He began experimenting with French oak barriques in the late 1960s, and in 1978 released the first Barbaresco aged in both barriques and in traditional, large Slavonian casks.

Gaja was also an early advocate of terroir. In particular, he focused on the Langhe hills, home to the Nebbiolo grape, the sole variety in two of Italy's greatest wines, Barolo and

Barbaresco. He shocked local winemakers when he planted tiny amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay in the late 1970s to “demonstrate that even international grapes would excel in Langhe’s extraordinary growing area,” he says.

But perhaps Gaja’s most important contribution to Italian winemaking was his devotion to individual vineyards. His Sorì bottlings from the 1967 vintage shook up the entire wine world for their finesse, structure and hefty price tag when they debuted in 1970.

Soon, producers across Italy began adopting the practices that Gaja innovated. His world-class wines inspired a generation of winemakers.

But Gaja didn’t just focus on winemaking. Early on in his career, he embarked on a quest to improve Italian wine’s image abroad.

“Up until the early 1980s, Italian wine suffered from the ‘cheap and cheerful’ image and finely crafted Italian wines were almost unknown in export markets,” says Gaja. “One of my goals has always been to demonstrate Italy’s ability to produce elegant wines like Barbaresco and to confirm Italy’s role as the leader in making wines that pair beautifully with food.”

To this end, Gaja has traveled the world, educating consumers and the trade alike on the excellence of fine Italian wine.

“One of my father’s unique qualities is his all-out conviction that if you really try, you can change things,” says Gaia Gaja, Angelo’s eldest daughter, who works at the firm alongside her father and sister Rossana, while her younger brother Giovanni attends university.

Today, the Gaja family also owns estates in Tuscany, where they make Brunello di Montalcino at Pieve Santa Restituta, and in Bolgheri, where they produce Toscana IGT and Bolgheri DOC at Cà Marcanda winery—but wine is more than a family business for Angelo Gaja.

“My father always says, ‘Chi sa bere sa vivere’ or, ‘Whoever enjoys wine knows how to enjoy life,’ because culture and values are the true riches of wine,” says Gaia.

Wine Enthusiast is thrilled to honor pioneer Angelo Gaja with our 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award.

—Kerin O’Keefe