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THE SOMM JOURNAL

CATERINA
ALLEGRINI
WITH HER
MOTHER,
MARILISA.

FROM THE
VENETO
TO THE

Tuscan Coast

WITH POGGIO AL TESORO,
MARILISA ALLEGRINI
ESTABLISHES A SECOND
DOMAINE



The Inferno area within the Valtellina is known for its scorching summer-afternoon sun and stone-terraced vineyards.



A Fresh Take

A CHANGE IN THE GUARD AT VALTELLINA'S **NINO NEGRI** SIGNALS A NEW CHAPTER OF HIGH-QUALITY WINEMAKING by Courtney Schiessl

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NINO NEGRI



The spicy, bold Nino Negri Inferno.

IT ISN'T EASY to make wine in Valtellina. The northernmost area for Nebbiolo cultivation in Italy, Valtellina is an Alpine winegrowing region with marginal temperatures and steep slopes that require a painstaking level of hands-on management. Despite these challenges, Valtellina's largest producer, Nino Negri, has staked its reputation for more than a century on the phenomenal results that come from this extreme region.

Following the April retirement of Casimiro Maule, the winemaker who shaped Nino Negri's success over the past 40 vintages, the first releases from newly appointed Winemaker Danilo Drocco signal a new chapter in the winery's history. Lured by the prospect of crafting distinctive, high-quality wines from northern Italy's finest grape variety in some of the most enviable terroir in the world, Drocco plans to make his mark on Nino Negri's next century of success.

Extreme Winemaking

Since its establishment in 1897, Nino Negri has worked to garner international recognition for the wines of Valtellina, a mountainous region located in the far reaches of Lombardy just south of the Swiss border. Unlike most of this area's Alpine valleys, Valtellina runs from east to west, creating a steep, south-facing slope that proves essential to grape cultivation in this cool climate.

Stone terraces cut into the side of this slope are largely planted with Nebbiolo: Locally known as Chiavennasca, it's the region's most prominent variety and must make up at least 90 percent of Valtellina or Valtellina Superiore wines. The slope of Valtellina is so extreme, in fact, that it's cheaper to lift boxes of harvested grapes directly from the mountainside by helicopter than it is to transport them by truck.

For Drocco, the awe-inspiring setting offered love at first sight. Born and raised in Piedmont, the winemaker has spent his 30-year career working in some of the Langhe's top wineries, including Prunotto and Fontanafredda. Upon hearing the news of Maule's retirement, Drocco couldn't resist interviewing for the position—and after he poured his wife a glass of Nino Negri's bold, spicy Valtellina Superiore Inferno, he says she too was sold on the venture.

Drocco now commutes three and a half hours from his home in the Langhe to the winery in Valtellina at the beginning of each week, but he considers the drive more than worthwhile. "Valtellina is special," Drocco says over lunch in Manhattan. "It's impossible to understand if you haven't been there, which is why everyone needs to visit."

Another Side of Nebbiolo

After working closely with Nebbiolo in the Langhe, Drocco says part of the allure of taking over winemaking at Nino Negri was the chance to combine the familiar with the new. "The idea to do something in another place with the grape I know best was a great opportunity," he adds. Though Nebbiolo maintains classic varietal characteristics like complex flavors and aromas, strong tannic structure, and bright acidity, Valtellina's climatic and geographical conditions—which Drocco refers to as "extreme cultivation"—create unique expressions of the grape.

While Valtellina itself is not homogenous (Nino Negri owns 31 hectares of vines across several sub-zones of the region and works with additional vineyards, as well) Drocco emphasizes the importance of the area's stony soil. Since vines must dig deep into the ancient volcanic rock and granite to get water and nutrients, there is a distinct minerality to Nino Negri's wines. The

combination of intense sunlight and cool temperatures, meanwhile, creates a fine balance of concentration and acidity that also characterizes the wines of Valtellina. "There is a beautiful freshness to the finish of Valtellina wines," Drocco says. "I could not find that in the Langhe."

The traditional *Sfursat* method of winemaking, a trademark style of Nino Negri, also serves to distinguish Valtellina wines from Nebbiolos made elsewhere. Born from necessity, as temperatures in the past were too cold to fully mature these late-ripening grapes, the process requires vintners to pick the grapes early

highlight the Inferno area, aptly named for its scorching summer-afternoon sun, and the Sassella area, where the soil is deeper to the bedrock and richer than in neighboring subzones.

Drocco, however, plans to take the winery one step further, noting that "it's time for Valtellina to show the real potential of its terroir through single vineyards." Nino Negri already produces the Vigneto Fracia Valtellina Superiore, which is made from the original vineyard of the estate and known for its characteristic notes of Mediterranean herbs. Because the winery has strong holdings in Valtellina, Drocco sees



The wines of Nino Negri are made in the Sfursat method, in which whole bunches of Nebbiolo dry in boxes.

and dry whole bunches in boxes before pressing the uber-concentrated berries into rich wines with layered structure. "This is a wine made with no technology," Drocco notes, "only tradition." Nino Negri produces two *Sfursat* di Valtellina wines: the *Sfursat* Carlo Negri, named after the winery's founder, and the *Sfursat* 5 Stelle, which is aged exclusively in barriques.

The Future of Valtellina

With a mission to garner broader attention for its home region, Nino Negri has taken strides toward distinguishing not just Valtellina as a whole, but the distinct subzones of the region, as well. The winery produces Valtellina Superiore cuvées that

more opportunities to highlight the great single vineyards of the region.

By drawing international focus to Valtellina's potential for world-class Nebbiolo, Drocco hopes to make additional investments in his second home and attract more local residents to work in the vineyards through pay increases. (Compared to the 200 man-hours required for the average wine region's harvest, Valtellina requires as many as 1,300, making it difficult to recruit workers.) Yet that has always been Nino Negri's goal: to elevate the status of Valtellina wines. After all, this may mark the start of a new chapter for Nino Negri, but the winery's story began long ago. *sj*