



## **Southern Italian Cult Wine: Q&A with Sergio Botrugno**

Mattie John Bamman (August 24, 2009)



Sergio Botrugno, winemaker at Botrugno Winery, keeps production down and quality high, gaining a small but fervent following around the world. At his winery in Brindisi, Italy, we discussed his winemaking philosophy and methodology.

For Sergio Botrugno, being a low-production winemaker in the south of Italy means having complete control. Every grape is grown under his supervision, his relationships with foreign distributors are created over years of conversations and dinners, and his wine's limited availability actually helps it in the global market: It's gained a cultish following in Germany and the Netherlands. The winery has a total of 44 hectares (109 acres) of vineyards, ten of which were purchased in the last year. Recently, Botrugno began distributing his Ottavianello in New York (see review below), a wine that greatly expresses the terroir of Puglia and embodies the uniqueness of Botrugno Winery.



The architecture of the winery is based on the concept of transparency, quite literally, and a significant portion is open to the elements. Located just a hundred feet from Brindisi Bay, the winery is constantly ventilated with the fresh salt air of the sea. Every wine Botrugno makes is made from grapes native to Puglia, and the vines grow along the sand shores of the Adriatic, sometimes right on the beach. The vines are called alberello: shrub-like vines that grow without trellises. This growing style has been used in Puglia for centuries. Recently, Zinfandel growers in Sonoma Valley have begun utilizing alberello, perhaps in part because Primitivo, one of Puglia's most important native grapes, is identical to Zinfandel.

The Greek root of Botrugno, botrus, means bunch of grapes. Sergio Botrugno, a third generation winemaker, grew up surrounded by wine. His family's livelihood was threatened, however, during WWII, when his father, Romolo Botrugno, was imprisoned by U.S. forces. When he was freed, Romolo Botrugno returned home to find his vineyards gone; but rather than lose heart, he immediately purchased new land, saving the family trade that Sergio Botrugno carries on today.

During my tour, Sergio Botrugno took me to the roof of the winery, from which the Adriatic Sea was visible—a natural location to discuss his approach to bringing out terroir in his wines.

**Mattie Bamman: What are your major concerns in the vineyards right now?**

Sergio Botrugno: It is very important to have control. We begin harvesting soon—first the Ottavianello, then Primitivo, then Negroamaro—and we don't want all of our grapes to mature at the same time because we won't have time to work them all. We want to track each individual vineyard's grapes—their juice and must—in order to preserve what is in the ground. This way we know what particular type of labor we must do.

**MB: What is characteristic of the terroir of your vineyards?**

SB: It is the basis of our logo. The triangle represents the three elements of our terroir: grape, ground, and vineyards. I use Malvasia Nera, Negroamaro, and Ottavianello because they are our grapes. Not Cabernet, Chardonnay, and so on, because, while these grapes make wonderful wines, you find them on every side of the world.

My Negroamaro are different than the Negroamaro of different regional wineries in Puglia. For example, my Negroamaro in Brindisi have a high acidity. And I know many people say that you cannot have this in the south of Italy, but the grapes start at 9 or 10 upgrade of acidity. It is very high. It is like Piedmont. If you go 20 kilometers to Cellino, you will find grapes that have 6 to 7 upgrade of acidity, and so these winemakers have a different kind of work because it is a different kind of terroir.

Another characteristic is that we have alberello Brindisino and alberello Pugliese, which are low shrubs and typical of our territory, and produce low yields of very good quality. The low shrubs produce 1-3 kilo from each plant. This promotes a good maturation of phenolic acids in the grape skins.

**MB: What do you think is the future of the Negroamaro grape?**

SB: I think that it offers the best opportunity for people to identify with the terroir of Puglia. Which is the most important thing.

**MB: What is particularly important for wine production in Brindisi?**

SB: That we work all along at very low temperatures. It allows us to preserve aromas and to extract all of the good substance from the skin. The maturation of the skin is very particular: To make a good wine, you don't need the juice, you need the substance of the skin.

**MB: What is one example of your gentle approach to winemaking?**



SG: It is possible for me to have a very high concentration with very good color, and this in turn allows me to use a long pre-fermentation, which gives the wine less color at the end but produces a great aroma. It is very important that what you find in the smell, you also find in the taste.

Another kind of work we do, which we are proud of, is a very natural form of carbonic maceration. We do it with our novello wines (young wines) made from Negroamaro, Malvasia Nera, and Ottavianello. While most people prefer to pump in carbonic dioxide, we use boxes filled with new must. The carbonic dioxide released from the new must completes the process. It takes longer, and my brother Antonio likes to say it is too much work, and it's true, it takes a long time, but it's worth it. If you have good maturation with carbonic maceration, you extract the good aromas. The Germans buy the novello Ottavianello in January, which I think is too early—but they like it so much, they can't wait.

**MB: What kind of barrels do you use to age your wines?**

SB: Where we store our wines is not a barrique-eria (barriques are French, oak barrels), but a cella vinaria, because long ago our ancestors did this kind of work. There is evidence that in the second century before Christ we had similar conditions. They did not have barrique, but bigger barrels, botti grandi. Now we work with new barrique, French and America, and we try to test and experiment because we are young in this work. It is beautiful for us when people ask: You have Negroamaro, a very particular grape; why do you use barrique? I use barrique because it is our tradition. We try to show that our Negroamaro can work in new conditions and have a longer maturation. The tastes may vary slightly, but it is Negroamaro, and that is what matters most. The only problem we have with our cella vinaria is that on hot days, when we come down we never want to go back up.

**MB: You recently acquired 10 more hectares of land. Do you plan to expand your distribution?**

SB: We have good situations in Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland right now. We are proud to say that during the last year, we began selling our wine in New York and Japan. This came about after multiple meetings over years, where we met with distributors and they tasted and examined our wines. It is important for us not to sell wine so much as to find a good partner.

**MB: What are some of the traditions that you want to maintain?**

SB: The first thing to understand is that our winery is in central Brindisi. In other situations, people say there are one or two days a year when their winery is open. Our slogan is "winery open year round." We want to show, every day, what we do, how we do it, and why. And if we do something that you do not understand, you can ask and we can explain. It is direct contact and satisfaction.

I know that it is possible to try harder, change, and experiment. I have my way, I know my way, but every year, I change my way. That is what real tradition is to me. I do not want a philosophy that will create an untraditional wine, and, simultaneously, I do not want to lose creativity. A Botrugno wine will always taste like a Botrugno wine: round and soft. I want to make drinking wines.

**Wine Review**

**Botrugno Winery 2007 Ottavianello (100% Ottavianello)**





exorbitant price, costing 15.99. The Ottavianello grape, better known as the French Cinsault, officially became a part of Italy's DOC wines in 1972. It has a long history in Puglia, but Botrugno is one of only a handful of wineries to use it. The 2007 Ottavianello is IGT rather than DOC because the Botrugno vineyard is south of the official DOC zone. The 2007 is medium bodied, dark and elegant: a very good year. Aromas of violets and chocolate open the wine. The wine is hot on the nose, but not in the mouth. Soft as lace with succulent juiciness and well balanced. Round and soft tannins make it superb for meat or salmon from the grill.

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