

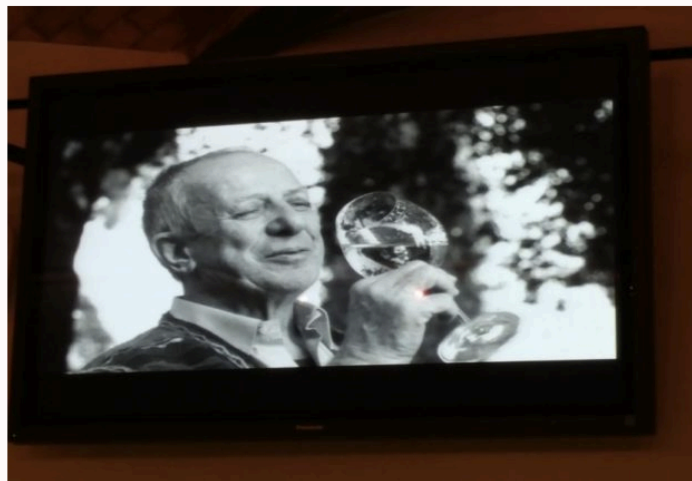
Luigi Veronelli: The Italian Wine Journalist Who Fought for Passion

In New York, a tribute to Veronelli who was infamous for his quotes that drove to the heart of what he cherished most about wine



New York State of Wine

by Cathrine Todd



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The legendary Italian journalist Luigi Veronelli was an highly educated man who stood by his principles to protect small winemakers, as well as artisanal products, around Italy; so much so that he was sentenced to prison twice and, in 1977, successfully stopped the national distribution of Coca-Cola in Italy for one day.

These days, it seems like I run into so many people who feel like their life is spinning out of control. Most people in the USA feel that they have to work more hours than their parents and they are earning less (when adjusted for inflation). As I walk down the streets of New York City, it seems that there are more vacant storefronts each week. Small business owners have more and more trouble surviving in this economic environment and soon, NYC will have nothing but banks and major chains lining even the once most neighborhood-y of streets.

Luigi Veronelli



1975 Emidio Pepe Montepulciano d'Abruzzo

A few weeks back, at the impressive *Astor Wines & Spirits* store and education center here in Manhattan, I attended a tribute to honor Luigi Veronelli (1926-2004), who was best-known as an Italian journalist. He was a self-described anarchist, an ardent activist, philosopher, poet, publisher and provocateur. Veronelli also starred in a television cooking show and was a defender of artisanal producers of wine, olive oil, and food in general. He fought for the little guy, trying to block the complete takeover of big corporations. So fierce in his convictions that Veronelli was, he was sentenced to prison twice and, in 1977, successfully stopped the national distribution of Coca-Cola in Italy for one day.

Many wine producers from all over Italy came to New York City for this event, just to pay tribute to this man. The famous Emidio Pepe, who showed the world that wine from Abruzzo could age, told his granddaughter Chiara, who was translating for him during this tribute, to not talk about the wine they were presenting in Veronelli's honor – 1975 Emidio Pepe Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. Instead this legendary producer wanted to talk about Luigi Veronelli, the man. Emidio made no bones about his passionate disagreements with Veronelli, but at least he was speaking to a highly educated, famous voice that never lost sight of the importance of small growers and he fiercely gave them his support.



Emidio Pepe with granddaughter Chiara

Luigi Veronelli was infamous for his quotes that drove to the heart of what he cherished most about wine; Emidio Pepe said that he would repeat one over and over again, "The smaller the estate, the tinier the vineyard, the more perfect the wine; it is all too easy to forget about the small growers, and this is a great injustice."

A Fight for Passion

Although many small Italian wineries had their desperate hour and gave up... the long hours and back breaking work, all to make small production high quality wine that no one was appreciating was sometimes too much. It was Luigi Veronelli who inspired many of these winemakers to stay true to their tradition, their vision, and their passion. Veronelli was the acclaimed figure who would not only spend years writing letters to several small producers giving the encouragement that they needed, but he, sometimes placing himself in deep trouble, would speak out for their rights. For example, he encouraged Barolo producers such as *Mauro* Mascarello to place the vineyard name, such as their 'Monprivato', on the top single vineyard's wine bottle labels. At the event, we were able to taste the 1970 vintage with his daughter Elena, the first vintage of the new single-vineyard, and as many Barolo connoisseurs know, it was one of the stars of the vintage. Mauro sent a barrel sample of this wine to Luigi Veronelli asking for his opinion – many of the producers trusted him with barrel samples – and he confirmed that it was "a champion" and it would live a glorious life. Of course it was controversial to some to place a "Grand Cru" name on a Barolo because it was not officially recognized, but today, it is deemed by many Barolo wine experts to be a top site.

When I thought I had already been taken away by the idealism of a man who walked the walk, Giuseppe Mazzocolin, owner of *Fattoria di Felsina*, entered the stage with his 1985 "Grand Cru" Fontalloro wine – a wine that Luigi Veronelli deemed to be the first "Grand Cru" of Castelnuevo Berardenga in Chianti Classico. He first started to describe the wine after being prompted to do so, but then his passion took over and he started to say with great intensity, "I am free if you are free... It's you and me... this is the personal relation... that is why it is possible to smell the wine... the wines of Veronelli were about the personalities involved!"

After this tribute, I left beaming with joy as electric currents of hope crackled up my spine. But before I left, I wanted to say goodbye to a New York City colleague; we talked about how remarkable it was that, at one time, a journalist could encourage the smaller producers to believe in their work, and most importantly, inspire his audience to invest in keeping artisanal products alive in Italy. My colleague said, "We think we have no control over what is going on in the world, but we do; we control it by what we buy and how we spend our money." It was a powerful reminder that it is not over for the little guys, and we can still actively fight the extinction of small independent shops and artisanal wines.

Cathrine's Recommendations

Astor Wines & Spirits in Manhattan, New York City, has bought Luigi Veronelli's wine cellar that included the wines from all the producers that he supported, such as some of the ones I mentioned. I thank them for inviting me as a guest journalist to participate in tasting wines from his cellar, with vintages that ranged from 1993 to 1964; these wines were living proof of one of Veronelli's greatest beliefs – one honors a great wine by aging it.

Also, we were given a copy of *Camminare La Terra*, a book about Luigi Veronelli, which is written in English as well as Italian.

Special Occasion Wine (from \$15 to \$50)

2015 Braidà, Barbera d'Asti, "Montebruna", Piedmont (Piemonte), Italy (\$27): 100% Barbera. Another favorite of Veronelli, this winery is spearheaded by Giacomo Bologna, a man who showcased the great potential of the Barbera variety. This should be added as a special occasion and an everyday wine since it delivers so much bang for your buck. This wine has generous flavors of black cherry and a lovely softness on the palate, with ripe fruit that balances out the high acidity. It is a juicy wine that pairs well with pasta and pizza, but also has enough concentration to drink on its own. During the tribute, we tasted Braidà's 1989 'Bricco dell'Uccellone' which was the wine that changed the perception of the Barbera variety. It still had lots of vitality and pristine fruit, with dried oregano and crumbly rock adding complexity.