



TRUSTING ALTESINO

*Elisabetta Gnudi Angelini is gently improving
one of Montalcino's best wineries*

BY MITCH FRANK // PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANDRO MICHAELLES



Since purchasing famed Montalcino producer Altesino in 2002, Elisabetta Gnudi Angelini has taken a hands-off approach to this pillar of the Tuscan wine industry, maintaining the estate's traditional style and devotion to quality.

Altesino has long been one of Montalcino's top producers. Founded in 1972, it is part of a small group of estates that helped bring Brunello to new levels of quality and prominence in the 1970s and '80s. Since the early 1990s, the estate has proved its greatness with a string of classic wines, all produced under the experienced eye of Claudio Basla, the only general manager the winery has known.

Costanti. "Altesino really does not need much more than pursuing the elegant style and quality that has always been its trademark."

Thirty years before Angelini visited Altesino, Basla was the outsider who came to see the property. At the time, he worked for Giulio Consonno, a Milanese businessman who owned a children's clothing company called Prenatal. In 1972, Consonno and Basla, who oversaw all of Prenatal's stores in northern Italy, were driving from Milan to Rome on a business trip when they stopped in Montalcino. Consonno fell in love with the area and bought several vineyards and a hilltop crowned with a brick villa built in the 15th century, the Palazzo Altesi.

Basla was put in charge of the operation, moving to Montalcino in 1975 for the first vintage. He had no prior experience in the wine industry, though he received significant help from consulting enologist Pietro Rivella (whose brother Ezio is also an enologist and was



Altesino's Montosoli vineyard, on a sloping hill just north of Montalcino, is one of the region's premier sites, producing a number of classic bottlings since the 1990s.

But in 2002, change was in the air for the first time in Altesino's history. The venerable producer was up for sale that year after the death of its original owner. One of the potential buyers was Elisabetta Gnudi Angelini, a businesswoman with a forceful personality, full of energy and passion, who had jumped headlong into the wine industry after successful careers in pharmaceuticals and film production. Over a period of just six years, she had purchased a winery in Chianti Classico as well as Caparzo, Altesino's next-door neighbor, and had made major changes at both estates. Undoubtedly, some people in Montalcino worried about what she might do if she got her hands on Altesino.

When she visited the property, she was greeted by Basla. "I've wanted to meet you," he said. "I was told you are terrible."

Today they both laugh about the meeting, because six years ago Basla quickly decided that Angelini was his favorite of the potential buyers. And since she sealed the deal that December, she has left Altesino in Basla's capable hands—a choice that underscores the trust and respect they have shown each other from the beginning. This mutual regard, in fact, has been the very basis of Altesino's ongoing success, as this celebrated estate now moves toward even greater heights.

"Elisabetta's best choice has been acquiring Altesino while leaving Claudio freedom," says Andrea Costanti, owner of Conti

the founding general manager of Banfi). But he learned quickly on the job. Today, Basla is weathered and tanned from long days among the vines. He has a soft smile and usually a glint in his eye, whether he's seriously discussing his vineyards or slyly cracking a joke.

At the time that Basla first arrived, Montalcino was one of the poorest hill towns in Tuscany, better known for its Moscadello dessert wine than for the big, 100 percent Sangiovese reds bottled at a handful of properties. "Thirty years ago, many vineyards were not taken care of, were not loved," says Basla. But a period of investment was beginning in Montalcino. With prices cheap compared with other top Tuscan appellations, several outsiders—many from Milan, Italy's financial capital—were buying land and vineyards in the area. A few years earlier, Nuccio Turone and a group of friends from Milan had bought the property on the next hill over from Altesino and called their winery Caparzo.

In the decade that followed, Altesino and Caparzo became known as leaders in the appellation. "Altesino was one of the first Brunellos to merge the true nature of Sangiovese in this *terroir* with an increased softness and drinkability," says Costanti.

Altesino's flagship wine is the single-vineyard Montosoli. The 1997 scored 98 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, while the 1995 and 2001 each earned 96 points. The estate's Brunello Riserva 1997 scored 95 points, and its two super Tuscans—a 100 percent

Sangiovese and a Sangiovese-Merlot-Cabernet blend, both aged in *barriques*—have also won outstanding scores. Overall, Altesino produces almost 17,000 cases of wine each vintage.

Despite the estate's many successes, however, Consonno didn't make new investments as he grew older and the vineyards and winery facilities started to show some age. When Consonno died in 2001, his son Afro made it clear that he had no interest in keeping the property. Angelini bought Altesino—including Basla's partial ownership share—for a reported \$25 million.

Angelini, 51, does not come from a winemaking family. She was raised in Rome, where her father, whose family was from Bologna, had settled as a pediatrician.

While studying business in school, she met a young man named Paolo Angelini, who lived in her grandmother's building. She was 20 when they married. Paolo's family owned *Farmaceutica Angelini*, Italy's largest pharmaceutical company. (Today, members of the family own three Tuscan wineries, including Val di Suga in Montalcino.) When Elisabetta was 22, she and Paolo moved to upstate New York to manage a resort hotel in the Catskills that his father had bought. When they returned to Rome a few years later, she began a 10-year stint helping run a film production company. She and Paolo had a son and a daughter, now 30 and 24.

In 1989, Paolo died in a car accident. When his father passed away four years later, Elisabetta became a member of the pharmaceutical firm's board, in charge of its general management and specifically focused on its food division. But she was already looking for a new career path. She sold her third of the company for an undisclosed sum in 1998.

Though Angelini has built a new, modern winery at Altesino, the Brunello is still aged in the old cellars underneath the palazzo (right). At her Chianti Classico estate Borgo Scopeto (below), meanwhile, she has carried out a major overhaul of the property.



"After pharmaceuticals, I said, the best drug is wine." She immersed herself fully in her new venture, attending university night-school classes in enology and agriculture. And she invested a lot of money. "A winery is like a wishing well you drop money into and hope to see again," she says. "Jesus! Between the vineyards and the cellar . . ."

"My dream was to come and live in the countryside," she says. "I am a lucky woman to have the chance in the middle of my life to choose what to do as I get older." Lucky, yes, but Angelini is hardly a woman just looking to spend the second half of her life relaxing under the Tuscan sun.

Caparzo was the first property she had her eyes on, but with ownership split between Turone and 12 other partners, it took two years of negotiations to finalize the sale. (Angelini finally closed the deal in 1998.) While she was waiting, she bought a Chianti Classico estate in 1997 called Borgo Scopeto. And two years later, she acquired 500 acres of land in Maremma, near the coast about 20 miles south of Grosseto, where she planted 175 acres of vineyards for a Morelino di Scansano she calls La Doga delle Clavule. She had originally looked at properties in Montepulciano, but her son loves Maremma wines and urged her to look there. Then when Altesino came on the market in 2002, she couldn't resist. "Altesino is like a little jewel," she says. "It's my baby."

Despite being new to the wine industry, Angelini made it clear at each of her first three properties that she was not afraid to shake things up. "It didn't intimidate me," she says. "I became a widow when my children were young—I raised my children all on my own. So usually I am laughing, but when I'm mad everyone knows it."

Angelini directly manages Scopeto, Caparzo and La Doga. At Scopeto, she completely overhauled the vineyards and the cellar and converted several of the old buildings into a 58-room hotel, moving the winery offices to her headquarters at Caparzo. She also hired a new winemaker for Scopeto, Simone Giunti. At Caparzo, she ended her contracts with consulting enologists. "I was so tired of all those wines that taste the same," she says. "If you taste the wines of [Carlo] Ferrini or [Riccardo] Cotarella, they taste so similar." She thinks they're well-made wines, but she was looking for something more distinctive. So she promoted her young assistant winemaker Massimo Bracalente to supervise winemaking both at Caparzo and at La Doga.

Standing in the bustling modern offices of Caparzo makes clear how different the estate is from its neighbor Altesino, which for decades was its rival.

Compared with Altesino's small cellars, Caparzo's winery is a large complex of tank rooms and barrel rooms. And Caparzo owns a lot of Tuscan vineyards—more than 200 acres. In addition to Brunellos, including the single-vineyard La Casa, whose vines sit just downhill from Montosoli, Caparzo produces several IGTs and low-priced varietal Tuscan wines that Turone and his partners added over the years, mostly from fruit in Caparzo vineyards outside of Montalcino. In total, the winery produces more than 32,000 cases of wine annually.

Angelini thinks Caparzo strayed from its primary purpose and plans to refocus on what she says the estate does best: Brunello and Rosso di Montalcino. She'll continue to make some lower-priced wines, but at La Doga. "The Maremma is a better source for easier wines like those," she says.

On the next hill over, at Altesino, things are much quieter. Since she bought the property, Angelini has kept Basla in charge, and enological consultants Rivella and Paolo Caciorgna still help him with the winemaking. But Angelini has made one significant addition. She brought in Guido Orzalesi, who previously managed a luxury travel consulting firm in Florence, to be Basla's right-hand man and the winery's sales and marketing director—her only hire since taking over.

"At Altesino, I have Claudio to watch over it—and Guido," says Angelini, a smile on her face as the two men listen. "They're bad boys, but they do a good job. If Claudio leaves his job in 100 years, Guido can take over." Orzalesi laughs and says, "Two hundred."

Today, Basla and Orzalesi oversee 86 acres of vines in four vineyards. The first lies below the palazzo, which sits on a hill 600 feet high just inside the northern boundary of the appellation, while two of the others lie on the southern, warmer side of the town. The fourth, Montosoli, is just north of Montalcino, the slanted top of a hill that is easy to see since it catches sunlight like a solar panel. But because the vineyard lies on the north side of town, it cools down at night.

"The differences [between the vineyards] are very big," says Basla. "In the south part of Montalcino, you have good wines in average vintages. In good vintages, when you have lots of sun and little rain, the north side is much better." Then he smiles. "At Montosoli, the wine is always very good, and in good vintages it is exceptional."

Asked why, he responds, "We haven't figured out which is most important—the microclimate, the soil or the clones. In the '70s, we just planted the vineyard and then discovered it was great."

While Basla hasn't altered many of his techniques in the vineyards, Angelini has invested significantly in replanting them, in order to use better grape clones and to double the density of the plantings. At Montosoli, Basla is increasing the density, but using the clone that already grows at the site. He doesn't know what it is, but he thinks it's particularly good—with leaves and bunches that grow farther out, allowing for better sun and air circulation—as long as it's grown at Montosoli. He tried planting the clone in his other vineyards, but it just didn't behave in the same way.

The other major investment that Angelini made was to build a new cellar. Carved into the side of the hill below the palazzo, the big fermentation room is filled with gleaming stainless-steel tanks, which were first used for the 2007 vintage. One of the more remarkable



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Long-time general manager Claudio Basla (left) and marketing director Guido Orzalesi (right)—the one hire Angelini has made—have overseen Altesino's ongoing success.

things about Altesino's track record of quality wines is that Basla and his team have been fermenting the wines in fiberglass-coated vats; many other top wineries in Montalcino shifted to steel years ago, with some even moving to oak fermentors.

Basla is the first to admit that fiberglass was not ideal. "The temperature control was not so precise, so we controlled it by doing lots of pump-overs to try and keep the temperature between 30° C and 32° C [86° F to 89° F]," he says. "Now with the new cellar, it will be constant. This is the temperature where you extract the best flavors from the skins."

Alcoholic fermentation of the Brunello takes 10 to 15 days. Basla tries to start malolactic fermentation in the tank, then moves the wine to big Slavonian oak casks called *botti*. While Basla uses French oak *barriques* for the super Tuscans—and to age a small percentage of the Montosoli for a few months—he shies away from aging the rest of his Brunello in them. "The *barrique* is boring," he says. "Brunello is a very masculine wine, so it needs more strong tannins—not the sweet tannins you find in *barriques*."

"[Basla is] afraid the *barrique* will make his wines like everyone else's," says Angelini. While she doesn't have any opposition to super Tuscans or more modern styles of wine, she doesn't believe in changing what Altesino does best. "Altesino is very traditional," she says. "It doesn't follow fashions. You have the best piece of land in Montalcino—Montosoli—why should we change the wine? We have a jewel, something unique." □

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BONUS VIDEO: Altesino owner Elisabetta Gnudi Angelini shares her thoughts about taking over the esteemed estate. Meet her at www.winespectator.com/043008.