



Winery Profile
LA MIRAJA

Nestled within the original castle of Castagnole Monferrato, La Miraja was constructed as an armory in the 11th century, only to be retrofitted as a cellar in the 1400s. In this armory-turned-cellar, Eugenio Gatti, a seventh-generation viticulturist, turns out Barbera, Grignolino, Freisa, and his fabled Ruché. His oldest Ruché plantings are located in the famed Majole vineyard, one of the first sites in Castagnole Monferrato where the grape was planted with the intention of producing single-varietal wines. Majole was replanted in the 1970s, and its Ruché vines rank among the oldest in the world. This has long been considered the top site of Castagnole Monferrato—the epicenter of Ruché production and the first of seven villages granted permission to produce single-varietal Ruché under the DOCG. La Miraja (pronounced “me-rye-uh”) is tiny by any measure, comprising less than 4 hectares under vine. It is here that Eugenio devotes his life’s work to producing roughly 2,500 transcendent cases of wine each year. Harnessing his years of experience working in wineries and distilleries across Italy, he imbues his wines with a haunting purity and a simple elegance.

Castagnole Monferrato holds the honor of being the birthplace of Ruché. This grape is a unique red variety found primarily in the rolling hills northwest of the town of Asti, where only seven villages hold the distinction of producing wines under the DOCG. Closest to Castagnole Monferrato, silt and loam soils rich in calcium carbonate are predominant. These soils produce wines of breathtaking fragrance and fine structure. Farther to the southeast, the soils grow richer in clay and adopt a reddish hue. In the 1960s, the parish priest of Castagnole Monferrato, Don Giacomo Cauda, fell in love with Ruché and devoted his life’s work to rescuing it from extinction. Father Cauda pushed his parishioners to produce single-varietal Ruché, thereby ushering in the rebirth of this ancient vine.

Ampelographers have discovered that Ruché is, in fact, the genetic offspring of the red grape Croatina and the now extinct white grape Malvasia Aromatica di Parma, also known as Malvasia Odorosissima and often compared to Moscato Bianco. Croatina yields a hearty, peppery red wine produced from northeastern Piedmont through southern Lombardy to northern Emilia Romagna. When crossed with Malvasia Aromatica di Parma, the resultant Ruché sports a wild nose redolent of violet, rose, iris, jasmine, cardamom, white pepper, and perhaps most surprisingly for a red wine, lychee.

Beyond Ruché, Eugenio focuses a great deal of his time and energy on Grignolino, an ancient red variety native to the Monferrato Hills of Piedmont. Grignolino was the favored red wine of the Savoy aristocracy in the thirteenth century, prized for its light color and elegant mouthfeel. In the latter half of the 1800s, these wines often matched or exceeded the price of Barolo bottlings. The grape name was likely derived from the word “grigné,” which is the local dialect for the pips, or grape seeds. Grignolino is rare among its fellow wine grape cultivars in that it has multiple pips per berry. In addition, the thin, delicate skins of the berry pose a challenge for winemakers aspiring to pull as much color from the skins as possible while avoiding the extraction of oftentimes harsh, green tannins from the pips. Accomplishing this oenological hat trick can result in brilliantly aromatic and brightly acidic expressions of Grignolino. On the nose, Bing cherry, raspberry, rose hip, geranium, and mushroom abound. Although Grignolino is particularly suited to hot summer days, locals drink these wines through the winter. Typically chilled before serving, this wine makes for a great “winter rosé.”

The 2019 vintage marked La Miraja’s inaugural bottling of Freisa, an ancient red variety native to Piedmont. An offspring of Nebbiolo, Freisa was historically used to augment the already noble structure



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of Nebbiolo wines thanks to the former's thick skin. Resistant to disease, the grape was often planted in less desirable spots, but when planted in optimal positions in the Asti province, Freisa wines sing with juicy strawberry and sour cherry. The grape variety's name comes from the Latin *fresia*, meaning strawberry, and one sip makes this association clear, recalling freshly baked strawberry-rhubarb pie with a dash of white pepper.

Another constant of Eugenio's annual production is Barbera d'Asti Superiore, a pure expression of Piedmont's most prolific and lovable grape variety. Documents from the 1200s celebrate this red grape, long appreciated for its vigor and robust production. Barbera's birthplace lies in the hills of Monferrato, known for its calcareous-clay soils. The high-acid, low-tannin wines of Barbera have long been a favorite of both locals and international consumers due to their approachability. Eugenio's bottling is a textbook example of Barbera from Asti, where the grape often realizes its most complex expressions. Its fantasy name, Le Masche, recalls local spirits believed to be protectors of the vineyard. Their origins can be found in the Celtic and Lombard civilizations who once occupied the region now known as Piedmont. "Masche" were benevolent witches known for their herbal remedies and healing powers, though the term was also extended to describe the mischievous spirits and supernatural entities who lurked in the villages and the taverns of the area.

Eugenio is steadfast in his dedication to cultivating the native red varieties of Asti. One delightful exception is his small-production Chardonnay, which he sources from a trusted friend in Castagnole Monferrato. Thanks to his close relationship with local growers, he has assumed farming responsibilities for several old-vine parcels. This helps families to retain possession of hereditary lands while guaranteeing their upkeep by a faithful custodian of their precious grapevines. Eugenio's vineyards are farmed organically, and all fruit is harvested by hand. His production methods are low intervention; specifically, the fruit is gently crushed by basket press and then fermented in stainless-steel tanks with indigenous yeasts. Both Grignolino and Ruché rest for several months in cement tanks following primary fermentation. Freisa, meanwhile, rests briefly in stainless steel prior to bottling, while Barbera enjoys one full year in neutral French barrels. All of Eugenio's wines are bottled without any fining or filtration.

On top of being a seventh-generation viticulturist and winemaker, Eugenio has worked for multiple distilleries in Piedmont, a region famous for its aromatic liqueurs. The distiller's meticulous attention to the preservation of botanical aromatics is evident in his wines. Eugenio's version of Chinato, a digestivo composed of a red wine blended with a botanically-infused neutral grape spirit, uses Ruché as its base grape as opposed to the traditional Nebbiolo-based Barolo, presenting a charming, aromatic twist on the traditional recipe.

When not hard at work in his vineyards or the cellar, Eugenio can be found preparing to open up his home and the winery to guests at his agriturismo-style restaurant each Saturday. In addition to homemade salumi and fresh tajarin pasta with white truffles, his ebullient Belarusian wife, Luba, will insist on a shot of artisanal vodka from her native lands to whet your appetite for all things La Miraja.