



Decanter

Ruché: A Piedmontese secret

Promotional feature

Decanter Staff





"If someone in Castagnole Monferrato offers you Ruché, it's because he wants to spend time with you": the sign at the town's entrance is an invitation for wine lovers to visit the places in the area in search of this rare grape. The Castagnole locals will welcome you with their greatest treasure, the wine which was traditionally drunk at festivals and special occasions. The red that, besides the flavours and aromas, and beyond drinking for drinking's sake, reveals their very soul. It is no coincidence that a country priest was the first to make wine purely from this grape, then bottle, sell and promote it.

Castagnole Monferrato, the home of Ruché, is in the deep countryside of Piedmont, a region famous for its wines. We are in Monferrato, a world heritage wine-growing landscape since 2011. Perched on a ridge about 230 metres high, the town is surrounded by an amphitheatre of lush hills. All the most beautiful Alpine peaks can be seen from here: Monviso, Monte Rosa, the Matterhorn, and Mont Blanc. The town's name recalls the once abundant chestnut forests (Castagna = chestnut) of the area, now replaced by vineyards.

Ruché di Castagnole DOCG in numbers

Vine-planted area: 148 hectares

Production: about 870,000 bottles

Producers: 26

Export: 35%

This is a place where time has stood still, where nature dictates life's rhythms. An area brimming with biodiversity where woods, arable land, meadows, vineyards and farmsteads dot the gentle hills. Besides Castagnole, there are six other villages that produce Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG: Grana, Montemagno, Portacomaro, Refrancore, Scurzolengo and Viarigi. Each municipality has its own peculiarities in terms of soil, history and culture. All have a castle and church: contrasting temporal and ecclesiastical powers.

The seven municipalities form a small wine-producing district within the Monferrato Astigiano zone on the left bank of the Tanaro river. The hill slopes are rocky. The deep soils of low permeability, are originally alluvial with fossil deposits (the area was once covered by sea). Generally speaking, the soil composition is predominantly loam with sand and clays. The subsoil has a chalk vein (and in fact, one of Italy's largest chalk quarries is located in this area).



Local differences in soil and style

At Castagnole Monferrato, the soil structure is silty-loam with calcium carbonate, the earth is almost white and produces wines with fragrant aromas (Ruché grapes smell of roses) and good structural balance. Saint Euphemia hill, an authentic natural spectacle, is a must-see. In terms of soil composition, Scurzolengo is quite similar to Castagnole Monferrato, while going towards Portacomaro, it becomes looser, producing extremely aromatic but less structured wines.

Heading towards Montemagno and Grana, there is more clay and the soil becomes brown. The wines here are stronger and more structured both in colour and tannins and take longer to refine and express their fragrances. At Refrancore we find red clay soils interspersed among Asti sands producing tendentially smaller, more concentrated and less aromatic grapes. The guyot-trained vineyards are at altitudes ranging from approximately 230 to 280 metres.

The grape

Little is known about the Ruché vine and its origins. It appears to have been cultivated on the Monferrato hills, particularly around Castagnole, its area of choice, since the Middle Ages. The Ruché origins and its name are veiled in mystery: some hypothesize that the name comes from the vineyards' vicinity to a now non-existent Benedictine monastery dedicated to Saint Roch. Or that its roots derive from the Italian verb *arroccarsi* which describes how the vines cling to the steep landscape. Or even that the vine was imported during the 12th century by Cistercian monks from Burgundy, but this theory was proved wrong by a study of the Ruché's DNA in 2016 which closely relates it to two typically northern Italian vines, Croatina and the now extinct *Malvasia Aromatica* from Parma.



History – priestly beginnings

Ruché was once used for celebrations and probably also during mass, but it was beginning to disappear. Its modern history began in 1964 with the arrival of Don Giacomo Cauda as the parish priest in Castagnole Monferrato. He found some rows of Ruché among the parish vineyards and decided to bottle wine made purely from Ruché grapes. He designed the “Ruché del Parroco” label depicting an angel with open wings. For years Ruché continued to go under that name and label. With the help of Lidia Bianco, the Mayor of Castagnole Monferrato, this priest-cum-wine producer brought fame and fortune to the territory.

In the ‘80s, the Ruché phenomenon started to pick up: other producers cultivated it and it became popular on the market. It achieved DOC status in 1987 and DOCG in 2010. “Ruché del Parroco” became “Vigna del Parroco”, and ended up in the hands of the producer Luca Ferraris in 2016. Nowadays, “Vigna del Parroco” is the only cru site recognized by the Ministry and has a priceless patrimony of clones. Luca Ferraris, wine producer and President of the Ruché Producers’ Association, is so passionate about this grape that he has become its ambassador in Italy and abroad (his is, in fact, the family-run company with the most hectares of Ruché). The Ruché Producers’ Association, formalized in 2015 after evening meetings had been going on since 2001, groups together 95% of the area’s producers and was established to promote this rare gem, which it also does with a three-day Ruché grape festival.

“Ruché”, says Luca Ferraris, “was the area’s redemption. With the economic boom that spanned the 1950s and ‘60s, this unique native grape was at risk of extinction. However, Ruché has brought the world to discover the Monferrato Astigiano region and it has become the backbone of the local economy. And will be even more so in the future.” Filippo Mobrìci, President of the Barbera, Vini d’Asti and Monferrato Consortium agrees and adds: “In 2009 there were 73 hectares of Ruché compared to the current 135, producing about 300,000 bottles compared to today’s 835,000. Thanks to the enterprise of a small group of producers, this area is now a success story – it has grown in fame, value and number of hectares under cultivation, bringing hope to areas that had become depopulated and creating value for everyone.”



Ruché – style and food-pairing

Ruché produces red grapes with a mid to early ripening. They accumulate sugars well and, despite the low acidity, retain a good share of malic acid that gives the wine freshness. The main characteristic of the grapes is the wealth of polyphenolic substances, mainly tannins, that generate the wine's structure.

Semi-aromatic, it has good alcoholic potential. The taste is unique and particular, averagely structured and generous. The olfactory notes are of faded rose, violet and spices and the taste is reminiscent of blackberry, raspberry and ripe plums, with hints of spice, such as black pepper. Although a 10% blend with Brachetto and/or Barbera grapes is legally allowed, the wine produced is usually pure Ruché.

The wine is an ideal companion for mature or blue cheeses and suitable for local Piedmontese dishes such as agnolotti (ravioli-type filled pasta), finanziaria (an offal-based dish) and main courses featuring game. Succulence, softness and olfactory depth make it easy to combine with highly aromatic and spicy foods such as ginger. It therefore goes well with oriental cuisine and piquant dishes. Its versatility makes it a cosmopolitan wine.

Alessandra Piubello's top wines

Cantine Sant'Agata, Pro Nobis, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy
2015 92

£26 Mondial Wines

Captivating, wide and intense olfactory range. Dense, palpable potential, well-balanced in the sip. Energetic and widespread tactile impression, galloping progression and lengthy, elegant closure on dark spices.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 14.5%

Ferraris Agricola, Vigna Del Parroco, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2017 91

£26 Gastro Nicks Ltd

Complex, choral nose with distinctive traits (ginseng, rose, mulberries, tobacco and chalky hints). Evocative depth in the texture that reverberates in the mouth on a full sip, sculptured in filigree.

Drink 2019-2025



Montalbera, La Tradizione, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2017

91

£16 Astrum Wine Cellars

Fragrant roses hiding in a glass with an echo of inviting sweetness. Petals to crush on the palate, aroma and delicacy together. Pure juiciness, a delicious tempting drink.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 14%

Garrone, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2017

90

£14

Fine, yet still muffled, olfactory profile: bound to astound in time. Dense, vertical, tasty mouth. Weightless power, transmitting bright energy and persistent extension with crunchy fruit beating the rhythm.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 14.5%

Bersano, San Pietro Realto, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato Docg, Piedmont, Italy 2018

90

£14

Distinctive varietal talent (rose, geranium leaf, cherry) with a spicy beat. Pulsing and fresh mouth; development on the palate is tasty, dynamic and vital. Darting and slightly tense finale.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 14.5%

Caldera, Prevost, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2017

89

£17

Fine, typical aromatic phrasing (unusual reminder of ginseng root), the integral expressive naturalness is striking. Full of character and impressive on the palate, flaunting dynamic vivacity and a soft finale.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 14.5%



Crivelli, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2017

89

£16

Inebriating olfactory timbre (geranium and wild berries on a bed of roses). Enthralling drink due to energy, power and fullness, the faintly warm opening softens and closes with slight bitterness.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 14.5%

La Miraja, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2018

88

£12

A little patience is needed to capture the spicy peppered traits that emit the typical fragrance of rose. Composed, sober, fresh and profound sip, given rhythm by slightly piquant tannins.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 14%

Tommaso Bosco, Oltrevalle, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2017

87

£16

Intense olfactory impact, with hints of violet, raspberry, a touch of pepper. Serious and profound sip that develops with vigorous elegance and tannins that are present and tasty.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 15.5%

Capuzzo Renato, Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2017

87

£14

Decisively produced Ruché that expresses the personality of the grape and the vocation of its origin. Direct and sincere, it welcomes with brotherly arms, calibrating structure and lightness.

Drink 2019-2023

Alc 14.5%