



{SELF-MADE}
ITALY'S QUEEN OF WINE

SUBJECT: *Elisabetta Geppetti*, owner of Fattoria le Pupille, a top Italian winery
TASK: Obtain subject's views on success and sexism.



NEARLY 30 YEARS AGO, a young woman named Elisabetta Geppetti set out on a single-minded task: to create some of Italy's finest red wine. She set herself a double challenge. Not only was Italian winemaking dominated by men, but the area where her family farm was based, the southern Maremma in Tuscany, was an agrarian backwater, home to sheep farms and olive groves, but no serious vineyards. Despite the naysayers, Geppetti is now creating one of Italy's flagship wines, Saffredi, from her winery at Fattoria le Pupille (above right).

Saffredi receives accolades and appears on fine wine lists all over the world – it is a remarkable red that is at once powerful and delicate, rich and heady, and also structured and fine – and her other wines have also helped put her home region on the map.

Geppetti's success is all the more outstanding because when she started, nobody thought you could grow fine wine in her area. Some of Italy's famous reds, like Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, were grown some 80km (50 miles) to the north; but the southern Maremma made, at best, basic table reds for consumption by the local sheep farmers. At *Journal*, we wanted to find out what it takes for a young farm girl to turn into a global wine star.

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Journal: When you started out, the area around Fattoria le Pupille was considered

unsuitable for fine wine. Why did you decide to start your winery there?

Elisabetta Geppetti: It was a sort of bet, because all the people at that time, the start of the Eighties, thought of the Maremma as a place for sheep farming and making milk and cheese. They called it cowboy land. People didn't imagine you could make great wine there. I wanted to prove them wrong.

J: So why did you think you would prove them wrong?

EG: Because it was an unbelievable area, with a great climate for wine – cold winters and warm, sunny summers with hot days; but the temperature drops at night, which allows grapes to reach harvest season without too much stress. It's near the sea, which has a beneficial effect on ripening, and the soil is special, too. I knew it had the potential to be top-quality *terroir* for wine.

J: What were the main challenges?

EG: It was a very difficult place to start out, you can't imagine. Lots of the local farms didn't even have electricity then, the roads were unpaved, and I was a young woman in a man's world. It was a struggle to make myself heard.

J: Even in your own vineyard?

EG: Yes. For example, I knew that to make better wine, you needed to prune some of the grapes, so that the other grapes could reach optimal ripeness. So you needed to make less wine, but better. They didn't trust me; they thought I was just a young woman

who didn't know anything. But I argued, I fought – I was very determined.

J: And when you made the wine, you still had to sell it. How did that work?

EG: That was another fight, another series of struggles! First I would present the wine to journalists at tastings, and they weren't interested because they didn't think you could make good wines in this area. Also, it was important for me to get on the very best wine lists, so I travelled across Italy taking bottles with me and calling in on restaurants, and I found a lot of locked doors in front of me. It wasn't easy at all! People weren't interested in my wines. But when they tasted them, they were astonished. And, step by step, people started to trust me and hear about the wine, and the word spread.

J: Did you ever get disillusioned through all the times you had doors slammed in your face?

EG: No. I always knew that this was a great place, and that we were making great wine. It was a passion for me, not only to produce the wine, but to put the area on the map. I was young, I had no children, I really threw myself into it.

J: And when did it start getting easier?

EG: The year 2000 was important for my area; other people started investing in vineyards, and I decided it was time to invest in outside PR, sales and marketing, to spread the word to journalists and opinion-formers in wine around the

world. That was also the start of the time when our wines started getting good international publicity. [All the vintages of flagship wine Saffredi since 2001 have received an outstanding 92 points or more out of 100 from the US's influential *Wine Spectator* magazine; see graphic, below right.]

J: What's the secret of making a great wine?

EG: First, you have to choose exactly the right place to plant your vines. Then, when they are producing quality grapes [typically after 10 years], you work very, very hard in the vineyard during the growing season [spring and summer]. You need to examine your vines every day and prune them perfectly. And then you have to choose exactly the right day on which to harvest. This is such an important decision every year. Just two or three days either way can make an enormous difference to a wine. You have to choose the right kind of wooden *barriques* to age the wine in as well: do you want them to be more or less heavily toasted, and what area do you want them to come from? Then, once it is ageing in the barrels, you need to taste it very, very frequently. Wine is like a child: the first three years are so important for its life.

J: Do you think of yourself as a businesswoman primarily?

EG: This has been more than a business for me. It has been a life choice, because I started so young with a single aim. And success has been built on 25 years dedicated completely to this.

J: Do you take pride in being a successful woman in the world of wine?

EG: Nowadays, there are so many important wines in Italy, and around the world, made by women. It was different when I started.

J: What are the key qualities that led you to succeed?

EG: Passion, dedication, determination, and producing a quality product and then marketing it to spread the word.

J: So, you have succeeded in what you set out to do: not only have you produced a wine admired by connoisseurs around the world, you have helped put your home region on the world wine map. Is it time to hang up your tasting glass?

EG: No... my next challenge is to produce a high-quality white wine. There's lots of light white wine produced in this area, and our own has been a great success, but now I want to make something more serious and important. Something that will be recognised as a great white.

J: Do you have anything we can taste?

EG: I'm still working on it! ☺

ANALYSIS: DARLUS SANAL. PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF FATTORIA LE PUPILLE

HIGH FIVE TOP WOMEN IN WINE

JANCIS ROBINSON

Wine adviser to the Queen, Financial Times wine critic and the Oxford Companion to Wine Editor, she also runs the authoritative jancisrobinson.com.

JANE MACQUITTY

No-nonsense wine critic of The Times and author of the Pocket Guide to Australian and New Zealand Wines.

LALOU

Winemaker at the fabled

Domaine de la Romanée-Conti in Burgundy (price: £1,000 a bottle), before running her own biodynamic estate, Domaine Leroy.

ANNE-CLAUDE

LEFLAIVE Owner of Domaine Leflaive, makers of supreme white Burgundies that can retail for up to thousands of pounds a bottle.

HELEN TURLEY

One of California's best winemakers, she brought the wines of Sir Peter Michael to worldwide fame, and now runs another cult Californian winery, Marcassin.



Wine by numbers

SAFFREDI RATINGS

Ratings in points out of 100 by *Wine Spectator* magazine and US wine critic Robert Parker.

YEAR	RATING	
	WINE SPECTATOR	ROBERT PARKER
2001	94	93
2002	92	89
2003	92	91
2004	97	95
2005	92	91
2006	94	96

VINTAGE RATINGS

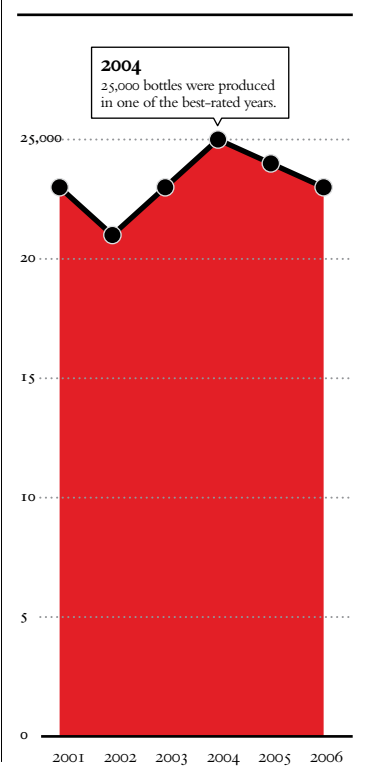
Ratings out of 10 for Tuscan vintages by British wine writer Hugh Johnson.

YEAR	RATING
2001	7.5
2002	5.5
2003	7.0
2004	8.0
2005	7.0
2006	8.5



PRODUCTION

Number of bottles of Saffredi flagship wine produced since 2001.



SOURCE: FATTORIA LE PUPILLE; HUGH JOHNSON