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### Antonio Galloni

#### Le Pupille: A Complete Retrospective 1987-2007

May 2011

2007	Le Pupille Saffredi	95
2006	Le Pupille Saffredi	96
2005	Le Pupille Saffredi	93+
2004	Le Pupille Saffredi	96
2003	Le Pupille Saffredi	92
2002	Le Pupille Saffredi	92
2001	Le Pupille Saffredi	90
2000	Le Pupille Saffredi	94
1999	Le Pupille Saffredi	92
1998	Le Pupille Saffredi	90
1997	Le Pupille Saffredi	90
1995	Le Pupille Saffredi	91
1994	Le Pupille Saffredi	88
1993	Le Pupille Saffredi	92
1992	Le Pupille Saffredi	80
1991	Le Pupille Saffredi	92
1990	Le Pupille Saffredi	94
1989	Le Pupille Saffredi	93
1988	Le Pupille Saffredi	93
1987	Le Pupille Saffredi	85
2007	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	92
2006	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	92
2005	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	91
2004	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	92
2003	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	90
2002	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	91
2001	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	92
2000	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	88
1999	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	90
1998	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	89
1997	Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano Poggio Valente	93

Le Pupille has been on tear of late. I can't think of too many estates that have made such a significant leap in quality over the last few years. This vertical of the flagships Saffredi and Poggio Valente provided a fascinating look at Le Pupille's history and development over the years. I admire proprietor Elisabetta Geppetti's willingness to show every vintage of her two top wines, which is pretty rare in a day and age where producers tend to cherry pick their best vintages for tastings like this one. As good as many of the wines are, there is a major improvement in quality and consistency across the board beginning in 2000.

Le Pupille is located in the south of the Tuscan Maremma, in the province of Grosseto, a region best known for the Sangiovese-based Morellino di Scansano. Geppetti's first vintage was 1985. At the time, Le Pupille was a small winery with just 6 hectares of vineyards and was really more of a hobby than a pure commercial venture. The family had close ties with Giacomo Tachis, who suggested grafting Cabernet Sauvignon onto existing Sangiovese rootstocks. The first Saffredis (1987-1990) were 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from the original estate's original vineyard holdings. Malolactic fermentation took place in barrel and the wine was aged in 100% new oak. Some of the early vintages remain brilliant, even if the oak is a bit overwhelming.

Geppetti planted the Saffredi vineyard proper in 1986 with a combination of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Alicante, Maremma's version of Grenache. Tachis continued to oversee winemaking until 1997. Riccardo Cotarella made the wines from 1997 to 1999. For whatever the reasons, this is not a particularly distinguished period in the estate's history. The wines from the 1990s are in general less interesting than more recent vintages. It's almost as if the elegant and rustic elements of the wines are at battle with each other in these years.

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Quality and consistency increased noticeably when Christian Le Sommer, former winemaker at Chateau Latour, took over winemaking with the 2000 vintage. Le Sommer introduced malolactic fermentation in steel, which is one of the reasons the post-2000 wines retain incredible freshness, aromatic complexity and nuance. With the 2004 vintage, Alicante was replaced with Syrah. Geppetti's view is that Alicante at times conferred a rustic element to the wines. It's hard to argue with her on that point. From about 2004 onwards, Saffredi has made another major move and is now among the very finest wines being produced anywhere in Italy. Some of that may be related to the elimination of Alicante in the blend, but also the increased age of the vineyards and greater attention to cooperage are all positive factors in the evolution of the wine. Today Saffredi is aged for 15-18 months in 100% new barrels, but the oak is rarely felt. Recent vintages have been nothing less than brilliant.

Poggio Valente is mostly Sangiovese, with some Merlot and a small percentage of Alicante. The wine undergoes malolactic fermentation in steel and is aged in French oak barrels (50% new) for 12-15 months, depending on the year. Geppetti purchased Poggio Valente in 1996. The vineyard was planted predominantly with Sangiovese plus some Alicante. Substantial work was required to get the vineyard in shape. Geppetti replanted half of the 15 hectares and replaced the existing Alicante with Merlot. The younger vineyards were used for the first time in 2006. With the addition of the new plots, the presence of Alicante has dropped significantly as a percentage of the final blend.

The **2007 Saffredi** is drop-dead gorgeous. Roasted coffee beans, grilled herbs, mocha and dark fruit emerge from this beautiful, textured wine. The richness of the fruit radiates through to the long, polished finish. The 2007 Saffredi impresses for its fabulous balance and soft, enveloping personality. It is another superb effort from proprietor Elisabetta Geppetti. Anticipated maturity: 2014-2027. The **2006 Saffredi** is the bombastic, kaleidoscopic wine it has always been. In fact at times it resembles a barrel sample, given its superb vibrancy and freshness! Dark wild cherries, herbs, graphite, spices, tobacco and leather come together beautifully in this focused, powerful Saffredi. Today the 2006 is decidedly virile and youthful, but there is no doubt it has the sheer depth of material to drink beautifully to age 20, and likely beyond. The 2006 is a marvelous Saffredi, but patience is required. Anticipated maturity: 2014-2026.

The **2005 Saffredi** is a revelation. Talk about a wine that has developed far better than I had ever hoped. A lightweight feminine wine when it was released two years ago, the 2005 Saffredi has grown into a rich, dark red packed with fruit. The 2005 doesn't have the character or complexity of the finest vintages but it has more than enough depth to drink well for many years. This is a fabulous wine from a slightly lesser vintage that has the potential to continue to improve from here. Pretty floral notes linger on the impeccable finish. Anticipated maturity: 2013-2025. The **2004 Saffredi** is utterly captivating. Dried roses cherries, berries and sweet spices emerge from the glass as the wine reveals its gorgeous inner fragrance. The 2004 isn't the most powerful or rich Saffredi, rather it conquers the palate and intellect with inimitable finesse. The silkiness of the tannins, expressiveness of the bouquet and sheer purity of the fruit all have much in common with the finest 2004 Barolos. In short, this is a magical bottle readers should not be without. The 2004 is the first Saffredi in which Alicante was replaced with Syrah. Anticipated maturity: 2014-2029.

The **2003 Saffredi** is an excellent choice for drinking today and over the next few years. The heat of the vintage comes through in the wine's richness but there is plenty of acidity and structure to guarantee a number of years of very fine drinking. Stylistically, the 2003 is rather extroverted, particularly in its up-front, jammy fruit, yet all of the elements come together beautifully in the glass. Scorched earth, worn-in leather and spices add considerable complexity to this superb, pedigreed Saffredi. In 2003 Saffredi is more interesting than the estate's Poggio Valente, much of which can be attributed to Cabernet's greater ability withstand the rigors of the excessively hot growing season. Anticipated maturity: 2013-2023. I had high hopes for Geppetti's **2002 Saffredi** after being bowled over by the 2002 Poggio Valente. I was not disappointed. The 2002 is a gorgeous, powerful wine laced with dark red fruit, sweet herbs, spices, white truffles and worn-in leather. The 2002 shows marvelous intensity in the lithe, focused style of the year. Notes of mint and crushed flowers add the final layers of complexity. I am not sure the 2002 Saffredi will be as long-lived as the Poggio Valente, but it remains one of the handful of successes in this challenging vintage. The 2002 really blossoms in the glass, so readers should give the wine plenty of air. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2018.

The **2001** is vibrant, rich and expansive, with gorgeous layers of dark cherries in liqueur, menthol, tobacco, leather and licorice. The wine flows with great intensity all the way through to the enveloping, sensual finish. The 2001 appears to be at the early part of its drinking window. Both bottles I tasted showed elements of rusticity, particularly in the bouquet, that worsened with air. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2021. The **2000** is another wow wine. Sensual and elegant through and through, the 2000 emerges from the glass with tons of ripe dark fruit, crushed flowers, raspberries, earthiness, worn-in leather and licorice. It possesses marvelous depth and intensity in its fruit, but with a level of complexity and nuance in the bouquet that completes the wine in magnificent style. The round, enveloping finish makes it impossible to resist a second taste. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2020.

The **1999 Saffredi** is an immensely gratifying wine. It could almost be mistaken for a Burgundy, so pure and sweet is the bouquet. The 1999 is a decidedly understated, graceful Saffredi that impresses for its elegance and finesse rather than for its heft. Hints of French oak, smoke, autumn leaves, tar and tobacco add the final layers of complexity. I am not sure the 1999 has much upside from here, but it should continue to drink well for another decade. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2020. The **1998** impresses for its considerable richness. Like so many Italian wines of this period, the 1998 Saffredi shows a determined attempt to extract as much concentration as possible. There is no arguing the wine has aged exceptionally well, but in

hindsight many of the subtler nuances Saffredi is capable of are buried under masses of fruit and excessive French oak. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2020.

The **1997 Saffredi** is another wine that doesn't develop a ton in the glass. The ripe, opulent personality of the vintage is in evidence, but the wine is rather one-dimensional. Grilled herbs, worn-in leather and spices add a touch of nuance on the finish. Ultimately the 1997 is a pretty boring Saffredi, particularly when tasted within the context of more recent vintages. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2017. The **1995** is an excellent choice for drinking today, as it is fairly mature. Dried flowers, menthol, licorice and plums are some of the elements that come together. Early tertiary, gamy notes are beginning to creep in, while the fruit is drying out, both of which suggest the wine is best enjoyed sooner rather than later. Though a touch lithe and even austere, the 1995 holds its own nicely in the glass. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2015.

The **1994 Saffredi** boasts a deep color and similarly intense, rich flavors for a wine of its age. Mocha, roasted coffee beans, licorice and worn-in leather come forth in the glass before the wine starts to lose its focus and energy in the glass. Some rough edges will always remain. The 1994 is another vintage that should be enjoyed within the next few years. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2014. The **1993** is a beguiling, graceful Saffredi laced with plums, prunes, wild herbs, spices and licorice. It possesses gorgeous inner perfume and freshness that frame the fruit through to the elegant, impeccable finish. The French oak confers a level of textural richness and sweetness, but is beautifully balanced in this vintage. At the same time, the 1993 could have been a truly great wine with a more restrained approach to cooperage. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2018.

The **1992 Saffredi**, from a challenging harvest, is now fully oxidized, despite its intense color. Anticipated maturity: 2011. Nothing could have prepared me for the **1991 Saffredi**. This is a marvelous showing. The 1991 still possesses terrific intensity in its dark, burnished fruit in a slightly compact yet beautifully balanced style. There is a very slight note of excess woodiness that plagues early vintages here, but that is not enough to detract meaningfully from what is otherwise a marvelous wine, particularly at nearly twenty years of age. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2016.

The **1990** is another impressive **Saffredi**. It is a marvelously rich, hedonistic wine packed with dark fruit, minerals, mint and grilled herbs. The French oak is particularly pronounced and continues to mark the wine to a strong degree. That said the 1990 remains quite youthful, with another decade or more of fine drinking still ahead of it. Personality-wise, this isn't a super complex wine, but it is the most complete of the early Saffredis. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2020. The **1989 Saffredi** shows excellent up-front richness. It turns rather delicate and slender in the glass. The 1989 is a Saffredi that impresses for its balance and understated personality. This is more subdued than the boisterous 1990, but equally beautiful. The sweet inner perfume and silky tannins bear more than a passing resemblance to a fine Barbaresco. Dusty cherries, licorice, spices and worn in leather linger on the finish. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2016.

The **1988 Saffredi** impresses for its clarity and nuance. Today it is at a glorious peak of expression. Sweet dried cherries, rose petal, mint and licorice are some of the nuances that take shape in the glass. The 1988 doesn't quite have the opulence of the 1990 or the silkiness of the 1989 but it is a finely-knit, elegant wine that has stood the test of time beautifully. The finish is impeccable and vibrant for a wine of this age. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2020. The **1987 Saffredi** is now past peak. I tasted two bottles, one of which was in slightly better shape, but not enough to make a material difference. Anticipated maturity: 2011.

Le Pupille's **2007 Poggio Valente** offers up sweet red fruit, spices and dried flowers in a fairly restrained style for the vintage. This is a Poggio Valente that emphasizes elegance over opulence. Anticipated maturity: 2017-2022. The **2006 Poggio Valente** opens with crushed flowers, raspberries, tar, French oak minerals. This mid-weight Poggio Valente impresses for its gorgeous texture and understated personality, all while showing considerable power in reserve. The wine continues to put weight in the glass as it turns darker and more inward with air. Today the fruit is understandably quite vibrant and fresh. Readers seeking a more complex set of aromas and flavors will want to cellar the 2006 for at least a few more years. This is a fabulous effort from Le Pupille but it needs time. Anticipated maturity: 2014-2021.

The **2005 Poggio Valente** has developed into a splendid wine, exceeding my own expectations. Soft tannins and a mid-weight, delicate personality contribute to the 2005's approachability. Crushed raspberries, flowers and spices add the final layers of complexity. The 2005 has enough freshness to continue to drink well for a number of years, even if it lacks the sheer stuffing of some of the very finest vintages. Anticipated maturity: 2012-2020. The estate's **2004 Poggio Valente** has found its inner balance (and then some) since I last tasted it two years ago. This broad shouldered, expansive Poggio Valente has begun to fill out beautifully, with seemingly endless layers of tobacco, spices, menthol, leather and licorice that add considerable complexity to a core of dark cherries, plums and black fruits. At the same time, the tannins have softened, allowing this wonderfully expressive, extroverted Poggio Valente to show off the full breadth of its pedigree. The finish is long, broad and exceptionally elegant. The French oak is just a touch pronounced, but not enough to detract from what is a splendid wine. Anticipated maturity: 2012-2024.

The **2003** possesses remarkable freshness considering the torrid vintage. Sangiovese dark cherries, wild herbs, tobacco and worn-in leather come together nicely in this delicate, understated **Poggio Valente**. The 2003 shows wonderful inner perfume, well integrated tannins and a generous, radiant personality. While not the most complex Poggio Valente, the 2003 is superb right now and should continue to drink well for a number of years. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2018. The **2002 Poggio Valente** is one of the biggest surprises in this tasting. How proprietor Elisabetta Geppetti made a wine like this in 2002 is frankly beyond me. The 2002 is

absolutely singing today. It shows a bit more freshness than the 2003, with a gorgeous sense of harmony in its dark red fruit. There is a level of sheer power and richness in the glass that is a marvel to behold. Earthiness, tobacco, truffles and dark cherries linger on the eternal finish. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2018.

The **2001** is one of the larger-scaled **Poggio Valentis** Le Pupille has made. Dark cherries, earthiness and smoke are some of the aromas and flavors that come together in this beautiful, layered wine. Though quite open and ripe, the 2001 also has enough freshness to drink well for a number of years. It is a marvelously complete wine. Hints of tobacco, smoke and incense add complexity on the superb finish. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2021. The **2000** is one of the more forward wines in this lineup. Black cherries, herbs, licorice and earthiness are some of the nuances that emerge from the glass. The 2000 has just enough density in its fruit to drink well for another few years, even if the aromas are already fairly advanced. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2015.

The **1999 Poggio Valente** comes across as a touch slender. It shows excellent balance, even if the fruit loses some of its persistence with time in the glass. Sweet candied cherries and flowers are woven together nicely on the polished finish. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2016. The **1998** is a fairly dark, brooding **Poggio Valente**. Early signs of oxidation have begun to creep in, suggesting the 1998 is best enjoyed sooner rather than later. Hints of leather, earthiness and tobacco add complexity to the fruit, which retains quite a bit of depth for a wine of this age. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2013. The **1997 Poggio Valente** is a beautifully balanced wine. Layers of ripe, opulent fruit are nicely buttressed by new French oak in this warm, open Poggio Valente. The 1997 shows marvelous depth and richness, with more than enough stuffing to continue to drink well for a number of years. A seamless finish has the last say in this awesome Poggio Valente. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2015.

—Antonio Galloni

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