

Angelo and America

In 1974, when Angelo Gaja was 34 years old, he went to discover America. “I stayed for two weeks. I went to important restaurants, which back then were all French, and their cellars did not carry a trace of Italian wine. Italian restaurants, on the other hand, were trattorias started by emigrants, people with great will and passion who put mothers and grandmothers in the kitchen. I immediately understood that a very difficult challenge awaited me.

“I met a wine broker, Mr. Bonsal Seggerman, who took me to two places to help me understand the market. The first was an Italian wine shop in Queens, managed by a guy from Molise (a small southern region in Italy), who told me that my wines were too expensive to compete with French wines. The refrain that everyone kept repeating was that our wines had to be “cheap and cheerful”. The second place was Sherry-Lehmann, a very important wine shop on Madison Avenue, run by Sam Aaron, who generously welcomed me by uncorking a bottle of Bollinger champagne. At the end of our meeting he also told me with prices like mine there wasn't a market in the United States. But he didn't discourage me, in fact he advised me to wait. He told me that the American market rewards patience and dedication. It was only a matter of time.”

Seven years later, in 1981, a ground-breaking book came out, written by Burton Anderson, an American journalist who still lives in Italy. Titled *Vino: The Wines and Winemakers of Italy*, described Italian producers and wines from a new point of view which praised tradition, craftsmanship and quality. It was a turning point.

“I returned to the US at the end of that year and the atmosphere already had begun to change. Our meetings went much better and I returned home with the first orders. Anderson's book was of enormous importance; it was the first work in English on Italian wine, a source of inspiration for American journalists. But it took time to shelve the idea that Italian wines should be cheap. In 1980 in Boston I found an importer, Jerry Tosi, a man who had flown American fighter planes during the war. He fell in love with Italian cuisine and after the war he started an import business selling olive oil and pasta to restaurants and then added a selection of wines for Boston wine shops. After visiting the Enoteca Pinchiorri in Florence he sought me out to organize a tasting of my wines at the historic Colonnade hotel in Boston. Despite an extraordinary snowstorm, the room was full. At one point a person in the audience stood up to ask a question. My English was terrible then and I couldn't comprehend what he was saying but I understood that he was angry because he took his papers and stormed out of the room. That man was Toni Spinazzola, the food and wine critic of the Boston Globe, arguing that the prices of Gaja wines ruined the perceived image of Italian wine. This was the climate”.

The real turning point came towards the end of the 1980s: “I remember Ed Koch, the mayor of New York for 12 years, who often had lunch at the *Il Mulino* restaurant in New York and always chose our wine. He was so passionate that he asked to keep the bottle of Barbaresco GAJA on the table, with the label facing the room, so that everyone could see what he was drinking. Another great sponsor of Italian wine was Robert De Niro with his “Tribeca” restaurant”.

Angelo sums up the fundamental lesson of his relationship with the United States as follows: “The Americans are willing to let you in the ring, even if you’re just a rookie, but you have to show that you can fight. If you know how to move well and you have courage, they appreciate and reward you. This is why I like to cross the ocean, because when I return to Piedmont I’m recharged with an incredible energy: I’m walking on sunshine, and floating high, ready for anything.”

The American with whom Angelo had the strongest and most inspiring relationship was Robert Mondavi. “He was an extraordinary man. In 1978 he came alone to Barbaresco, it was an important meeting. He wanted to see the Langhe so I took him to the panoramic lookout at La Morra. A magnificent view. But he said to me: “Do you hear this noise?”. While driving between the vineyards and the hills he insisted: “Don't you hear a strange noise?” I didn't understand, I thought he was referring to my car. Instead, at the end of the day he surprised me with this sentence: “You, in this land, sleep on a treasure that you don’t even notice. You snore blissfully, not only at night, but also during the day”. That was the noise he heard in the air. He was an absolute genius. He made me understand that here, many things needed to be changed. I returned the visit and went to see him in Napa Valley and that’s when I found the inspiration to shake off our hesitation to change and open up to new ways”. This exchange and their friendship were celebrated by Wine Spectator, who in 1985 dedicated a cover photo to Robert and Angelo, titled “Meeting of the Minds”.

In 1993 Angelo was invited for the first time to *New York Wine Experience*, the event organized by the prestigious American magazine Wine Spectator. “While all the other

producers were talking about their wines, I told them about the landscape, about Barbaresco, about truffle hunting, our family history and our future projects without ever having a glass in front of me. I remember the journalists were asking me about my wines, instead I kept talking about something else. Ten years later I went back to that stage and focused on the culture of wine more than on the wine itself, but in the end, they asked me the difference between Cabernet and Nebbiolo. How could I explain it? It's enough to taste them, right? Can't everyone detect the differences they personally experience? So, I invented this metaphor: Cabernet is to John Wayne as Nebbiolo is to Marcello Mastroianni. If we could resurrect John Wayne right now, he'd be occupying the center of this room, like Cabernet Sauvignon; it's prevalent on the palate because it dominates, it has a strong personality, speaks loudly, has a big smile, it welcomes you, fascinates you, makes you dream. Instead Mastroianni is not center stage. Nebbiolo does not occupy the entire palate, it's in a corner observing you with a vaguely ironic, sarcastic look. It's not clear if it's shy, but if you approach it you understand that it's extraordinary, it makes you fall in love and discover a new world, it whispers and conquers you. This is my wine".