

BEYOND PINOT GRIGIO – HOW PECORINO HAS BECOME A SYMBOL OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

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Along Italy's south-eastern edge, where the last ridges of the Apennines tumble towards the Adriatic, a once-forgotten mountain grape has been quietly rewriting its story. Pecorino has emerged from obscurity to become one of Italy's most compelling white wines.

CASALFARNETO OWNS A 35-HECTARE VINEYARD AMIDST THE HILLS OF ANCONA PROVINCE BUT GROWS ITS PECORINO FARTHER SOUTH IN DOC AND DOCG TERRITORY



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LUCA PESOLILLO AND HIS FAMILY LIKE TO HARVEST AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE TO PRESERVE THE ACIDITY IN ITS BONE-DRY PECORINO WINES

It is, in many ways, the story that the wine world loves to tell: a grape variety rescued from the brink, reclaimed by a new generation and re-rooted in the landscapes that shaped it. But the revival of Pecorino is more than a tale of comeback. It reflects a deeper movement across Italy – a return to indigenous varieties as authentic expressions of place, identity and heritage.

Defined by its naturally high acidity and surprisingly elevated alcohol, Pecorino offers a distinctive style: bright citrus, green apple and pear notes, often edged with herbs and a subtle saline touch, underpinned by a textured, almost weighty touch. Over time, it develops a spectrum of aromas associated with high-end white wines – quince, honey wax, anise... It is this rare combination that has captivated both producers and consumers, setting it apart from more immediately aromatic varieties.

Pecorino's brush with extinction is now well-documented. At the end of the 1970s, a few hectares remained, buried deep among the vertiginous inclines of Marche. In the early 1980s, producer Guido Cocci Grifoni tracked down some old Pecorino vines in Arquata del Tronto, a high-altitude village in the Sibillini mountains. He produced his first grafts at Tenuta Cocci Grifoni, planning to make single varietal

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ULISSE PATALOCCHI, EXPORT MANAGER AT CASALFARNETO, INSISTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PECORINO'S MOUNTAIN ORIGINS AS ONE OF ITS DEFINING FEATURES



CIU CIU EXPORT MANAGER PAOLO AGOSTINELLI BELIEVES PECORINO'S SUCCESS LIES IN ITS VERSATILITY, FROM EASY-DRINKING, TANK-FERMENTED WINES TO FULL-BODIED, AGE-WORTHY OFFERINGS



Pecorino. “It was a crazy idea, everybody told me that. My friends constantly repeated it on winter evenings around the fire. But I wanted that wine, and I never doubted it could be made”, recounts Cocci Grifoni. The rest, as they say, is history.

UNIQUELY STYLED

Abandoned in the post-war rush for productivity, when high yields trumped all else, Pecorino seemed destined to fade into obscurity. Its revival, however, rests on a paradox that today feels perfectly attuned to modern tastes: a grape capable of combining brisk acidity with naturally elevated alcohol, offering both freshness and substance. It also speaks to a broader desire among Italian producers to reclaim native varieties with a true sense of place. Plantings have, therefore, expanded steadily over the past two decades.

“It is a charming mountain grape with true body, yet a kind of freshness you rarely find in warmer regions like Marche and Abruzzo”, notes Ulisse Patalocchi, export manager at Casalfarneto, a 35-hectare estate in the heart of the Marche, whose Quirico single varietal Pecorino was awarded gold by Gilbert & Gaillard for the 2023 and 2024 vintages. Years of experimentation, replanting and careful adaptation gradually reshaped its identity, culminating in official recognition in 2011. “When Offida DOCG was established, what had been seen as a rather rustic variety – suited to blending or simple, easy-drinking wines – became far more compelling,” explains Paolo Agostinelli, export manager at Ciu Ciu, based in Offida itself. “Growers began to rethink their approach, lowering yields, harvesting later and even allowing controlled exposure to oxygen”.

Deliberate exposure to oxygen may seem counterintuitive in white winemaking and indeed, not all producers choose this path with Pecorino. Yet at Ciu Ciu, this approach is fully embraced. What began as a small, family-run estate founded by the Bartolomei family in 1970 has grown into a sizeable, 180-hectare winery. “We produce two wines through spontaneous fermentation

PAOLO TOGNI AND HIS
FAMILY, AT THE HELM OF
CASALFARNETO IN THE
MARCHE REGION, BETWEEN
THE SEA AND THE APENNINES



using native yeasts and without temperature control”, says Agostinelli. “It’s very old-school winemaking. Oxygen plays a role in shaping the wine, bringing greater evolution, a deeper colour and more complexity and depth. Pecorino is not as overtly aromatic as other grape varieties, but it offers far greater complexity”. That depth also lends the grape remarkable versatility. Depending on terroir and the winemaker’s intent, Pecorino can move effortlessly from light, crisp early-drinking styles to structured, age-worthy expressions of considerable breadth. At CasalFarneto, their single Pecorino is fermented in stainless steel then left on the lees for three to four months with minimal filtration and prolonged static settling. “Our Pecorino is a blend of power, structure, but also acidity and subtle salinity from the sandy soils. We avoid barriques and excessive ripeness because we want to preserve freshness and drinkability”, shares Patalocchi.

SCALING THE HEIGHTS

Altitude plays a defining role in shaping Pecorino’s character. In regions where daytime temperatures can soar to 35°C or more, high-elevation vineyard sites are essential to preserving the grape’s natural freshness. The pronounced diurnal shift not only safeguards acidity but also enhances aromatic complexity and precision. Few producers have embraced this vertical dimension as decisively as the Pasetti family. Twenty-five years ago, they began moving their vineyards higher into the hills. Many of their plots now sit around 550 metres above sea level in the Gran Sasso national park and Monti della Laga in Abruzzo. With 80 hectares

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THE PASETTI FAMILY IN FRANCAVILLA AL MARE, ABRUZZO, IS A FIRM BELIEVER IN THE MERITS OF ALTITUDE, PLANTING SOME OF ITS VINEYARDS OVER 1,000 METRES ABOVE SEA LEVEL



PASETTI ONLY PRODUCES SINGLE VARIETAL PECORINO FROM ITS OWN VINEYARDS TO CAPTURE THE GRAPE'S HALLMARK CHARACTERS



already under vine, five years ago they acquired a further 150 hectares in Forca di Penne, this time at 1,050 metres, some of which will be dedicated to Pecorino. “We were the first winery in Abruzzo to release single varietal Pecorino in the 1990s”, explains Massimo Pasetti, who oversees exports. The estate’s vineyards trace the path of the historic Tratturo Magno, the ancient drove road used by local shepherds to flee the harsh mountain winters for the milder plains of Puglia. This seasonal migration – the ‘transumanza’ – lies at the very origin of the grape’s name: ‘pecora’, meaning sheep, a nod to the flocks that would graze eagerly on Pecorino’s early-ripening grapes as they moved across the landscape.

These deep-rooted connections to place go some way to explaining Pasetti’s resolutely purist approach to Pecorino. “We only produce single varietal Pecorino so that consumers can clearly recognise its identity”, Pasetti emphasises, convinced that blending has often diluted the varietal’s distinctive character. The estate is in a position to remain faithful to this philosophy: “Pecorino grapes are among the most expensive in the market – sometimes costing twice as much as other varieties. Many wineries blend to reduce costs. But because all our fruit comes from our vineyards, we don’t face that constraint”.

Clarity, both in the glass and the message, has guided recent decisions in the cellar. Rather than maintaining separate bottlings, Pasetti now brings together fruit from Pescosansonesco and Capestrano under a single label – DOP Abruzzo Pecorino Collecivetta. “The terroirs complement each other: the spiciness and structure of Pescosansonesco are balanced by the elegance and drinkability of Capestrano where the climate and soils are entirely different”. In the winery, the aim is to capture Pecorino in its purest expression. Fermentation takes place in tank, then ageing on fine lees with regular stirring for up to six months preserves vibrant acidity while adding length and elegance.

Pasetti’s conviction is widely shared. “If a consumer enjoys the intrinsic character of the grape, why blend?” reflects Lorenzo Pesolillo,

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export manager at Tenuta Agricola Pesolillo in Francavilla al Mare, Abruzzo. A similar philosophy guides Cantina La Canosa in Rotella, Marche, where Pecorino takes centre stage in the estate's flagship label, Pekò, awarded gold by Gilbert & Gaillard in the 2023 and 2024 vintages. "Pekò is designed to highlight varietal purity and expression of the terroir", explains CEO Alberica Reina. The estate's 50-hectare vineyard, set between 350 and 650 metres above sea level, provides an ideal canvas. Here, Pecorino delivers freshness, distinctive acidity, mineral and saline notes with aromatics that move from citrus and apple to more subtle tropical nuances. At Ciu Ciu, Pecorino is likewise honoured through two single varietal expressions notably Merlettaie, a tribute to Offida's lace-making tradition. Yet the estate also embraces a more flexible approach: under the 'Oris' label, Pecorino is blended with Passerina and Trebbiano to create a wine that has become central to the winery's identity, and business. "In 2021, Jancis Robinson included Oris in her top ten white wine list", notes Agostinelli. "We now sell 300,000 bottles, including 150,000 in Quebec alone".

LORENZO PESOLILLO OF TENUTA AGRICOLA PESOLILLO STRESSES THAT THE WINERY'S ETHOS REVOLVES AROUND AUTHENTIC ABRUZZO GRAPES, ORGANIC FARMING AND INDEPENDENT WINEGROWING





AT CIU CIU, THE MERLETTAIE LABEL IS MADE FROM HAND-PICKED GRAPES THAT FERMENT SPONTANEOUSLY WITH NATIVE YEAST IN LARGE WOODEN BARRELS THAT EXPOSE THE MUST TO OXYGEN AND DEVELOP COMPLEXITY IN THE WINE



MERLETTAIE IS THE ITALIAN FOR LACE MAKING, A RENOWNED TRADITION IN OFFIDA HONOURED BY CIU CIU

A MULTI-TASKER

Versatility lies at the heart of Pecorino's success – the stylistic spectrum even embraces charmat and 'metodo classico' sparkling wines. "One of its great strengths is that it can be enjoyed young – I've already released the 2025 vintage – yet it also rewards patience", says Pesolillo, whose 15-hectare family estate earned a double gold medal from Gilbert & Gaillard for its 2024 organic Abruzzo DOC Pecorino and gold for the 2023 vintage. "What makes Pecorino unique is its ability to age well", adds Agostinelli. "Very few white wines develop complexity over time – Pecorino can age beautifully for 10 to 15 years, even without using sulphites".

Over the past two decades, producers have refined their approach while navigating the mounting pressures of climate change. "Rising temperatures, particularly in central Italy and Abruzzo, are an issue," says Pesolillo. Growers are adjusting harvest dates, trellising and canopy management to reduce exposure to the sun and heat in a region where irrigation is not an option. At Tenuta Agricola Pesolillo, which markets Pecorino under its yellow and Filari in Costa labels, the traditional 'tendone' system has been reworked into a pergola design that improves airflow from sea breezes while helping control yields.

Timing, too, has become critical. "The harvest window is very small", confirms Pesolillo. "Once we decide to pick, we have just 24 hours to bring the grapes in". Typically harvested in the third or fourth week of August, any delay risks compromising lightness and vibrant acidity. "We have moved away from techniques that exposed



THE PESOLILLO FAMILY HAS ADAPTED THE TRADITIONAL 'TENDONE' CANOPY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM TO ACCOMMODATE CLIMATE CHANGE, PROMOTING AIRFLOW AND REINING IN YIELDS

the grapes to direct sunlight, keeping more leaves to protect the clusters”, explains Agostinelli. At Ciu Ciu, more bunches are left on the vine to avoid over-concentration, with increasing preference for north-facing slopes to preserve acidity.

RECEPTIVE AUDIENCE

The pursuit of freshness and lightness has become central to Pecorino’s appeal, aligning naturally with evolving consumer preferences. “Pecorino meets the current demand for wines that combine authenticity, quality and recognisable identity”, notes Alberica Reina, adding that it is increasingly positioned as a premium alternative to more widely known white wines. As indigenous varieties gain traction, Pecorino has found a receptive audience, particularly among younger consumers attentive to sustainability – reflected in the many organic and responsibly farmed wines now produced.

“Pecorino is growing as a brand across Europe but also in markets like Canada”, adds Pesolillo. “Consumers are discovering that Italy offers more than just Pinot Grigio”. Reina offers a fitting conclusion: “Pecorino is both a heritage grape and a contemporary opportunity, increasingly recognised as one of the most interesting white varieties of central Italy”. Perhaps its enduring appeal lies precisely in this dual identity – rooted in the rugged landscapes of the Apennines, yet shaped by a new generation of growers attuned to precision and place. Pecorino speaks both of where it comes from and where Italian wine is heading.