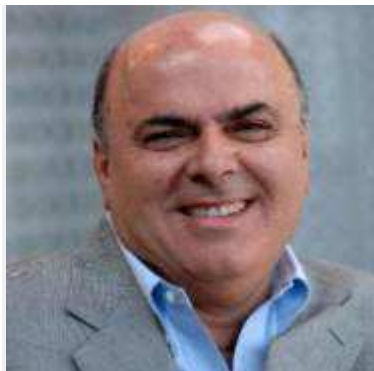


Gianni Masciarelli: winemaker



Gianni Masciarelli

The Abbruzzi region between Italy's Apennine mountains and the Adriatic coast is not famous for the quality of its wines. It is mostly an ocean of thin, sharp reds and whites made from the red Montepulciano and white Trebbiano grapes. In the past 20 years, however, two names have stood out: Edoardo Valentini and Gianni Masciarelli.

The two men represented the opposite schools. Valentini personified the very best of local tradition, while Masciarelli drew his inspiration from France and sought to modernise a very rustic part of Italy. Valentini died in 2006, and Masciarelli has now followed him at an age when he had still more to achieve.

Gianni Masciarelli was born in San Martino della Marrucina in 1956. He was the son of the vigneron Giovanni Masciarelli, whose vines he took over in 1978. The younger Masciarelli had been in France and found that he admired the French approach to winemaking. His first vintage amounted to just 2,000 bottles. By 1984 he knew the sort of wine he wanted to make, and launched his Villa Gemma label for montepulciano. Like many wines of the time, it was made in small oak barriques. It was an instant sensation.

Travelling in Croatia in 1987 he met a student of chemical engineering called Marina Cvetic. They were married two years later. She was an enormous help to him in his work and he once conceded: "Without her I would not have been able to succeed in anything." From 1991 she was to receive homage in the form of a series of wines dedicated to her. The Marina Cvetic label was meant to typify his most modern approach to winemaking.

Masciarelli's success was all the more remarkable for the fact that his vines were in the decried sub-region of Chieti, which has the worst reputation of all. He used mostly local grapes — Montepulciano, which has nothing to do with the Tuscan town of that name — Trebbiano, Cococciola, but also some Cabernet and a highly praised Chardonnay.

Italy's best-known guide, Gambero Rosso, awarded its Tre Bicchieri top mark to his 1995 montepulciano, after which it continued to lavish praise on Masciarelli's wines. The 1997 vintage was "as good as it gets", and whites such as the Marina Cvetic 1998 Trebbiano were also singled out.

By the time of his death, Masciarelli's estate had become very large by European standards. He had almost 400 hectares (1,000 acres) and was making between three and four million bottles a year.

Masciarelli, who died in a hotel in Munich while on business, is survived by his wife and three young children.

Gianni Masciarelli, winemaker, was born in 1956. He died of a heart attack on July 31, 2008, aged 53