

*I believe greatly in women; they know how to be tough
and gentle, and when they want to, they have more insight
and are more quick-thinking than we men.*

*Sì, credo molto nelle donne, che sanno essere tenaci
e dolci e, se ne hanno voglia, hanno più sensibilità e
prontezza di noi maschietti.*

Alberto di Grésy

Tenute Cisa Asinari dei Marchesi di Grésy

LABOR *of* LOVE

Wine Family Women of Piemonte

Suzanne Hoffman

Foreword by Maurizio Rosso

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THE STRONG RING

Maurizio Rosso



Suzanne Hoffman came to see me in May 2014.

She knew I had written an extensive book about Barolo wine with a particular focus on the individual producers — their personality and distinct character. With two exceptions, they were all men. She told me that she wanted to do something similar for women. As we got into the conversation, I learned she had named her dog Arneis, and at that point I knew she was serious about Piemonte and its wines!

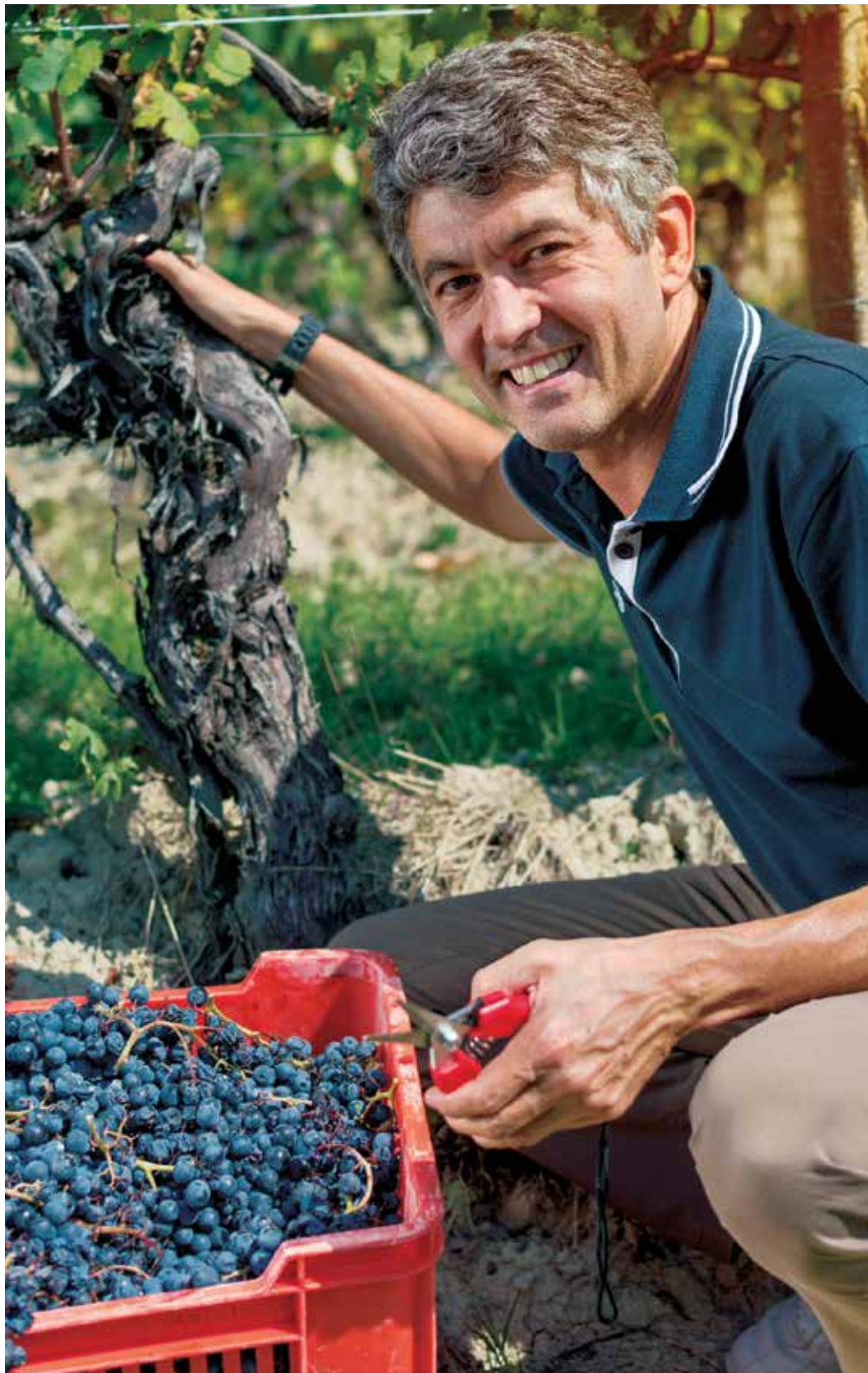
Since the year my Barolo book was published (2000), significant generational change among winemakers has taken place. In 2000, the most famous Barolo makers were almost all men, but soon many of their daughters would attend the Enological School in Alba and become professional winemakers in their own right. The early 2000s were years when many young women actively entered the professional wine world to rise to positions of responsibility and public recognition.

The presence of Piemontese women in active professional roles goes even deeper than that. In 1985, Piemontese partisan-writer Nuto Revelli wrote *L'Anello Forte. La donna: storie di vita contadina* (The Strong Ring. The Woman: Stories of Farm Life), a powerful book that investigates the pivotal role women played in agricultural life in our region. Women always

worked in the countryside. I remember how they would work in the fields and vineyards with their husbands then leave work a half an hour early to go back home and fix lunch or dinner. They were also mothers, but older daughters would help take care of younger siblings and do daily house chores. During wartime, when men were away, women took over the entire management of farming and the household. After World War II, Italian families began changing due to industrialization, and women often became housewives with much less managerial and financial responsibility.

When I recall my grandmother, I remember a strong woman who worked all of her life. In the 1930s, my grandfather was unemployed, so he accepted a job in Africa where Mussolini had conquered what he emphatically called the Italian “fourth shore.” My grandmother was left with three small children. She found a job in a local silk factory and then in a winery. When her husband returned from Africa, he was sick with malaria and could not work at a stable job, so she kept on working. When I was a child, my father provided for her and she was no longer needy, yet I remember her selling some lettuce and tomatoes to her friends from her small garden, an instinct for survival that never went away.

The history of Piemonte is full of remarkable, strong women who made their contribution to the progress of society, although sometimes indirectly. My favorite one is Juliette Colbert, Marquess of Barolo. French by birth, she married young Marquis Carlo Tancredi Falletti and moved to Turin, where they



Historian, author and owner of Cantina Gigi Rosso in Barolo, Maurizio Rosso.



Autumn shadows lengthen as the sun sets west of Monte Viso, Piemonte's tallest mountain of the Cottian Alps.

lived in a beautiful mansion that even today carries the name Palazzo Barolo. Since they had no children and were devout Catholics, they both devoted much of their time and money to charity. Tancredi died at age 56 and the Marquess Juliette (now known as Giulia) dedicated the rest of her life to charity. She turned her home into an orphanage for female foundlings and furnished the ground floor as a school for them to learn sewing in order to be more employable. She also owned the castle of Barolo where she wanted to open a school for poor boys from the countryside, which she wrote in her will, also leaving a large amount of money to start the project. She passed away in 1864, and 11 years later the school of Barolo opened its doors. The Marquess of Barolo was a heroine of her own time, and her contribution to society was quiet and soft-spoken yet huge and durable.

Among great women of the past in the Langhe, I would also like to point out Rosa Vercellana, better known as “Bela Rosin,” who became the king’s mistress at age 15. Victor Emmanuel II, King of Piedmont and later King of Italy, built a villa for her on his Barolo estate, Fontanafredda. She gave birth to two of his children and, as if in a fairytale, when the king was widowed he married her, against the common sense of the day. The aristocracy was appalled, yet chronicles of the era say that Bela Rosin was never ashamed and proudly strolled down via Po in Turin holding her two children by the hand. I always thought that this was in fact a superb love story that also reveals something significant about a local woman’s character.

On the other hand, some women were thorough workers. In Serralunga d’Alba in the 1920s, Virginia

Ferrero, known as “Tota Virginia,” remained a spinster because she dedicated all her time and care to her vineyards and winery. She was as tough as a man, so people referred to her as “a woman with pants” instead of a normal woman who would wear a skirt. Although women worked in the vineyards, they worked less often in the wine cellar, which was considered a man’s place. By contrast, women were unrivaled queens in the kitchen. I remember grandmothers who would kick their men out of the kitchen, as if it were a female sacred space. Some of them really starred and were invited to cook semi-professionally in other people’s houses for weddings and christening parties. They were known as *cusinere*, which is simply Piemontese dialect for “cooks.” Forget about chefs, those were skillful women who could produce a luxurious banquet for a hundred people out of a tiny kitchenette where they would cook on a *poutaget*, a wood-burning stove. They were frugal, fast, and efficient at tossing together flour, eggs, water, and salt to come up with the finest *tajarin* one could ever imagine. Recipes were never written, as they were an intrinsic part of our oral culture, passed on from mother to daughter.

In the 1960s and 1970s, life changed drastically on the farms in keeping with a general modernization of Italian lifestyle. Gas stoves replaced the *poutaget*, and most women did not want to be seen with stained hands and short fingernails. The wave of feminism that struck Italy between 1968 and 1978 stressed the urgency of bringing women out of the kitchen to gain a more active role in society. Yet all those young women had witnessed their mothers’ work and lifestyle in the countryside as I did, and some of their legacy, I believe, was never lost. It reappears in new forms and expressions with the work and commitment of the women Suzanne has met during her numerous trips to Piemonte.

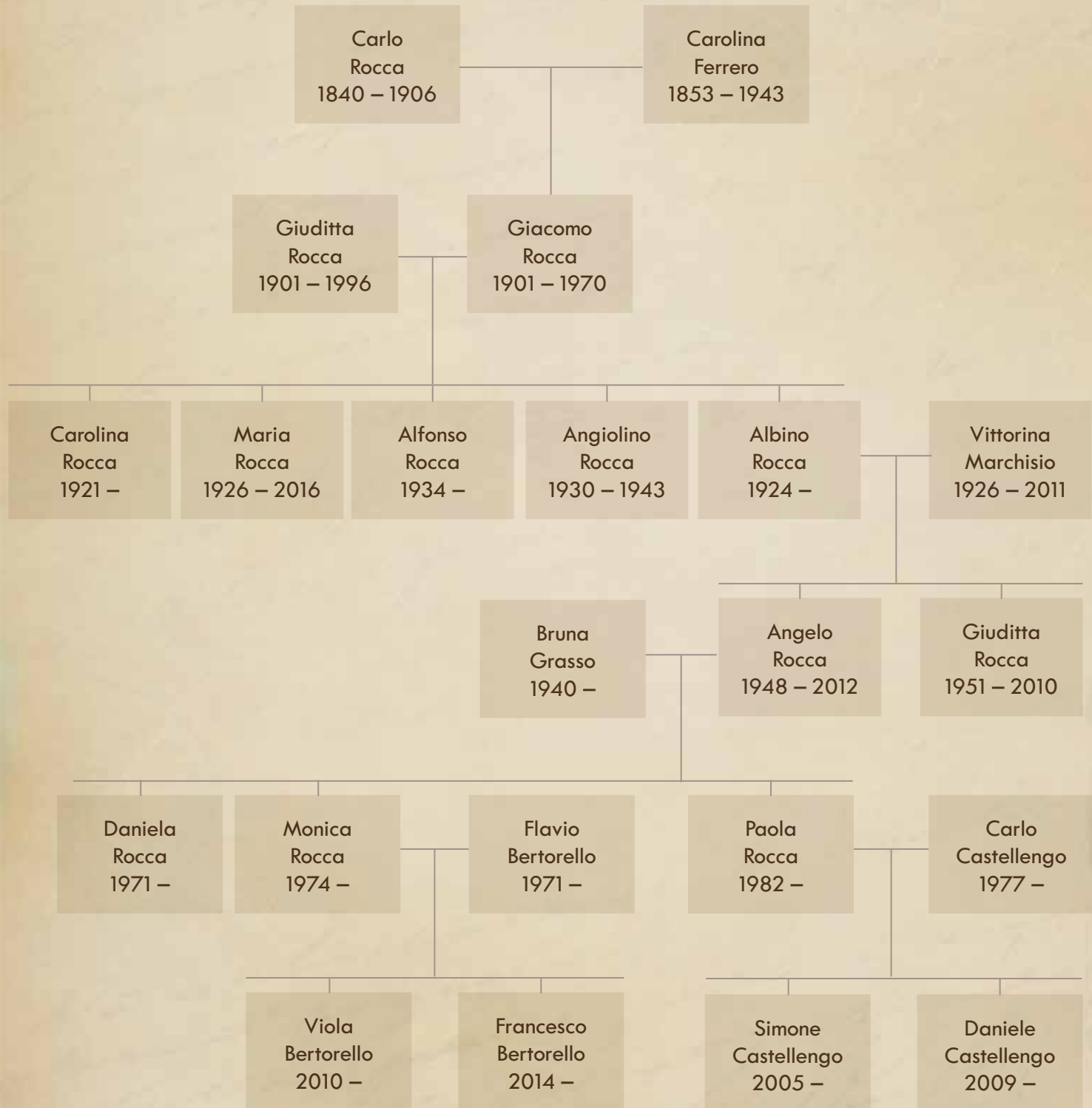
With her sensibility and passion, Suzanne has slowly come ever closer to our culture and has absorbed its intimate values. She visited women who witnessed the past, befriended these women, and patiently listened to their stories. Only then did she begin writing about them with a deep sense of urgency and commitment. I have met with her again and again, and I have seen this urgency grow in her soul to form a project that she could not let go of. Only the completion of this wonderful book can give her the final satisfaction of having contributed to the legacy of female culture in the millennia-long history of Italian civilization. ■



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ALBINO ROCCA



ALBINO ROCCA

Barbaresco



October is a celebratory time in Piemonte's wine country.

Months of sleepless nights and worried gazes at dark, stormy horizons are put to rest until the next growing season as grapes come home to *cantine* (wineries) for the next phase of the vintage. Regardless of the quality of a vintage, joy and relief are common emotions throughout the region. But in the autumn of 2012, one week after the harvest ended, sadness, shock, and despair struck like a dagger in the collective heart of the Langhe and devastated a renowned winemaking family. It did not, however, destroy it, thanks to three talented, determined women.

On October 8, 2012, shrouded in the dense autumn fog so common in Northern Italy, the ultralight plane Angelo Rocca piloted fell to the ground shortly after takeoff near Alessandria. The crash, just 45 minutes east by car from Angelo's home near the village of Barbaresco, took the life of the highly respected vintner and his companion, Carmen Mazza. Although many feared the fatal crash spelled doom for the winery bearing his father Albino's name, Angelo's vision and talent were not entirely extinguished. He had passed those on to his three daughters, Daniela, Monica, and Paola, and they would ensure that his light continued to shine across Barbaresco as a beacon to the wine world far beyond the hills of Piemonte.



Giacomo Rocca, the only child of Carolina Ferrero and Carlo Rocca, and father of Albino, founded his wine business in the mid-1940s. In the Rocca cellar, one can still find bottles of Giacomo's wines with the original labels.

Had the crash occurred 60 years earlier, without male heirs, the Albino Rocca winery as a family enterprise could have been doomed. Vineyards sold. Cantina shuttered. Not so today, when women routinely assume control of family wineries upon the passing of a patriarch. Fate had both taken one of Barbaresco's leading visionaries from his family and the wine world and brought Angelo's three daughters to work with him in the winery in the final years of his life. Their decision to join their father and perpetuate the Rocca family's legacy proved lucky, even though they never imagined they would assume control of the winery so early in their lives.

Although the Rocca sisters are the third generation of the Albino Rocca family winery, they are the fifth generation of this Rocca family of vintners in Barbaresco. Little is known about Carlo Rocca, the sisters' great-great-grandfather (*trissonno*), but they do know he won a gold medal for his wine at a Genoa exposition in the 19th century. They also know that before he married Albino Rocca's grandmother, Carlo went twice to America in search of work, as did many Piemontese men during that poverty-stricken era. He was once married to a woman named Maria with whom he had a daughter, but Maria died in Piemonte shortly after they returned from America. Carlo never crossed the Atlantic again. After a few years alone, Carlo married 43-year-old Carolina Ferrero of Castagnito, a small village across the Tanaro River from Barbaresco. In 1901, at age 60, he fathered his son, Giacomo, his only only child with her.

Five years later a heart attack ended Carlo's life. Carolina was left with a small

child and a farm to run. Running a business was not foreign to Carolina, as it would have been to most women of her day. Before she married Carlo, she had managed her family's bakery and butcher shops in Castagnito. At the beginning of the 20th century the Rocca family sold their grapes to the Cantina Sociale in Barbaresco, the forerunner of the Produttori del Barbaresco. After Carlo's death, Carolina continued as a member of the cooperative. The Rocca sisters' great-aunt Carolina Rocca delighted in telling them about their great-great-grandmother. "I would like to find something more about Carolina Ferrero," Monica Rocca told me, "Because at the time a woman who managed a farm was something quite unusual." Once again, I experienced the satisfaction of knowing that my own quest for knowledge about a wine family's ancestors motivated a young Piemontese vintner to discover more history.

In the early 20th century, Carolina's son Giacomo moved to the area where the Roccas now live. He built a house in the vineyards, the same one that appears on the Albino Rocca wine label. It's fitting since Albino was born in that house. In the Rocca cellar, one can still find bottles of Giacomo's wines with the original labels. His wife, Giuditta, was also from the Barbaresco area. She and Giacomo had five children: three sons and two girls. Their youngest son Angiolino died at age 13 in an awful accident of a type all too common during World War II. He and other children found a bomb near the railroad tracks in Martinenga near their home in Barbaresco. The bomb may have come from a passing train, although it is unknown exactly how it came to be there. The explosion took Angiolino's life. The war spared his brothers, however. The oldest, Albino, did not serve in the army due to problems with his eyes. Alfonso was too young for military service. Although tragedy had taken one son, the dark cloud of the war otherwise passed over the Rocca family without incident.

Albino Rocca (1924)

When I first visited the Rocca sisters in 2014, I interviewed their grandfather Albino, then 90 years young. Although he had lost his wife, daughter, and son in the previous 10 years, he appeared at peace, comforted by the love that his three granddaughters showered upon him. In a mixture of Piemontese dialect and Italian, Albino spoke with me through Daniela and Monica. We chatted a bit about his boyhood growing up in the vineyards, a boyhood spent in the dark years before and during World War II. When I asked him about the German occupation and life in the vineyards of Barbaresco during that dark time, a



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