

# Emidio Pepe & the Road Less Travelled

William Kelley  
profiles a  
visionary Italian  
winemaker.

Emidio Pepe and family





**W**hen Emidio Pepe established his winery in 1964, he was convinced from the very beginning that the Montepulciano d'Abruzzo could produce one of Italy's great red wines. Nowadays, it would be hard to argue the point. The world beats a path to his *cantina* in the sleepy village of Torano Nuovo, nestled in the rugged hills of rural Abruzzo. The year before last, vertical tastings in London and New York celebrated the winery's fiftieth vintage as a milestone for Italian wine. Emidio, who learnt English to sell his wines across the world, now has no need to lapse from his native idiom. He has given Abruzzo a wine worthy of its extraordinary pasta, saffron, game and truffles.

But if Pepe is recognized as a visionary today, five decades earlier his ambitions seemed decidedly eccentric. In the 1960s, Abruzzo's red was known as an innocuous *vin de soif*, and most of the region's 7,500 wine growers sold their fruit to cooperatives. In the 1980s, modernism struck, and a new and vulgar Montepulciano emerged alongside the old: oaky, extracted and still-born. Neither style ever won acclaim, though they continue to have their adherents. Pepe's vision of an artisanal and age-worthy wine was thus entirely without precedent, and for several decades it seemed hopelessly quixotic: one village wag notoriously joked that Emidio was building castles in the sky. Today, the bottles in the Pepe cellar are still stacked in crenellations to satirise that wisecrack.

Pepe's path to Montepulciano primacy was not easy. Born into a family of farmers in 1932, the young Emidio was hard at work in the fields well before his tenth birthday; by age

thirteen he was adept at grafting vines, and he went on to attain distinction in cattle husbandry. But a visit to the Netherlands in 1960 prompted the realisation that the future of agriculture lay in specialisation, and Emidio began to contemplate producing his own wine.

After a few experiments, he released his debut 1964 vintage and began building a reputation for quality, one client at a time. By the early 1970s Emidio was already touring the world to promote his wines, visiting the United States and embarking upon 4,000km road trips around Europe, from restaurant to restaurant, in his trusty Alfa Romeo Alfetta. None of this distracted the indefatigable Emidio from work in the vineyards and the cellar, where he always – as he and his family admit – wanted to do everything himself. Slowly but surely, Emidio's approach paid off, and the Pepe Montepulciano began to win a domestic and international following.

To this day, the Pepe wines are still made using the techniques that produced those early vintages. The winery's approach to viticulture is firmly rooted in Abruzzese tradition, as over two-thirds of the estate's vines are still fastidiously pergola-trained, a labour-intensive system which protects the grapes from sunburn – a distinct advantage in torrid vintages such as 2003. The remainder of the estate's vines are trellised more conventionally, which ensures success in cooler years too. These vines were always cultivated along organic lines, but in 2005 the Pepe family began to transition to biodynamic viticulture, and Emidio's initial scepticism has been more than assuaged by the results. Needless to say, there is no machine harvesting or mechanisation at this address.

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Pepe's winemaking is rather more idiosyncratic. The grapes are de-stemmed by hand and transferred to glass-lined cement tanks where the wine is subject to daily pumpovers while it ferments for about eight to ten days. Once the sugar content of the must drops to about six degrees Brix, the wine is racked off into identical tanks where it ferments to dryness and ages undisturbed for between 18 to 24 months before it is bottled without fining, filtration or SO<sub>2</sub>. A further peculiarity is that every single bottle of Montepulciano Riserva is hand-decanted off its sediment before release by Emidio's wife Rosa.

The wines that result from this somewhat unusual vinification and *élevage* are among the most remarkable reds produced in Italy. They are typically distinguished by aromas of balsamic black cherry, cigar ash, bitter herbs and aromatic bark, but in cooler vintages the wines take on a more red-fruity personality. On the palate the Pepe Montepulcianos are dependably sappy and deep, structured

around refined tannins and juicy acidity. They age beautifully in the cellar, and vintages such as 1975 and 1983 continue to drink brilliantly, their undiminished and exuberant vitality complemented by all the complexity that comes with prolonged bottle age. Importantly, more challenging vintages such as 1994 also age brilliantly in a more high-toned, refined and Burgundian vein.

Emidio Pepe is now well into his eighth decade, and the Pepe winery is very much a family enterprise: one daughter, Sofia, has increasingly taken over winemaking duties since 1997, and another, Daniela, manages the business; granddaughter Chiara ably represents the winery internationally. But Emidio continues to be active around the *cantina* and in the vineyards. As he remarks, “if you work the land, you'll live better, longer. And though you'll probably go to bed tired, you'll be ready to face the next day.” His example would suggest that a regular intake of Pepe Montepulciano also correlates strongly with longevity, and long may it remain so.

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