

# Wine Spectator

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## ITALY'S ALLEGRINI

**A FAMILY SAGA  
LEADS TO  
GREAT WINES**

**PIEDMONT EXCELS  
MORE THAN 300  
RATED 90+**

**A SEAFOOD FEAST  
MATCHED WITH  
WINES**

**SPECIAL REPORT  
BEST BOTTLES  
AT \$15 OR LESS**

Marilisa  
Allegrini

AS SEEN IN *Wine Spectator*

*“We were desperate, because we were young and we didn’t have the business in our grasp. I remember [my brother] Walter said, ‘We have to fight like lions for the company to survive.’”*—MARILISA ALLEGRINI, CEO, ALLEGRINI ESTATES



40 Franco and Marilisa Allegrini

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# SIBLING SUCCESS

*One is a high-flying CEO, the other a farmer. Together, Marilisa Allegrini and her brother Franco have built the family company into one of Italy's top wine brands*

By Robert Camuto Photographs  
by Colin Dutton



**In 1983,** the future of the Allegrini family wine company looked dim. The untimely death of patriarch and winemaker Giovanni Allegrini at 63 left his children searching for direction.

“We were desperate, because we were young and we didn’t have the business in our grasp,” recalls Marilisa Allegrini, Giovanni’s only daughter. Then 28, Marilisa worked in administration and sales for the winery. Her older brother, Walter, 34, tended the vineyards, while younger brother Franco, 26, was Giovanni’s apprentice in the cellars.

Allegrini was then a modest producer of fewer than 8,500 cases per year—mostly light Valpolicella Classico and its stout counterpart, Amarone, made from raisined grapes. Although Giovanni had carefully scouted *terroirs* and planted new vineyards with an eye to quality, the consumer image of Valpolicella was mediocre. “I remember Walter said, ‘We have to fight like lions for the company to survive,’” says Marilisa.

The siblings, the sixth generation of winemaking Allegrinis, worked with fierce determination to achieve one of the most dramatic success stories in Italian wine. In spite of setbacks, including the sudden death of Walter in 2003, Allegrini has steadily developed into a top Italian brand that now counts three quality-driven estates—one in Veneto and two in Tuscany. Focusing on the high-end and middle market, the family has grown revenues from about 100,000 euros in 1983 to more than 30 million euros from the sale of about 292,000 cases of wine in 2015.

From their hometown of Fumane (pop. 4,000), about a half hour’s drive northwest of Verona, the Allegrinis have helped lead the movement to higher quality in the Veneto, producing Valpolicella and Amarone and other estate wines from local varieties, primarily the red grapes Corvina and Corvinone. Their expansion in the past 15 years into Tuscany includes development of Poggio al Tesoro in Bolgheri and the purchase of Poggio San Polo in Montalcino.

Under the Allegrinis’ leadership, these three principal estates have released a combined total of more than 60 wines rated 90 points or higher in *Wine Spectator* blind tastings.

At the same time, the Allegrinis delved into the mass distribution market through a *négociant* label, using mostly purchased grapes and producing a range of wines that now fills 125,00 cases per year under the Corte Giara brand.

And success has come with a dramatic flair. Marilisa, now 63, is the stylish ambassador for Valpolicella, leading tastings at government embassies and art museums such as New York’s Guggenheim. After years of restoration work following their purchase of Fumane’s landmark Renaissance-era Villa della Torre, the family opened the property in early 2016 as a five-star boutique hotel, celebrating its

launch with a series of private lunches and dinners where guests included Matteo Renzi and John Phillips (then Italy’s prime minister and U.S. ambassador, respectively), Alibaba founder Jack Ma and superstar Sting.

The company’s modern legacy is based on a simple formula of great grapes, smart business and tireless promotion, embodied by two seemingly opposite personalities: Marilisa, the globetrotting CEO, and Franco, the winegrower and producer.

“My sister thinks that the most important part of wine is business,” says Franco, 60. “I think the most important part is the vines.”



Winemaking is a centuries-old tradition for the Allegrini family. When patriarch Giovanni Allegrini (left) died in 1983, his children—(from left) Franco, Marilisa and Walter—took over the business, turning their small Veneto estate into an international powerhouse.

“And I can travel the world because I know that Franco is at home taking care of everything,” says Marilisa.

## FAMILY TIES

Growing up, Marilisa was the family rebel. While her two brothers knew they would follow their father in wine, she dreamed of becoming a doctor and seeing the world.

At 16, she says, “I told my father, ‘Don’t count on me—you have your two boys. They will be happy to work with you. But not me.’”

But Giovanni persisted in trying to steer her into the fold. “My father was a visionary person,” says Marilisa. “He was hoping I would study something that would help the company, like economics or languages.”

He forbade her to go to the regional medical school in Padua, about 70 miles east of Fumane. So Marilisa studied physical therapy in nearby Verona. She sought independence from her family by marrying at 21—though she quickly realized her mistake. She worked five years as a therapist and at 25, she says, became the first Fumane native to divorce.

A year later, she joined the family company. “One of the intuitions I had was that it was my task to communicate to the world what Allegrini was doing to build the company and our future,” she says.

In June 2016, Marilisa joined Italy’s business elite as the only vintner appointed to the board of the country’s state-sponsored export bank SACE—a move signaling the importance of wine and



Franco Allegrini has brought innovative production methods to Valpolicella, including making a 100 percent Corvina bottling from the family's premier vineyard site, La Poja.

agriculture to Italy's economic recovery.

Driving the equation on the home front is Franco. Uninterested in the limelight, Franco is focused on meticulous row-by-row organic management of the vineyards, where he pays particular attention to vine leaves as indicators of nutritional balance and plant health. "If the leaves are perfect, the grapes will be perfect," he insists.

In the cellar, Franco is a classicist, aiming for elegance and shying away from trends toward more muscular, wood-influenced wines. Yet he is also an innovator who brought technology to the area to help winegrowers control conditions for Amarone production and limit the wines' contamination from problematic molds.

"Franco is *bravo* in agriculture and winemaking," says Oscar Fari-netti, founder of Eataly, the high-end chain of Italian gastronomic emporiums. "Marilisa has more energy than anyone in wine. She is the best person I know representing Italian wine, Italian style and beauty in the world."

## NEWS FROM AMERICA

Five months after her father's death, Marilisa flew to the United States and spent two months visiting restaurants and stores in New York, Boston and Chicago. Though Allegrini was exporting its wines in limited markets, directly to distributors, it did not have a national importer.

"I went to America and I said, 'I am here to sell Valpolicella!'" Marilisa recounts. "They told me, 'But I don't want a Valpolicella on my wine list.' 'Why?' I asked. 'Because Valpolicella is not quality wine,'" came the answer.

"Valpolicella at the time was too acidic," she explains. "There was too much production, and the grapes didn't ripen."

There was more bad news. During a tasting of several producers' Amarones at Chicago's historic Italian Village restaurant, Marilisa noticed a common defect: "The Amarones all had

too much of a taste of oxidation."

Still, on that trip she collected enough wine orders to boost production back home—chiefly for the family's Palazzo della Torre bottling, a red made through the *ripasso* technique (of macerating the leftover skins and seeds from pressed Amarone with the lighter Valpolicella wine) to produce a style that falls between Valpolicella and Amarone in ripeness and richness.

Addressing the defects of Valpolicella and Amarone became Allegrini's mission. Production was slashed and vineyards replanted with higher-density Guyot pruning in place of the old pergola system. The family phased out Molinara, a thin, acidic blending grape. The Valpolicellas—tasting of cherry and spice—became rounder, easier-drinking wines.

The oxidative character Marilisa and others detected in many Amarones sent Franco on a quest. He identified the key culprit as botrytis, a fungus welcome in the production of sweet white wines like Sauternes, but a potential disaster for reds because infected

**"My sister thinks that the most important part of wine is business. I think the most important part is the vines."**

**—Franco Allegrini**

grape skins can introduce oxidative enzymes. “The more oxidation you have the more you lose your *terroir*,” says Franco. “Oxidation makes all wines taste the same.”

Franco and Walter began their battle against botrytis with a nearly grape-by-grape selection at harvest. But even with the most rigorous sorting, it could appear and spread in traditional drying attics and sheds—particularly if the weather turned warm and humid during the 100 to 120 days of drying then required for Amarone grapes. The problem was compounded by the bamboo and straw mats on which the grape bunches were typically laid out to dry. “It was romantic to use mats,” Franco says. “But hygienically it was not great.”

The brothers switched to easy-to-clean plastic drying crates. Then, working with Verona enologist Robert Ferrarini, Franco led the effort to build Terre di Fumane, a modern drying facility and research center. Opened in 1997, and now used by a handful of other wineries, the 54,000-square-foot structure monitors humidity, temperature and airflow, controlling these factors when necessary to avoid mold growth. “All the work we do in the vineyard, we want to preserve here,” Franco says.

## — BIRTH OF AN ICON —

While they were mapping the company’s future after Giovanni’s death, his children discovered an unexpected treasure he’d left them.

In 1979, Giovanni had purchased about 93 acres of vineyards planted on the La Grola hillside at the western edge of Valpolicella Classico, near Lake Garda. Its heart was a 6-acre white limestone plateau known as La Poja, where he’d planted a high-density vineyard with his favorite clone of Corvina.

In 1983, La Poja was ready for its first harvest, but the grapes didn’t fully ripen until November. “At first, I didn’t understand why my father planted vines up there,” Franco says. “They were so late.”

But after Franco vinified the crop at the family winery, built onto an ancestral farmhouse, he was struck by the complexity of flavors and depth of the resulting wine. “We understood immediately it was another level,” Franco says.

La Poja became Allegrini’s top single-vineyard *cru*. Because the wine was 100 percent Corvina it couldn’t be labeled Valpolicella, but rather just table wine (now classified as Veronese IGT). In the 1990s the vineyard produced a string of stellar vintages topped by the 1997 (96 points), which *Wine Spectator* called at the time “the greatest wine the Allegrinis have ever made.”

As Franco gained confidence in the winery, even Allegrini’s popular Palazzo della Torre got a makeover. In 1990, he adapted the traditional *ripasso* technique with a new process in which the Valpolicella wine (whose grapes are fermented just after harvest) undergoes a second fermentation with the addition of raisined grapes (about 30 percent) that had been set aside to partially dry. The resulting wine was lush and less bitter—and has appeared in *Wine Spectator*’s Top 100 six times. Now made with Corvina (70 percent), Rondinella (25 percent) and Sangiovese (5 percent), it’s



In 2007, the Allegrinis partnered with Winebow founder Leonardo LoCascio to buy Montalcino’s Poggio San Polo, whose state-of-the-art winery, built entirely underground, is a striking example of bio-architecture.

also classified as Veronese IGT.

The give-and-take of working together hasn’t always been easy, the siblings agree—insisting they have been arguing since childhood. “I can be very demanding,” says Marilisa. To which Franco lightheartedly replies, “She can be more difficult than making a good wine in a bad year.” Still, the pair realized they were stronger together than apart.

“Stylistically, our wines are the result of our discussing a lot,” Marilisa says. “I was out in the market, and Franco was able to change without losing the integrity and character of our varieties. We learned that you can make something that pleases you *and* pleases the customer.”

## — EXPLORING BOLGHERI, MOVING INTO MONTALCINO —

By 2000, Allegrini’s business was on firm footing in the Verona area and in the international export market. The wines were earning steady critical acclaim, and the family’s *négociant* label

# Destination Villa della Torre

The history of Veneto's Villa della Torre is a long and romantic one, with its painstaking restoration by the Allegrini family as a landmark hotel its latest chapter. Located in the countryside near the town of Fumane and nearby to the Allegrini winery, the villa is surrounded by the Palazzo della Torre estate vineyard.

Built in the 16th century under the patronage of nobleman Guilo della Torre, the villa showcases the work of architects Giulio Romano and Michele Sanmicheli and artist Giovanni Battista Scultori. The property embodies classic themes in Italian Renaissance art and architecture,



including the peristyle courtyard reminiscent of ancient Roman domi-ciles and striking decorative elements such as Scultori's walk-in fire-places depicting angels, devils and sea monsters.

Ten elegantly appointed guest rooms add modern amenities such as luxurious baths, satellite TV and Wi-Fi to the period decor and furnishings. Amenities include breakfast, and other meals can be arranged in advance. Visitors can opt for conducted tastings of Allegrini wines at the wine *relais* and/or purchase bottles from the on-site shop. Specialty cooking classes are featured regularly, and the various public spaces accommodate meetings, weddings and other events.

About a half hour's drive from Verona, Villa della Torre hosts a variety of cultural events each year; contact the villa for upcoming schedules.

Via della Torre 25, 37022, Fumane di Valpolicella, VR  
Telephone (011) 045-683-2070 Website [www.villadellatorre.it](http://www.villadellatorre.it)



Corte Giara, created in 1989 to fill out the Allegrini portfolio with other regional wines, was growing.

With six children among them, Marilisa, Walter and Franco looked to the future and decided to expand outside of Valpolicella, which Marilisa calls "our comfort zone."

Marilisa and Walter went prospecting in coastal Tuscany, drawn there by its new wave of freewheeling winemaking. "We really wanted to work in an eccentric wine-producing area, where we could plant international varieties," Marilisa explains. "When we arrived in Bolgheri it was love at first sight."

The family invested together with Leonardo LoCascio, who was the founder of Winebow, then their U.S. importer. By early 2002, they'd purchased more than 120 acres, including about 17 acres of vineyards planted chiefly to Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc in Bolgheri's mineral-rich hills.

The estate was named Poggio al Tesoro, and Walter was its driving force. But in 2003, he suffered a fatal heart attack while swimming off Tuscany's Elba island.

In addition to their grief over Walter's death, the family had to deal with the future in Bolgheri. Marilisa didn't want to sell, but





LoCascio did. He sold his interest to the family.

Franco took over Walter's responsibility for the vineyards around Fumane. Marilisa, working with consultants and local agronomists, assumed leadership in Bolgheri, where she grew holdings to more than 170 acres.

Working out of a winery squeezed into a local warehouse, Poggio al Tesoro produces three red wines, including Dedicato a Walter, a 100 percent Cabernet Franc IGT. In 2004, Marilisa decided to add a signature white wine, from Vermentino grapes planted in the sandy plain of western Bolgheri.

Vermentino is permitted as a single-variety wine in the young Bolgheri appellation. But Marilisa wanted to produce something exceptional. "I didn't want to make another easy-drinking Pinot Grigio-type wine," she says. "I wanted a wine with complexity, intensity, acidity and longevity."

Tuscan agronomist Stefano Bartolomei suggested planting a Corsican clone of Vermentino—"the only one that keeps acidity when grapes are ripe," says Marilisa.

The resulting wine, called Solosole, has been a commercial success since its first vintage, 2006 (87 points, \$20), and production

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Carrying on the legacy of Walter Allegrini, Lorenzo Fortini (left) makes the wines at Bolgheri's Poggio al Tesoro, while Walter's daughter Silvia (right) represents the Allegrini brand around the world.

has increased over time. Quality too is on an upswing: The 2015 earned an outstanding 90-point score (\$23).

With the 2015 harvest, Poggio al Tesoro winemaker Lorenzo Fortini experimented with a small amount of late-harvest Vermentino macerated on skins for two days before pressing and then left on the lees for five months. On a trip to Bolgheri last summer, Marilisa was so impressed with the rich results of that experiment that she decided to release a limited-edition 2015 (500 cases, under screwcap, to be released this year).

“I don't know what we'll call it,” she says excitedly. “Maybe a super Vermentino.”

Success in Bolgheri was followed by a purchase in Montalcino in 2007. On this project, Marilisa went in as equal partner with LoCascio, with whom she had become romantically involved. The couple bought Poggio San Polo, an estate located at the eastern edge of Montalcino; founded in 1994, it had subsequently been sold and expanded. They paid 12 million euros for 54 acres of land, including 40 acres of organic Sangiovese vineyards, and a new bio-architectural winery.

But in 2010, even before Marilisa and LoCascio could toast the release of their 2007 Brunello di Montalcino, their relationship ended. “Even the best love story—if you don't have the possibility to live together—at one point must end,” Marilisa says. “I didn't want to live in America, and he didn't want to live in Italy.”

Marilisa bought out LoCascio's stake over five years and put the shares in the names of her two children.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

Asked about the future, Marilisa says, “I think I have done enough for my lifetime. Now I want to consolidate.”

There remains plenty to do just in Fumane. The Villa della Torre property, which had been abandoned in the 1950s, is only half renovated. Allegrini has rights to plant 50 acres on the hillside above the villa, and the family plans to break ground this year for a new winery designed by Mario Botta, a Switzerland-born, Italy-based architect most noted for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, built in 1994.

This year, Allegrini will add to its top-shelf lineup by reintroducing its single-vineyard Amarone Fieramonte with the 2011 vintage. The *cru* was taken off the market decades ago, when the site was ravaged by disease. The vineyards were replanted, but the Allegrinis waited until the vines were old enough to deliver a complex wine.

These days Marilisa is a more cautious businesswoman—sobered by the financial crisis of 2008, from which Italy has not fully recovered. “It was a nightmare,” she says, recalling how the family purchased Villa della Torre in May 2008

## Recent Releases From the Allegrini Family of Wineries

### Allegrini

SCORE	WINE	PRICE	CASES IMPORTED
92	Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2012	\$85	1,300
92	Corvina Veronese La Poja 2011	\$95	300
90	Veronese La Grola 2013	\$35	600
89	Veronese Palazzo della Torre 2013	\$23	19,740
86	Valpolicella 2015	\$17	17,000

### Poggio al Tesoro

SCORE	WINE	PRICE	CASES IMPORTED
94	Bolgheri Superiore Dedicato a Walter 2011	\$99	100
92	Bolgheri Superiore Sondaia 2013	\$55	1,880
90	Vermentino Toscana Solosole 2015	\$23	3,000

### Poggio San Polo

SCORE	WINE	PRICE	CASES IMPORTED
94	Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2010	\$150	50
91	Brunello di Montalcino 2011	\$60	300



In the garden of Villa della Torre, the Allegrinis' 16th-century estate in Veneto, Marilisa looks to the future of the family business with her daughters, Carlotta (left) and Caterina.

and four months later came the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy.

At the beginning of the recession, in early 2009, company revenues were down 60 percent from the previous year. “We needed to have cash flow to pay the mortgage. I said, ‘What can I do?’ and I started traveling like crazy. I went everywhere and I started hiring people to cover our markets. I understood that importers in a time of crisis don’t want to be forgotten.”

Marilisa was on the road 220 days in 2009. By the end of the third quarter, revenues were off only 20 percent, and Allegrini’s wine businesses finished the year up 8 percent. Since 2011, she says, revenues have doubled, and she believes they can rise another two-thirds to about 50 million euros in the next decade as wine solidifies its place in American culture and is embraced by young Chinese.

“The wine market will never stop,” she says, sitting one afternoon in the manicured gardens of Villa della Torre.

In the U.S., Allegrini has joined forces with California’s E.&J. Gallo. After launching its prestige LUX Wines portfolio in 2014, Gallo signed Allegrini and Poggio al Tesoro as its first estates.

Gallo’s broad distribution contracts and its emphasis on a small portfolio of no more than 15 brands appealed to the Allegrinis. For Gallo, Allegrini represented a marquee brand with growth potential, and as a category Amarone was booming.

“To use a shopping-mall term, we needed an anchor tenant,” says Roger Nebedian, senior vice president and general manager of Gallo’s Premium Wine Division. “As we thought about the iconic regions of Italy we thought about Barolo, Montalcino and Amarone. We started looking for the highest quality Amarone, and that led us to Allegrini.”

As for the next generation, Walter’s daughter, Silvia, 41, works in sales and marketing, and Franco’s eldest son, Francesco, 29, has worked in sales, while his two younger sons are still at university.

Marilisa has two daughters: Carlotta, 28, is finishing her post-medical school pediatric training, and Caterina, 25, recently completed advanced studies in philosophy. Though Caterina has no experience in the wine business, Marilisa showed her confidence by naming her CEO of San Polo. She explains the move by noting that she herself began leading Allegrini’s sales and marketing decades earlier “with no real experience.”

“I think Caterina is ready for the challenge,” says Marilisa, who predicts her younger daughter “will run the whole company one day—she is so tough.”

“It’s our dream they will continue together,” Marilisa says. “Family can be difficult and it can be a risk. But if they stay together as a family, they have a great opportunity.” □

