

Italy's New Faces: Luca Sanjust

When wine becomes art

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Posted: November 5, 2003

Page [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [5](#) | [6](#) | [7](#) | [8](#) | [9](#) | [10](#) | [11](#)

It's been some time since Luca Sanjust has been in his art studio -- a barnlike building perched on a small knoll on his family's 665-acre Tuscan wine estate, Fattoria Petrolo. In fact, he hasn't even picked up a paintbrush in more than three years. Instead, he spends his time making top-class super Tuscan reds.

"It was my mother who persuaded me to make the move from Rome to Tuscany to make wine," explains the 43-year-old artist. "It was a loaded call," he adds. "It meant me possibly having to give up my career as an artist, but I was ready to take it on, because I believed that the family estate could produce great wine."

Until Sanjust's arrival in 1993, Petrolo was one of many estates in the region producing weak, monotonous reds under the Chianti Colli Aretini appellation, although the winery did make a tiny amount of a very good pure Sangiovese called Torrione. But the combination of Sanjust's creative instinct and the sound advice of top Tuscan consulting enologist Giulio Gambelli has transformed Petrolo's wines into some of Tuscany's best. The estate no longer makes a Chianti Colli Aretini, but Torrione continues, only better. And Sanjust now makes one of the best Merlots in Italy, Galatrona, which has been compared to some of the top names in Bordeaux, including Pétrus.

Sanjust has no formal training as a winemaker. He's taken the same approach to wine as he did to painting, which he learned through visiting and working with other artists. The strategy has clearly worked in both cases. By 1984, he was showing his paintings internationally and was represented by galleries in Milan, Rome and Paris. His paintings were selling for \$5,000 to \$20,000, and by the time of his last solo exhibition in Paris, he had already been called "one of the most promising contemporary young Italian artists" by renowned American critic Barbara Rose.

"It's the same with winemaking," he says. "I didn't go to enology school; I went instead to Bordeaux and visited the great châteaux and talked with some of the greatest winemakers in the world."

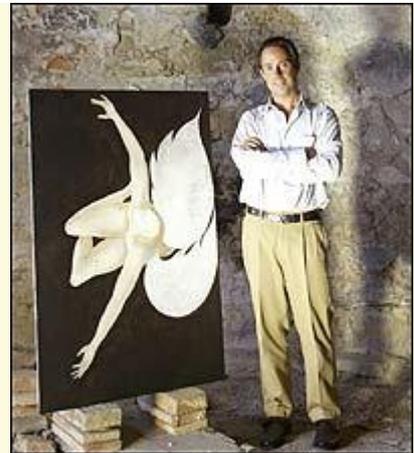
Sanjust's Bordeaux trips confirmed his love for the great Merlots of Pomerol, a passion that fueled the idea of producing a pure Merlot in Tuscany from the vineyards that his mother, Lucia, had planted on the estate in 1990. The Merlot grapes originally were to be blended with the Sangiovese for Torrione. But Sanjust says the Merlot fruit showed such potential at harvest time that he decided to create a new wine -- Galatrona, named after the ruined tower that sits high on the hill at the peak of the estate.

"At the start," says Sanjust, "it was a bit frightening -- like standing in front of a blank canvas. I suppose it was pure presumption to think we could make a wine like a Pomerol, but we went ahead anyway."

Beginning with the first vintage in 1994, every vintage of Galatrona has received at least an outstanding score from *Wine Spectator*, and the recently released 2001 is the third classic-rated vintage in succession for the bottling. The 2001 Torrione is not far behind, scoring outstanding.

When Sanjust isn't traveling to promote his wines or involved in the daily running of the estate, you might spot him buzzing around the Tuscan countryside on his Kawasaki Retro motorbike, visiting friends at other wineries. Sanjust still spends some time in Rome, where he has an apartment in the city center. His wife, Sabina, also a well-known artist, still bases her work in the capital city. The couple has two children: Rocco, 11, and Lucia, 8.

I hope I haven't hung up my palette and brushes for the last time," says Sanjust, "but an artist has to dedicate his whole being and 100 percent of his time to his art. I was faced with the question: Art or wine? I chose wine."



Sanjust left a successful career as a painter to make wine at his family's estate in Tuscany.

Italy's New Generation **Winemaker Profiles:**

Albiera Antinori

Luca d'Attoma

Elisabetta Foradori

Lamberto Frescobaldi

Barbera Kronenberg-Widmer

Francesca Planeta

Alberto Tasca d'Almerita

Cesare Turini

Luca Currado Vietti