

VERTICAL TASTING: GALATRONA, THE SERENDIPITOUS SENSATION



Luca Sanjust standing in front of the medieval watchtower of Galatrona.

Lucia Sanjust, whose family owns Petrolo, died over the weekend. She was an inspiration and role model to Luca Sanjust, having been the one to convince him to enter the wine world.

Lucia would go on to create one of Italy's most successful brands, the pure merlot wonder Galatrona. In fact, it was Lucia who first planted the merlot at the estate back in the '90s, originally intending to blend the grapes into Torrone. She will be sorely missed.

—

These days, you'll probably find Luca Sanjust on the road somewhere, promoting his wines or giving a seminar as one of Italy's top producers. But it wasn't too long ago that his creations were more likely to be hanging in an art gallery than being poured at a wine fair.



Lucia Sanjust will be deeply missed.

By the '80s, Sanjust was considered a promising new face in the Italian art scene. Living in Rome, the artist was drawing praise from critics and interest from prominent exhibitions alike. But in 1993, he decided to move to his family's rural estate in Tuscany, Petrolo, leaving his paintbrushes behind.

The family bought the land and planted the first vines there in 1947. The hilly landscape looks out on the Arno Valley with its olive groves and slightly rundown farmhouses not far from Florence; it's an area that – unlike Bolgheri or Montalcino – still captures a sense of rustic charm.

By the time of Sanjust's arrival, the winery made a dry and rather meager Chianti Colli Aretini, like many others, and a decent but as of yet unexciting sangiovese, Torrone.

Even so, the time was ripe. The Super Tuscan movement was coming of age and many were already boasting of proven success with international varieties, thanks to improved techniques in viticulture and winemaking.

Luca became passionate about merlot. He travelled to Bordeaux and visited the great châteaux, primarily those on the Right Bank, where he became friends with a number of top vigneroni.

The family already had some merlot, his mother Lucia having planted a few hectares back in 1990. But the intention had always been to blend it into Torrone.

Then the eureka moment came in 1994. During that year's harvest, the family completely forgot about one parcel of the merlot. Having picked it so late, they thought it best to vinify it separately, unsure of the quality.

And who should stumble into the estate's rather basic tasting room that year but the young James Suckling, who had begun covering Europe for the Wine Spectator. James was so impressed that he convinced Luca to bottle the wine as a pure merlot.

This serendipitous story was how the pure merlot sensation now known as Galatrona came to be. Its namesake is the property's iconic square tower, which was built as an important fortification in medieval times.

Although today Petrolo produces a number of excellent wines — including the Torrone, now a great value wine in its own right — it's Galatrona that is sought after by collectors around the world.

James often likens Galatrona to Le Pin. The wine shares the same immense power but also sublime tannin structure and finesse.

The terroir of Galatrona also bears some resemblance to Le Pin. Its 10 hectares slope close to the valley, where the soil is rich with all-important clay, just like the famous, low-lying Pomerol plateau. This comes in handy particularly during drier years, when the loam holds onto the scarce moisture.

Nevertheless, Galatrona is a distinctly Italian cru, the obvious point being that it is a lot hotter in the summer in Tuscany. Just as importantly though, the entire parcel is dotted with large rocks unique to Chianti: alberese, a type of marlstone made from fossils, and galestro, a type of shale.

The first great vintage of Galatrona was the legendary 1997, a year that put many names on the map in Tuscany. It also performed exceptionally well in '98 and '99. In fact, the '98 is the only Galatrona to have picked up the elusive 100-point rating — not as a young wine but at a number of James' recent retrospectives.



Galatrona was first created by Luca Sanjust in 1994 – this is the bottle that started it all.

In the hotter years such as 2017, 2011, 2007 and 2000, the wine shows an iron fist of fruit while maintaining a sense of structure and minerality. It also performs well in cooler years such as 2014, 2010 and 2008, where it shows a more nuanced character of black olives and undergrowth.

The most exciting modern vintage though has to be the 2015. The product of a true Goldilocks harvest, it's densely thick but never fat, intricately ornate but never overworked. The 2016 is not far behind, if slightly more fine and reserved. One thing's for sure: there are many more pages to be written in the storybook of this great Italian merlot.

Check out the tasting notes below of Galatrona going back to 1997. Petrolo started using the local Valdarno di Sopra DOC as opposed to the better-known Toscana IGT designation starting with the 2014 vintage. Small quantities of a Galatrona in amphora are also made, although the project is in its infancy.



TASTING NOTES

PETROLO VALDARNO DI SOPRA GALATRONA 2016

Country Italy	Score	98	The aromas of dried flowers, stones, dark tea leaves, hot tile, and dark berries. Full-bodied, yet tight and linear. Wonderful drive and depth. An extremely long and focused finish. A great wine. Needs four or five years to come together. Try in 2022.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2016			

PETROLO VALDARNO DI SOPRA GALATRONA 2015

Country Italy	Score	99	Terrific aromas of violets, roses and raspberries with hints of strawberries and brown sugar. Full body. Phenomenal layers of focused fruit and polished velvety tannins. This is the Galatrona that everyone has been waiting for. It's the vintage that shows depth and power yet wonderful finesse and focus. Best ever. Drink from 2023 but already electrifying.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2015			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2013

Country Italy	Score	98	The violets and blackberries show wonderfully on the nose here, yet this remains subtle and complete with hints of walnuts. Full body, ultra-fine and firm tannins and a beautiful fruit and mineral undertone. Tight and substantial. So layered. Another example of finesse and beauty here with this pure merlot. Better in 2018.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2013			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2012

Country Italy	Score	96	Very racy and refined with bright acidity and a blueberry and dark-chocolate character. Love the interplay of acidity and ripe fruit. Minerals and dark fruits, too. Very Pomerol. Pure merlot. Better in 2016 when it softens.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2012			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2011

Country Italy	Score	99	This is a phenomenal pure merlot with blueberries, raspberries and hints of milk chocolate. Some nutmeg too. Full body with very fine yet chewy tannins and a long, intense finish. Reminds me of the amazing 1998. Best ever from here. Needs four or five years of bottle age to soften.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2011			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2010

Country Italy	Score	95	Aromas of black olives, violets and fresh fruit follow through to a full body, with a dense palate of dark fruits and olives. Long and polished. Handmade wine. You sense it. Pure Merlot sensation. Try in 2014.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2010			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2009

Country Italy	Score	97	Amazing aromas of black truffles, crushed blackberries and dark chocolate. Dried flowers too. Full-bodied, with wonderful fruit that is layered and gorgeous. The finish is fruity, long and stylish. Give it three years to come together. Best after 2013.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2009			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2008

Country Italy	Score	95	This shows lots of smoky and meaty aromas with black olives and brown sugar. Balsamic too! It's full-bodied and velvety with a beautiful finish. Why wait?
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2008			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2007

Country Italy	Score	98	Wonderful aromas and flavors of violets and crushed blackberries. Just a touch of cream. Ripe, powerful tannins and a full body, with incredible flavors of dark chocolate and blueberries. Goes on for minutes on the palate.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2007			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2004

Country Italy	Score	98	This has always been a superb red with beautiful aromas of crushed berries, flowers and hints of hazelnuts. It's still tight and powerful with a full body and firm and lightly chewy tannins. Beautiful now to drink but one for the cellars.
Region Tuscany			
Vintage 2004			

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2001

Country Italy
Region Tuscany
Vintage 2001

Score
96

A wonderfully toned merlot with aromas of crushed flowers and ripe berries that follow through to a full body, very fine tannins and a long and flavorful finish. Will continue to improve with age but why wait?

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 2000

Country Italy
Region Tuscany
Vintage 2000

Score
95

This is drinking beautifully now with plenty of dark berries and hints of chocolate in a medium-bodied, round and savory package.

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 1998

Country Italy
Region Tuscany
Vintage 1998

Score
100

I underestimated this wine when I first tasted it and the few times I have had it since, it has proven to be superb. A perfect bottle. It always shows a balsamic character with an exotic Thai basil and ripe-fruit undertone. Pure, so complex and balanced. It goes on and on and on. A triumph.

PETROLO TOSCANA GALATRONA 1997

Country Italy
Region Tuscany
Vintage 1997

Score
96

This is still holding on beautifully with balsamic aromas that are very rich and powerful. The ever-impressive fruit comprises plums and raspberries. It's full-bodied with silky and caressing tannins. Always a joy to drink. Drink now.
