



## Q&A with Eataly Wine Director, Dan Amatuzzi

By [Amy Zavatto](#) January 16, 2013

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EM: How long have you been wine director for Eataly, and what does that entail?

DA: Since August 2010. It entails purchasing the wines for the for restaurants, managing the wine list, training staff and servers, also sourcing the wines for the wine shop.

EM: Oh wow, you do that, too?

DA: I do, but it's largely the same because we sell what we cook, and we cook what we sell. The idea is that everything you have in the restaurants can be enjoyed and available for retail. So with the wine, all the wines that are available in the restaurants are for sale in the shop, too. There's also the rooftop restaurant, and I source the wines and train the staff for that, too. I'd say the only thing out of ordinary between this and other beverage directors is that we have a culinary school, and I teach the wine classes for that, as well as wine education with food classes as well.

EM: That's a lot to handle, plus you're working for Joe Bastianich, who makes wine, too. That seems intimidating! Does that add an extra component to your job?

DA: It does – I've worked for him at 3 others — Del Posto, Babbo, and Otto – so it's a good model. We do focus on incorporating his wines. He has three properties: Brandini in Piedmont; Bastianich in Friuli; and La Mozza in Tuscany. So we're always rotating those wines and also introducing other producers. We try to offer things that are staples to keep a well-rounded program, but also find rare and obscure bottles to keep it interesting.

EM: How did you get your start in wine, and how did you come to focus on Italian wine?

DA: I've always been interested in wine. My family drank a lot of it when I was growing up. And then I studied abroad in Florence for a semester and saw how wine and food came together on the table and what it meant culturally.

EM: Your last name is unmistakably Italian, too.

DA: Well, my parents were born here, but both sets of my grandparents were born in Italy, in Calabria and Puglia. So after my experience there I came back and focused on my studies. Then I graduated and I was a wine rep for one year with Rad Grapes, who sold mostly Spanish and California wines, and then after a year I thought restaurants might be a little more exciting and I'd get to taste a little more wine. I went to work for Jean Georges as a back-waiter for 6 months, and then later at Babbo where I worked my way up.

EM: Were you studying restaurant management or something like that in college?

DA: No, I was an Economics major at Villa Nova University.

EM: That's not a bad background for someone who's buying wine.

DA: Yeah, it works!

EM: What do you think it is about the Italian culture that makes it the cornerstone spot for the concept of Slow Food and Slow Wine?

DA: It's funny – ever since I started working here and we had a culinary school I'm starting to see a lot of the same questions and that's made me think a lot about this. It's something I've been looking at, and I'm working on a book due out next fall called *A First Course in Wine* (Quayside Publishers), and a lot of that is about how to explain wine to the beginner. And I realized that Italy has so many indigenous grapes. Whereas international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are always kinds of grapes traced back to France, so if you look at Australia and South America or the U.S., all those countries incorporate grapes from France. But Italy remains so untapped; it's a never ending source for new-old grapes. There's always a new grape to learn, and there's never really an end in sight for really mastering Italian wine. That's why Italy is kind of the prime place for a concept like Slow Wine.

EM: When it comes to grape varieties and their indigenous regions and winemaking, are you a traditionalist, or are you more modern-minded — and can these two things ever meet on friendly ground?

DA: I'd say I'm a modernist in a sense that I am drawn to wines that are approachable. I think the concept of aging wines really only applies to a small percentage of all the wine made. But a lot of people have this conception that all wine is better when it's older. The beauty of wine in my opinion is it's different to everybody and there are no real right or wrong answers. A wine that you can just open up and are ready to drink and that many people can enjoy simultaneously is my kind of wine. Through modern technology, a lot are wines really are ready to drink. Even if they were tannic grapes like Nebbiolo or Sangiovese, some techniques can soften the tannins and make the wines more approachable. But it's a double-edged sword because a lot of these wineries market their wines now as simultaneously "approachable now but can age for 20 years!" And that's kind of confusing for the consumer.

EM: What would you wait to open?

DA: Any new releases of Barolo I'd hold off on opening for a few years. Young wines I've had of that kind tend to be kind of intense and insane. But I appreciate science for all its innovation and technology in hopes that it makes wines more approachable, acceptable, and universal.

EM: Universal?

DA: Yes.

EM: In the sense that grape varieties may be grown in places beyond their home? I think that's what you were hinting at before about Italy as an untapped resource for indigenous varieties and the creativity and discovery that goes with that. That makes me think of producers in New York, like Channing Daughters and their winemaker Christopher Tracey, who's been very passionate about working with Italian varieties and has done well with them. But does this muddy up the notion of Italian terroir to you, or is it giving a grape a chance to show itself in new and surprising ways?

DA: The latter – it's a good opportunity to see what the same grape is capable of doing in a different land and made by a different person. American winemakers aren't really bogged down by tradition, or by generations of doing same thing. There's nothing holding us back. Prohibition was devastating in a way but it was also pretty good because we ripped up a lot of old [lambrusca] vineyards and really started focusing on vinifera varieties, and how to make wine easier, better, make more of it, and make better-quality wine.

EM: Who are some of your favorite sustainably-minded producers in Italy?

DA: Valle Reale from Abruzzo; Joe's Brandini, which is organic. Di Giovanna, which is also certified organic and they're from Sicily. Part of the problem, though, is some people say they're practicing organic, or working towards organic or biodynamic producing, but it's hard to tell who is and who isn't. But anyone who really cares about long-term sustainability in their vineyard is going to minimize chemicals, only irrigate and spray copper sulfites when they have to. But it's interesting how it's labeled and marketed here in comparison to Europe.

AZ: America is the largest national Slow Food chapter after Italy, and NYC is the largest city chapter after Rome, so it makes sense that last year Slow Food launched the concept of Slow Wine here in the US – but how do you think putting the Snail Seal of Approval on a wine bottle can be a game-changer?

DA: There are a lot of labels — the whole DOC and DOCG system, for instance. But once you get into Italian wine you learn that the DOC system isn't always a sign of quality. Like sustainable, biodynamic, and organic doesn't necessarily mean it's a quality wine. But with Slow Wine I think it's the most credible and viable wine way to differentiate one from the next. Credibility is a big part of it. The whole organization was founded on quality and fair price. And that makes a difference.

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