Apollonio 1870's goal: developing presence in the USA

scritto da Emanuele Fiorio | 7 Dicembre 2021



We interviewed **Massimiliano Apollonio**, owner and oenologist of Apollonio 1870.

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of an American importer who wants to propose new Italian wines in the US market, why should he or she turn to you? Can you give us a synthetic picture of your peculiarities?

Answering this question is always a challenge, especially in a moment like the present one, in which communication and slogans have an essential role and induce everyone to present at his or her best.
There is a general homologation that sees abused concepts such as quality, authenticity, goodness and, in the end, you lose the sense, as well as the real correspondence with the products offered.
Apollonio Casa Vinicola gives burdens and honors.
In my winery wine has been produced since 1870, but not only. It is first of all a long story.
Both because I have the honor of leading – together with my

brother Marcello – one of the few Italian Historical Enterprises, recognized as such by the Chamber of Commerce, but also because mine is a family business and it is, therefore, a family story.
And when you have been producing wine for such a long time (151 years), the above mentioned concepts and the awards – both national and international – which daily reward our wines, are not just an honor, but a burden, because we are always called to give our best, out of gratitude to those who came before us and spur to those who, hopefully, will come after.
Therefore, historicity, quality and genuineness of the product, and again, daily passion and commitment are the engine that guides our choices every day.
If I had to sum up everything with one word, I would use responsibility.
Choosing our wines, in fact, means choosing a responsible company which makes the respect of its tradition and of the final customer a commandment which cannot be ignored.

According to the latest ISTAT data, in the first 7 months of 2021 the United States consolidated its leadership as the first export destination for Italian wine, with a growth of +18.8% for more than one billion euros. How do you plan to take advantage of this positive trend?

The USA has always represented an interesting destination, declined in every form: literary, existential and, without a doubt, commercial.
Even my winery – already present in the US market – nourishes the "American dream" of a more massive and widespread presence of our wines in all the 50 States!
In order to make the most of the positive situation we are talking about, I believe it is essential to find a stable importer, covering the whole area of action or a large part of it, with whom to establish a relationship of collaboration and trust in order to maximize, even more than sales, the

spreading of Apollonio 1870 brand.
Together we could:

- analyze the product, in order to address it in the best way on the market,
- define the areas of intervention,
- plan periodic meetings that strengthen the partnership and make known more and more the seriousness of the company and the quality of the product offered,
- plan promotional campaigns aimed at spreading and selling our wines on online platforms which, even though they had already anticipated their great potentialities, during the pandemic period have undoubtedly imposed their presence.

The US market is notoriously very competitive, which are the commercial and marketing/communication strategies you are going to develop in order to implement your image and notoriety in this key market?

The American market is undoubtedly one of the most challenging. It requires us to stay updated and in line with consumer needs.
During my travels in the U.S. one of the things that struck me most was not only the vastness of the offer and the complexity of the market, but also the existence of products with a decidedly innovative packaging, I would say “curious”, disruptive and completely different from the “more classic” packaging present in the Italian and European market.
This necessarily pushes us to focus great attention on communication and marketing.
My company is already planning ad hoc investments in order to improve our communication strategy at 360 degrees. The plan will cover every aspect, from social media to labels and everything that can make the company’s image more competitive and appealing, without diverting attention from the main focus: the product and its quality.
A lot of work will have to be done in terms of brand awareness

because, as previously said, I believe it is important to make oneself known, by linking to one’s name a series of elements that give relevance and echo to the characteristics of our wines, selling is just the next step.

As far as Horeca is concerned, are you seeing a real recovery or are we still in the running-in phase?

Our presence on the American market is obviously mediated by agents/importers, which is why we do not have direct feedback on the trend of the sector.
From the information we have available, we are still in the running-in phase with timid signs of recovery. However, the moment is still very delicate, so we cannot make any short-term forecasts.

The logistics sector is at a particular moment, given the current problems linked to international shipments: delays, lack of containers, rising costs, port closures, long delivery times. Also in relation to the US market, how are you dealing with these difficulties and what are the prospects and developments of this situation?

We have had and still have slowdowns due to the problems you have highlighted. We do not directly manage the logistic aspects, in the sense that it is always our customers who organize the load. This is why we can only hope that the situation will become more fluid as soon as possible to avoid slowing down departures and, consequently, trade.
An adequate planning of times and an effective synergy among all the operators involved, which also considers these delays, I believe this could be the key to avoid excessive postponements.

In the US, wine e-commerce has been growing a lot and data for the first half of 2021 show an increase in DTC wine shipments of 12.2% in value and 1.9% in volume. How are you moving forward in this regard?

This is an aspect I have already mentioned, concerning marketing and communication strategies.
I believe, in fact, that the e-commerce channel is not only a sales tool, but first and foremost a good pivot to communicate the presence of a company in the territory and its ability to reach the consumer immediately and directly.
Unfortunately, in the USA (as well as in other countries) it is not possible to sell one's wine directly to the final consumer, as some steps are needed such as import, customs clearance, sale to consumers having proper licenses and, finally, to the final customer.
I believe that in this context the figure of the importer and distributor plays a fundamental role, as well as that of digital platforms provided with the necessary licenses.
Not less important is the role of wine clubs whose catalogs often include Italian wines and that could be an excellent way to sell, even online.

One of your peculiarities is about the valorization of Salento's autochthonous grape varieties (Negroamaro, Primitivo, Malvasia nera, Susumaniello, Bianco d'Alessano). How did you recover and develop these local varieties?

We produce wine in one of the richest and most interesting regions of Italy: Apulia. Our tradition has always been linked to welcoming and our borders have always been touched and crossed by people from the South of the world.
This has meant that our territorial history has been intertwined with the stories and traditions of those who crossed us or hosted us, who inevitably left something of themselves. One example among all, the Greeks, who gave us so much in terms of culture, tradition and viticulture.
Apulia is a region which has a very high heritage of autochthonous vines. There are about 100 of them.
Starting from this basis, it was right to work with what our nature, culture and tradition offered us.
I would not talk about recovery, but rather of valorization.

Varieties such as Susumaniello and Bianco d'Alessano – two autochthonous vines which until few years ago were almost unknown even in the panorama of Italian consumers – have been strongly wanted by me in our portfolio (I am the owner and also the winemaker of the winery), because they are the expression of the most promising and authentic Apulia.
Negroamaro, also widely present in Apollonio's line, is the main grape variety in Salento: the last strip of land of our wonderful region, as well as the area where our winery is located.
For us Salento inhabitants, Negroamaro means family. It is the first wine you drink when you are a child, when adults pour a drop of it to color the water of children to make them feel "grown up".
And more… our DOP: Copertino (the area where the company is located), Squinzano, Salice Salentino and, of course, Primitivo di Manduria.
Each of them (apart from the last one which is 100% Primitivo in the bottle) represents a harmonious blend of autochthonous vines, because I believe this is the best way to present and honor the territory where we are located.

And speaking of our DOP, allow me to recall a memory that makes me proud, especially when talking about the U.S. market: back in 1999, our Copertino DOP red was defined as "The best buy" by Wine Enthusiast. This is one of the many important recognitions that, as I mentioned earlier, we receive both nationally and internationally. Proof, I hope and believe, that we work hard and we work at our best.
Continuing on this theme, I would like to make you understand how rich Apulia is: Sangiovese, so well known in the world, is the "son" of Ciliegiolo and Negrodolce, ancient native Apulian varieties. Moreover, in the north of Puglia, we also boast a native variety of Montepulciano, present in blends in some of our DOP.
Apulia is a generous mother for those who honor her with gratitude.

The recovery of autochthonous vines is linked to your attention to sustainability and biodiversity conservation. Can you tell us about your commitment in this direction?

The preservation of biodiversity is the basis of a sustainable development, as well as the future of agriculture and economy. We try to address this issue through an integrated management of water, land and plants that avoids waste and allows the conservation and use of resources in a fair and sustainable way.
In addition, we do not use harmful treatments for soil, plants and fruits.
We could define our wines as “naturally organic”, this because the three elements that characterize Salento – sun, sea and wind – besides being indispensable to determine the organoleptic characteristics of our wines, are also of fundamental importance for a healthy growth of the vines and for a natural protection from parasites (the wind is our great ally against moulds and harmful fungi). This means a very low human intervention and a very high protection and valorization of biodiversity which, among other things, is the first way to go in order to produce genuine and quality wine like ours.