



GEORGOFILI WORLD

Newsletter of the Georgofili Accademy

SANGIOVESE UNGRAFTED

by Claudio Milanesi,
Mauro Cresti

July 15 2016



The Sangiovese is the most valuable, famous, and widespread red-wine grape variety in central Italy. Its origin and provenance are uncertain. Some studies of the historical and angiographic sources have highlighted two distinct nuclei, one in the Romagna hills and the other in the Tuscan hills, whereas the germoplasm differences between the two nuclei

might highlight a common ancient origin with a subsequent differentiation over the centuries. As the legend goes, the name derives from a bishop's exclamation, who, in the Middle Ages, finding himself on Mount Giovi in the Apennine ridge of Mount Morello, after tasting this full-bodied wine compared it to Jove's thunderbolts and the god's strong and warm blood (*sanguis Jovis*). Meanwhile, Francesco Redi, already by 1655 a fellow of the Accademia della Crusca, wrote in his work *Bacco in Toscana* (1685), "*If the pleasing blood of grapes does not refresh our veins all the time, this life is too weak, too short, and always amid a sea of pain. [...] But if you ask for the purplish drink from Lappoggio, you will dry up all the wine in the cellar.*" In his work, Redi refers to Falerno, the ancient Roman wine known in the late Republican era of ancient Rome. What is certain is that Sangiovese's origins are lost in the mists of time. Since the VIII century BC, it seems there are archaeological traces confirming the presence of the two original strains, namely the Romagna and the Tuscan ones. Moreover, this could confirm two different migrations, a commercial one by the Greeks that reached southern Italy by sea and then *empòrion Pithekoussai* (Ischia) and Elba. The other by the Etruscans to extend their boundaries (reported by Herodotus, V century BC) who, leaving from Anatolia by land, under the Etruscan leader Tirreno, conquered the Umbrians and Villanovans, and gave his name to Etruria's sea. In those days, the cuttings, produced by slips and then planted, were ungrafted, i.e., they were not attached to a rootstock of American grapevines following the phylloxera, powdery mildew and downy mildew plague, which arrived from northern Europe at the end of the 19th century. Indeed, their life was certainly superior to that of modern plants, in fact, up to our grandparents' times, there were really ancient vineyards cultivated according to traditional methods. The ancient growing technique involved setting up parallel rows at a distance of about 3 meters, where the vine, planted with a tree, was set in a bed consisting of a 1m x 1m "pit", with stone, pottery shard, and sandstone drainage. In this way, a tap root development of the grapevine was stimulated, with the root remaining fresh and never too moist or dry, safe from endemic diseases. There were basically two cultivation methods that followed the ancient wine propagation methods. The first favored the cordon systems to produce full-bodied, smooth and generous wines. The second, of Etruscan origin, tended to make the vines combined with trees grow high to get a clear light, sparkling wine. Today, clonal selection has led to standardizing the Sangiovese germoplasm, which represents the most widespread grape variety and is the base of the most important and prized Tuscan wines (Brunello di Montalcino, Chianti, and Nobile di Montepulciano). The vast range of the certified clones bear witness to this vine's great variability but, unfortunately, they do not provide the information on the adaptability and the vegetative-productive and oenological behavior that each entrepreneur should have before setting up a vineyard in the various production areas. The reasons for this variability are its widespread distribution that cause considerable genetic instability. Moreover, its greater environmental adaptability, in comparison to other cultivars, defines different quantitative and qualitative characteristics in different areas. It must be said that some varieties with stable characteristics in a given area can optimize a qualitative response emphasizing a specific sensory quality of the wine that is made from them. Perhaps we should orient ourselves from here to identify those populations to be used and avoid "sexual confusion" in small, isolated systems, propagated by cuttings of rootstocks, set in drained, sandy soils, planted with Sangiovese traditional methods for obtaining wines particularly typical. Production costs may discourage some companies because no longer connected with a general and real situation of the market, but the Sangiovese is a man-made and archaeological plant, a relic of our past that has accompanied us and, given its great adaptability, will be with us yet for a long time.

