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## A woman's sense of wine

**A** good wine has no gender. Even the most accomplished wine connoisseur would not be able to distinguish in a blind taste test whether a wine was produced by a male or female winemaker. Nevertheless, the stereotype of winemaking as a man's job still prevails. That being said, the number of innovative and courageous women winemakers is on the rise. In conversations with three successful female winemakers in three different parts of Europe, Julie Durlak attempted to establish—in this harsh and simultaneously relaxed profession, which can only be practiced successfully with the heightened use of all five senses—whether the intangible notion of a "woman's sense of wine" truly exists.



## Wine as a philosophy

**Barbara Widmer is a charming woman from Switzerland. Over the past 18 years, she has managed to turn the Brunacci winery, which her parents had purchased, into one of the best-known and distinctive wine brands in the Chianti region of Tuscany.**

**"E**very day is like a dating with the grapes. You really have to understand what they need and when. You might believe that they will give better if you do something to them during the fall or the new moon. Not many things are totally wrong or totally right. For me there is a bit of philosophy in winemaking," she says.

Widmer sees an advantage in the fact that she entered the winemaking business completely by accident. A bit more than 30 years ago, her parents had spent a Christmas in Tuscany and fallen in love with the region, so they decided to buy some real estate there.

"In that time in the 1980s, many estates here were empty. Usually someone wanted to invest in the countryside."

The bigger problem was not in finding a house to buy, but in the fact that the owners also wanted to sell the vineyards that came with the houses. "So, my parents became vineyard owners by accident, not by design."

When Widmer was a teenager, her parents tried to convince her to study oenology, or the science of wine and winemaking. However, since Zurich was not in a winemaking area, she opted for architecture instead, but failed to obtain a

series of failures in her studies.

"I was 21 when I decided to take a year off and figure out if wine could be my thing. I went to the French part of Switzerland and worked for six months in vineyards, then six months in a cellar. Every day."

By the end of that year, wine had become her passion, obsession and profession all in one. She then got a diploma in oenology at the technical college of higher wine education at Widemsdorf (Switzerland). Currently Brunacci produces half a million bottles of wine per year, which means that although the winery is not small, it is not among the largest either. Discounted red wines have been highly rated and placed near the top of annual wine lists by *Wine Spectator*, *Decanter* and Robert Parker's *The Wine Advocate*. The winery's pride and joy is 100%, which has already become a wine-lovers' classic. Widmer's architect's background, for its part, manifests itself in the typically bright paints on the walls of her winery's cellar.

"When I compare Brunacci with other estates, the fact that my family is not Italian and that I don't come from a traditional winemaking dynasty gives me the opportunity to see the things in a new way. I didn't have a grandfather to tell me what

to do. Of course, not having a background can be difficult because you have to recreate everything from zero, but for me it was an advantage. As long as the product is good, I don't see any limits for doing things in a different way."

In order to grow superb quality grapes, one has to spend an average of 300 hours working in a European vineyard. In Brunacci they spend 450 hours, because all of the work is done by hand.

"We have no difference in the way that we see treat our vineyards. Our philosophy is that every vineyard has the potential to make its best crop and produce our best quality wine. Of course, that doesn't always happen, but it's a challenge. For example, we have one vineyard which we do not consider to be our best. It's not bad, it's about average. But during a very year, I will get some of the best Sangiovese grapes there. How can I know in January if it will rain or not in the summer? By keeping all of my options open, I always have enough grapes to make my wine."

While the Tuscan climate is ideal for grape-growing, the weather remains unpredictable, turning each day on the job into a challenge.

"Even after 18 years, there is always something new and I have to think 'Oh, how should I do that?' It is only after the fact that you can say 'Oh, I did it right the way' or 'Maybe I could have done it better this way'."

While Widmer is usually open and very communicative, it is best not to disturb her during the harvest.

"Harvest time is very strange. I walk through the vineyards and try to understand what's going on. I check the leaves to see if they are still bright green or if they are already red. Does the berry still stick to the vine or does it detach easily? Is the skin thick or already very thin? There are a lot of small details that you can only get on the spot in the vineyards. I don't speak with anybody during the harvest and concentrate on my work. We don't send our grapes for analysis too often. An analysis can't tell you what you have to grasp with your eyes, your nose, and with all of your five senses."