



The Wines of Emidio Pepe: 1964 - 2001

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Bucking every trend and modern convention, the wines of Emidio Pepe represent one of the most singular expressions in winemaking today. That can't be too surprising given that Pepe himself is quite a personality. Initially somewhat stern, he seems to live in a world long gone by. Pepe doesn't say much except that all his wines are excellent and that he only drinks his own. Fortunately the wines speak for themselves. In a time of increasing convergence these wines stand out for their unique style, artisan approach and notable purity. Though the extremely traditional approach may not be for everyone, readers looking for wines that offer much complexity and evolution in the glass owe it to themselves to check out the wines of Emidio Pepe. I recently had the opportunity to survey a broad array of the estate's wines with Pepe's daughter Sofia and importer Doug Polaner in New York.

The property is located in the hills of Torano Nuovo in the Abruzzo region. "We are lucky to be in an area that is both close to the sea and to the mountains," says Pepe's daughter Sofia. "The proximity to the ocean is felt in the salinity of the wines while the mountain breezes bring respite from the heat in the evenings. The temperature fluctuations we get from the hot days and cool nights are essential for the grapes to mature gradually. We try to make wines that faithfully represent the character of each vintage, so the wines are typically very different from year to year."

Pepe's approach to winemaking is quite possibly the most unconventional I have yet encountered. Pepe treats his fruit and the resulting wines with the utmost care. All operations are meticulously carried out by hand. The estate farms its 7 hectares following bio-dynamic principles. The grapes are hand picked and de-stemmed. For the Trebbiano the grapes are crushed by foot in a wood vat and the must is fermented for 8-10 days in glass-lined cement. After fermentation the wine is racked into 22-hectoliter glass-lined cement tanks where it ages for roughly six months prior to being bottled.

The Montepulciano is fermented for about 10-12 days and subsequently aged for 24 months in glass-lined cement, which Pepe prefers over oak. "I think glass is the best medium for aging wines. It is no coincidence that extended bottle-aging is what allows wines to develop their fullest complexity," adds Emidio Pepe. Both wines are fermented without the aid of selected yeasts or temperature control. The wines are bottled with no SO₂ and laid down to rest for several years in the cellar which holds extensive stocks of virtually all past vintages.

As they age in bottle the wines undergo malolactic fermentation naturally. Before being released the bottles are opened and decanted one by one into new bottles after which

they are re-corked, labeled and shipped. There is no fining, filtration or SO2 added during the second bottling. Pepe's fanaticism extends to storage and when I saw him in New York recently he complained that temperature controlled rooms common in the city's top wine shops were too cold for his wines which he views as living creatures.

Like Sangiovese and Nebbiolo, Montepulciano benefits from the kind of extended growing season that balanced weather provides. Specifically with regards to Pepe's wines, the fresher vintages give wines of rich color, aromatic complexity, vibrant fruit and notable structure that allow the wines to age effortlessly for decades. In warmer vintages the wines often show less liveliness in color, riper fruit and a rustic, gamey character which I find less appealing. Around age ten or so the aging curve seems to flatten and the wines begin to approach maturity. In general I find Pepe's wines from the cooler vintages to offer more balance as well as elegance although the warmer vintages have also proven to age well, if slightly less gracefully.

While these are unique wines, there can be little doubt that the practice of releasing small batches of the wines over the course of many years almost certainly leads to bottle variation. I have never done a side-by-side comparison but it would seem likely that, for example, a properly cellared bottle of the 1979 Montepulciano purchased upon release will differ somewhat from a recently released bottle of that vintage which has spent the intervening years aging in Pepe's cellar prior to undergoing the re-conditioning program and being issued from the winery. For that reason, these notes and scores should be interpreted as general impressions rather than the more precise evaluations that are possible with most other wines. That said, these are fascinating, quirky wines that represent a singular approach to winemaking.

The **2001 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo** is super effort, with a floral, perfumed nose followed by complex sensations of jasmine, honey, apricots and minerals, and an engaging, soft, creamy texture. It offers exceptional length and great overall balance. This super-finessed white promises to drink well for at least another decade, if not considerably longer, but it is difficult to resist today. **91**/Anticipated maturity: 2006-2016. With its mature, slightly oxidized nose and evolving flavors of roasted nuts and candied orange peel, Pepe's **1995 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo** strikes a beautiful balance, showing more advanced nuances while maintaining excellent underlying freshness. My impression is that the vintage did not provide the raw materials of 2001 and this medium- to full-bodied wine is a great choice for drinking today and over the next few years as it appears to be at or near peak. **89**/Anticipated maturity: 2006-2010.

Pepe's awesome **2001 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** is a great introduction to this producer's wines. Richly colored, it offers an aromatic nose and layers of vibrant, sweet dark fruit that open in the glass, revealing a wine of outstanding purity that is full of life and energy. At once delicate and structured, it is one of the highlights of the afternoon. It should also be another long-lived wine from this estate and I imagine that its aging potential is decades. **92**/Anticipated maturity: after 2016. The **2000 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo**, from a much warmer vintage, is a big, powerful wine packed with dark fruit, earth and game notes. It doesn't have the level of finesse and balance of the 2001 and

its less lively color along with its evolving flavors suggest it will reach maturity sooner, although for this producer that is measured in relative terms. **90**/Anticipated maturity: after 2010. Just beginning to show some tertiary nuances, the **1998 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** is another terrific effort from this estate. It offers multi-dimensional nuances of leather, tar and cherries on soft, delicate frame supported by youthful but fine tannins with excellent freshness on the finish. Ideally another few years of cellaring are called for after which this wine will provide great drinking for several decades. **91**/Anticipated maturity: after 1998. The **1995 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo**, also from a hot vintage, is less intense in its color as well as slightly oxidized on the nose, displaying complex sensations of leather, marsala, stewed fruits, licorice, spice cake, menthol and roasted coffee beans. Though fully mature it shows excellent length and just enough freshness to keep things in balance. It is an excellent choice for current to medium-term consumption. **90**/Anticipated maturity: 2006-2011.

Pepe's **1993 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** offers notable complexity in its sensations of tar, roses, earthiness, mushrooms and sweet cherry fruit on a medium bodied frame with outstanding length. Although it is absolutely delicious today it also shows enough freshness and acidity to make me think that will age for at least another decade or more. **91**/Anticipated maturity: 2006-2016. The **1985 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** is another wine that is stunning today. A medium faded red, it opens with an alluring, ethereal nose followed by notes of tobacco, leather, stewed fruits and minerals. Much of the fruit has faded, yet this delicate, medium-bodied wine displays enough supporting structure and freshness to drink well for another ten years although it is a joy to drink right now. **91**/Anticipated maturity: 2006-2016. The fully mature **1983 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo**, a faded red, presents the wilder side of Montepulciano with an earthy, gamey profile and notes of licorice, leather and evolved, stewed fruits that develop in the glass. Its somewhat lean, angular personality and tart character are less than fully convincing in their overall balance and further cellaring is unlikely to improve things much. **89**/Anticipated maturity: 2006-2011.

The afternoon closed with three lovely wines from the 1960s and 1970s that are a testament to the longevity of the estate's wines. Though fully mature none of the wines appeared to be in a state of decline. The **1979 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** is simply a drop-dead gorgeous wine. It offers nuances of leather, licorice and a delicate core of sweet fruit that blossoms onto the palate with extraordinary length and purity of expression. It is a joy to drink today and although it should last for another few years, it is a wine that is peaking today and is unlikely to improve much with further cellaring. Anticipated maturity: **92**/Anticipated maturity: 2006-2011. Hard as it may seem to believe, this **1975 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** takes things to another level. It offers an irresistible profile of earth, licorice, leather and sweet dark fruit sensations supported by youthful structure, closing with a long, ethereal finish. Owing to the cooler vintage it is firmer and fresher than the 1979. This was the highlight of the afternoon. **93**/Anticipated maturity: 2006-2016. The delicate **1964 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** is another ethereal beauty, with captivating nuances of cocoa, licorice, spices, roasted coffee beans and soft, sweet fruit. This is Pepe's first vintage and the style here is decidedly more rustic than the previous wines. It offers excellent length and appears to be fully resolved.

Miraculously, it is the only one of these wines that seems to have arrived at full maturity!
90/Anticipated maturity: drink 2006-?

WINES:

Emidio Pepe 2001 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo 91

Emidio Pepe 1995 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo 89

Emidio Pepe 2001 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 92

Emidio Pepe 2000 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 90

Emidio Pepe 1998 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 91

Emidio Pepe 1995 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 90

Emidio Pepe 1993 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 91

Emidio Pepe 1985 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 91

Emidio Pepe 1983 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 89

Emidio Pepe 1979 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 92

Emidio Pepe 1975 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 93

Emidio Pepe 1964 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 90

—Antonio Galloni