

# Walter Massa Timorasso 1990–2012: The most famous unknown wine

**Kerin O’Keefe** explores the recovery and rise of Timorasso, the indigenous varietal that has achieved eminence in obscurity thanks to the creative determination and passion of one man

John Lennon once described his wife Yoko Ono as “the world’s most famous unknown artist. Everybody knows her name, but nobody knows what she does.” The same description can easily be applied to Timorasso, one of the most exciting wines coming out of Italy: Everyone in the wine world has heard of it, but no one knows much about it, apart from the fact that it’s a singular white and comes from Piedmont.

For starters, this structured wine has more depth, body, and complexity than most Italian whites. It’s definitely not your classic light-bodied white to sip as an aperitivo. Even if Timorasso—made with the eponymous grape—comes from Piedmont, it doesn’t hail from a famous growing zone like Langhe, Roero, or Monferrato. Instead, the grape is grown in an obscure corner of Italy’s most celebrated winemaking region. And Timorasso owes its modern-day existence—and cult status—to one man: Walter Massa.

## Colli Tortonesi conundrum

Massa, an intense, philosophical man—whose knowledge of local history, viticulture, and winemaking balance his all-consuming passion and scintillating enthusiasm, which would otherwise border on the fanatical—graduated from Alba’s enological school in 1976. Full of youthful ambition and eager to join the burgeoning quality-wine revolution that was heating up in Italy, Walter took over his family’s farm in the hilltop village of Monleale in southeastern Piedmont, in the rolling hills near Alessandria known as the Colli Tortonesi. Until then, Vigneti Massa—created in 1879—grew grapes and sold bulk wine, as did most of the surrounding farms. After the last bout of

phylloxera ravaged the vineyards in the 1940s, local growers responded to market demands by planting red grapes Barbera and Croatina and, later, white Cortese, but the area’s main focus was (and remains) Barbera. Over the next few years, Walter, whose first bottled wine was a 1978 Barbera, became convinced that this should not be the area’s flagship.

“In the 1970s and 1980s, the market was geared toward red wines and easy-drinking whites. Everyone assumed Barbera was what the market wanted. Growers and producers also assumed they understood the grape, but back then they didn’t—not in terms of vineyard management or vinification. Everyone was making Barbera, but the Colli Tortonesi—an area with a long history of winemaking—never had a benchmark producer,” says Massa.

Then, in the spring of 1986, the infamous methanol incident that killed 23 people and blinded dozens more rocked the Italian wine industry. Barbera producers were hit especially hard because the scandal involved 2-liter bottles of “wine” labeled as Barbera that were manufactured by a winery in Piedmont that had added methanol to increase alcohol levels. While Massa admits that the methanol scandal certainly depressed what was already a lackluster market, he insists the unfortunate event wasn’t the determining factor in his decision to rethink his production strategy, an idea he had been toying with for some time.

“Our altitude, microclimate, and soil are more suited to white grapes, but market demands for reds meant that growers here replanted with red varieties for commercial reasons only,” says Massa. But not just any white grape would work.

At the time, the only white production in the area was Cortese, a high-yielding white variety—made famous by Gavi—that can also generate bland, often dilute, wines. The grape’s mediocre local performance didn’t convince Massa, who sums it up by remarking, “Monleale doesn’t love Cortese.” One grape variety that did fascinate Massa, however, was a thick-skinned, native white variety known as Timorasso.

## A viticultural jewel

“We always had a small amount in our vineyards, and the grapes were fantastic to eat. For the most part, these were our table grapes, but we’d also add it to Cortese to make a white that we sold in demijohns to wine merchants from other parts of Piedmont and Oltrepò Pavese,” explains Walter. In 1987, he decided to ferment his Timorasso alone and made a little over 500 bottles. “I let the grapes ferment and then stay in the tank all winter, after which malolactic fermentation naturally set in. I bottled it in May and knew right away that the wine was way better than Cortese,” recalls Walter. Encouraged, he continued to experiment with the grape variety from about 400 plants scattered throughout his holdings, and began asking other growers—who bluntly told him he was crazy—for their Timorasso. In 1989—the same year hail damage destroyed the crop—he carried out a massal selection of the best grapes, and in 1990 he planted his first vineyard dedicated entirely to Timorasso.

He also began to research the grape variety and discovered proof that it was once well known. According to the *Guida Vinicola della Provincia di Alessandria*, published in 1911, “Apart from Timorasso, the area around Tortona doesn’t have any special grape varieties,” while another passage states that it was the predominant grape variety in the area. Still another section cites Pietro de’ Crescenzi, who, in his 14th-century opus on Italian agriculture, *Ruralia commode*,



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praised the “exquisite white wine from the Tortona area,” which was presumably made wholly or partly with Timorasso. The author of the relevant chapter in the *Guida Vinicola* concluded in 1911 that “The viticultural jewel of the Tortona area is therefore dry white wines. They have a splendid future.”

From 1987 to 1997, Walter continued

Above: The brilliantly creative Walter Massa, viticulturist and modern-day father of Timorasso.

to experiment with, and to bottle, Timorasso (with the exception of the hail-stricken 1989, as well as the 1991 and 1994 vintages because, “due to our inexperience, these vintages didn’t satisfy me at all,” he explains). Then, in 1997, he bottled his Costa del Vento vineyard, the one he dedicated to Timorasso in 1990. Since then he has planted other vineyards and now has nine vineyards totaling 10ha (25 acres) of Timorasso, as well as 10ha of Barbera (which he never abandoned but improved on over the years), 3ha (7.5 acres) of Croatina, and 1ha (2.47 acres) each of Freisa and Moscato.

## Saved from extinction

Walter’s focus on Timorasso has led to his current range of three cru bottlings—Costa del Vento, Stirpi, and Montecitorio—while his Derthona (the ancient name for Tortona) is a blend of Timorasso from all his vineyards. All wines undergo a 48–60-hour pre-fermentation maceration, with the stems, in concrete, before temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel,

using only wild yeasts, followed by bottle aging. “Timorasso needs time, so I release Derthona after a minimum of 18 months in the cellar, and the crus after a minimum of two years. But the wines reach maturity only three to four years after the harvest,” says Massa.

By the late 1990s, other local producers—including some who had earlier deemed Walter crazy—took notice of Walter’s Timorasso and began planting the grape variety themselves. There are now more than 20 firms growing and producing Timorasso, giving new life to an agricultural area that had been largely abandoned in the 1970s and ’80s.

In July 2015, Walter—together with his right-hand man, the perennially barefoot, history-loving philosopher Pierluigi “Pigi,” who helps him in the cellar and in the vineyards—invited me to a vertical tasting of his Timorasso held at Alessandria’s Chamber of Commerce. The tasting proved the greatness of Walter Massa’s Timorasso and the importance of saving Italy’s best native varietals from extinction.



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**TASTING**

**2012 Vigneti Massa Derthona**

Antique gold in color, this boasts enticing floral scents of white spring flower, orange blossom, citrus, and white stone fruit. The creamy palate offers apricot and ripe apple alongside bright acidity. It's young and vibrant but already shows impeccable balance and poise. | 17.5

**2011 Vigneti Massa Derthona**

Light gold, this stands up well to the scorching heat of the vintage. It's rounder and more forward than the 2012, with sensations of dried apricot, mature apple, beeswax, white almond, and a hint of honey. | 17

**2010 Vigneti Massa Montecitorio**

Luminous golden hue. Loaded with finesse, this penetrating wine is a step up from Derthona, offering an alluring bouquet of Spanish broom, orange blossom, chamomile, orchard fruit, and aromatic herb. The elegantly structured palate delivers layers of peach, nectarine zest, and flinty mineral alongside crisp acidity. It should develop more complexity over the next few years. | 18.5

**2010 Vigneti Massa Sterpi**

Bright yellow-gold. Fabulous and full-bodied, this stunning wine has an enviable combination of concentrated flavors and an almost weightless



Above: Vines of Timorasso, the thick-skinned white grape native to Monleale, cultivated by Walter Massa.

mouthfeel. In the glass, it continues to evolve, revealing layers of lemon drop, ginger, nectarine, peach, and energizing mineral. A backbone of bright acidity balances the fantastic depth of flavors. | 19

**2010 Vigneti Massa Costa del Vento**

Rich golden yellow. Round and robust, this is the most structured and intense of the cru bottlings—exuberant, even. It boasts aromas and flavors of linden flower, juicy apricot, flinty mineral, balsamic notes, and a hint of honey framed in a creamy texture and fresh acidity. | 18.5

**2008 Vigneti Massa Costa del Vento**

The first bottle was a deep, burnished gold and showed signs of obvious oxidation. The second bottle also has a rather dark golden hue but is lighter than the first bottle, with aromas of roasted nut, baked apple, and honey. The palate is fresher, with nectarine zest, dried apricot, honey, flint, and a walnut note. | 16

**2006 Vigneti Massa Costa del Vento**

Intense golden color. This is drop-dead gorgeous, boasting a heady perfume of fragrant yellow flower, beeswax, honey, citrus, forest floor, and a hint of petrol. The creamy palate offers layers of apricot, hazelnut, mature apple, lemon, mineral, and nectarine, framed in a creamy texture and bright acidity. | 19.5

**2002 Vigneti Massa Costa del Vento**

Torrential rain at harvest-time made this a challenging vintage. The first bottle was completely

oxidized. The second bottle also had evident signs of oxidation, with sensations of wet leaves, walnut, bruised apple skin, and honey. I was not going to score this, but a half-hour after pouring, it not only has a pulse but shows subtle notes of beeswax, nectarine zest, mineral, and honeyed nut. It's seen better days, but for such a difficult vintage, it shows impressive stamina. | 14.5

**2000 Vigneti Massa Costa del Vento**

Not only was this an exceedingly hot year, but in 2000 and 2001 Walter experimented with drastically lowering added sulfur from his already limited amounts, which were well below the minimum. This is completely oxidized. | NS

**1998 Vigneti Massa Costa del Vento**

Lemon-drop, nectarine, graphite, hazelnut, honey, and lemon zest are some of the sensations that emerge on this gorgeous wine. Vibrant acidity brightens the rich flavors. A fabulous combination of freshness and complexity. | 19

**1992 Vigneti Massa Timorasso**

Reflecting the cool, wet harvest, this is unsurprisingly lean, showing roasted nut, coffee, balsamic sensations, and oxidized notes alongside brisk acidity. It's still impressive given its age and the vintage conditions. | 13

**1990 Vigneti Massa Timorasso**

This is still hanging in there but has seen better days, offering sensations of smoke, mineral, hazelnut, honey, marzipan, and a hint of citrus zest. Brisk acidity keeps it alive. | 14