

TIBERIO

Tiberio Pecorino Colline Pescaresi 2005 - 2018

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The twists and turns that characterize the human condition have an uncanny way of making great things happen from unexpected circumstances. So call it luck or destiny, but one of Italy’s best-buy wines was born from a casual stroll in the vineyards, now 20 years ago. That vineyard walk led Abruzzo’s Tiberio winery, now run by second-generation Tiberio siblings Antonio (the viticulturist) and Cristiana (the winemaker), to begin production of a multi-award-winning Pecorino wine. In fact, founder Riccardo Tiberio (Antonio and Cristiana’s father) had bought the property in 1999 because of the extremely old vines surrounding the house that he recognized as authentic Trebbiano Abruzzese. Despite its name Trebbiano Abruzzese (a very high-quality native variety) is not common in Abruzzo anymore, so being able to buy old vines of it is a major coup. After all, it’s the authentic Trebbiano Abruzzese that is one of the secrets behind Valentini’s standout Trebbiano d’Abruzzo (Trebbiano Abruzzese is the variety; Trebbiano d’Abruzzo is the wine), easily one of Italy’s best white wines. Being no fool, Tiberio pounced on the opportunity to buy; but in so doing, he ended up getting an extra, one that he admits he hadn’t planned for, or even seen coming.



Tiberio's beautiful and intensely green Pecorino vineyard

It was Antonio and Cristiana Tiberio who, while strolling beneath the canopies one summer day back in 1999, realized that a bunch of vines and grapes looked completely different from the rest. The two admit they really didn’t know what grape or grapes stood before them; they just thought it was some really funny-looking Trebbiano-variety (beginning with the near-circular leaf, which is nothing like the leaves

of most Trebbiano varieties). Only after sending samples to a local nursery did they learn that they also owned vines of Pecorino, something nobody had mentioned at the time of the estate sale. The Tiberio siblings aren’t sure who first decided to plant Pecorino among the Trebbiano Abruzzese vines on the estate, but it was most likely Silvio Tinozzi, who owned the property back in the first part of the 20th century (he was a descendant of the Tinozzi family that owned much of the land around Cugnoli, the town where the Tiberio estate is located).

In Italy, it was once common for farmers to hedge their bets by co-planting different varieties in the same vineyard plot. As different cultivars ripen at different times and are more or less susceptible to different diseases, locals always believed, not unreasonably, that planting more than one grape variety in the same vineyard was a good idea. No matter, Antonio and Cristiana Tiberio were hardly displeased with their discovery, for even then they were aware of the excellent wines made with the Pecorino variety by the two men who had rediscovered it only a few years before, Guido Cocci Grifoni in the Marche (the first person ever to bottle a monovariety Pecorino wine) and Luigi Cataldi Madonna in Abruzzo (the first person ever to bottle a monovariety Pecorino wine that sported the cultivar’s name on the label). As luck would have it, the Tiberio siblings were very good friends with Cataldi Madonna, whose first Pecorino wine dates back to the 1996 vintage and who undoubtedly did more for Pecorino’s surge to fame in Abruzzo than anyone else. Cristiana Tiberio credits Cataldi Madonna for having been her mentor in those early years (and to Cataldi Madonna’s credit, other Abruzzo wine producers have told me exactly the same thing over the years). “Very little was known about Pecorino back then, either the grape or the wines. Written information was practically nonexistent, and so the only way I could learn was by hanging out at Cataldi Madonna’s estate, observing and listening to him.” Over time, Tiberio developed her own winemaking style with the Pecorino variety. Today, her wine, Cataldi Madonna’s old-vines Frontone bottling and Cocci Grifoni’s Colle Vecchio bottling are, by a huge margin, the three best Pecorino wines made in Italy.



Pecorino hiding in the cool shady canopy provided by its many round leaves

Pecorino is a mountain variety that requires long, cool growing seasons to ripen fully and to give truly complex wines. Unfortunately, the popularity and very strong sales of its wines have been such that people have taken to planting it anywhere, even in much-too-warm flatland and seaside areas. Pecorino grapes are able to pack in sugar quickly, and in such warm habitats the harvest needs to take place far too early in the season (often by the middle to the end of the summer) in order to avoid making jammy wines sporting 15% alcohol or more. Thick-skinned and small-berried, Pecorino is at once rustic and resistant (an example of a grape well adapted to its cold mountain environment), but those small berries and the sterile basal buds do not allow large wine volumes to be made, which is the main reason the variety had been abandoned before Cocci Grifoni rediscovered it. (New clones are much more fertile and more productive than older biotypes.) Pecorino prefers clay-rich, hillside soils that are not especially rich in lime, and rootstocks that don't push vigor are best.



Quarmari, Tiberio's majestic Abruzzo shepherd dog, stands guard at the estate entry

Today, the Tiberio Pecorino is a single-vineyard wine. The vineyard was planted in 2000 and 2001 with massal

selections of old Pecorino vines that Antonio and Cristiana Tiberio sourced from one vineyard after scouring all of their Trebbiano Abruzzese vineyards in 1999. Ultimately, the siblings found that the Pecorino had been planted in only one plot of what are now 60-year-old Trebbiano Abruzzese vines located right behind the estate's main house (in other words, not among the 80- to 90-year-old vines used to make the estate's top wine, the Trebbiano d'Abruzzo Fonte Canale). The Pecorino vineyard, now 3.8 hectares large, was originally planted with a single biotype of Pecorino (in other words, the plants all looked more or less the same and behaved similarly), but after almost 20 years, thanks to ongoing climate change and differences in the geology and soil structure within the vineyard, mutations have taken place among the grapevines and there are now six recognizably different Pecorino biotypes living in the vineyard (though three types are the most common). Cristiana Tiberio told me that over the last few years they have been performing separate microvinifications of each Pecorino biotype, so as to learn what each can give wine-wise; and while for the moment a blend of the biotypes appears to give the best possible result, Tiberio believes that one biotype in particular seems to give a superior wine to the other five. Whether in the future the family will move to bottle a second Pecorino wine with just that one biotype requires more study and further vintages.

While Cataldi Madonna likes to use dry ice to save the aromatic precursors of the Pecorino variety (and therefore makes extremely thiol-rich wines that have much in common with those made with the Sauvignon Blanc grape), Tiberio does not. The Pecorino grapes are picked at sunrise in the cool morning air (before temperatures rise but after the nighttime humidity has resolved), then destemmed; no pressing occurs and the juice run-off is collected by gravity. Vinification takes place in temperature-controlled steel tanks without any bâtonnage or pump-overs (the Pecorino variety is so rich in polyphenols and glycerol that Tiberio finds those techniques result in too fat and heavy a wine). Only native yeasts from the Pecorino vineyard have been used since the 2013 vintage. The wine goes through full malolactic fermentation, as Pecorino is a high-acid variety and so are its wines (these usually clock in at 7 g/L total acidity with pH values as low as 2.7–2.9, depending on the vintage). Stainless steel tanks are also the aging vessel of choice; after six to eight months in the tanks and another three to four months in bottle, the wine goes on sale.



Over the last two years I have tasted through three different verticals of this wine. Each time, the wines presented similar characteristics with recognizable vintage-related differences in all three tastings. For the most part, a good Pecorino wine will always evoke white stone and fresh citrus fruit (especially lime), lemon curd, lemongrass, sage and rosemary. Wines that suggest very ripe tropical fruit, vanilla and spices should be considered atypical; they are most often the product of industrial yeasts or planting in less-than-ideal habitats. Pecorino is always a texturally rich wine and never too shy in alcohol, as the variety accumulates sugar with ease. Tiberio's wine ranges from 13.5 to 14% alcohol by volume, and though Pecorino can easily become heavy and blowsy in the hands of lesser winemakers, I find that Tiberio's trademark style of very refined, high-acid but graceful wines is almost always recognizable in her Pecorino wines as well.

2018 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Luminous yellow, with just a hint of a pale green tinge. The lively nose offers aromas of lemon, lime and minerals, nicely lifted by lemon verbena and jasmine notes. Then steely and boasting noteworthy clarity and cut to the fresh lime, guava and green apple flavors. Closes juicy and with a laser-like acidity extending a hint of wild fennel on the long back end. Easily the best Pecorino wine Tiberio has made in the last few years
2021-2028 (93+)

2017 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Medium-deep bright yellow. Ripe aromas and flavors of pear, papaya and apple, complicated by a whisper of wild herbs. Suave and mellow on the long finish, this has just enough acid lift to avoid coming off as heavy. Offers plenty of early appeal, but lacks the usually nuanced, lifted personality this wine boasts in the best vintages.
2019-2023 (89)

2016 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Bright medium yellow. Ripe aromas of orange jam, poached pear, apple jelly and honey are lifted by a lively and nicely perfumed orange zest note. Suave and exotic in the mouth, with an oily texture and a round mouthfeel to the ripe orchard and citrus fruit flavors. Closes long and smooth.
2019-2023 (91)

2015 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Vivid green-tinged straw-yellow. Aromas of yellow melon, rosemary and sage on the expressive nose, complicated by nuances of almond and hazelnut paste. Then richer in the mouth, offering ripe but lively flavors of yellow melon, orange peel and balsamic oils. Finishes very long and suave. Outstanding, varietally accurate Pecorino wine in what was a difficult year: very hot and dry at the start of the growing season, but even more so in late August and September. This led to a slightly earlier-than-usual Pecorino harvest (in one pass, on August 25); nevertheless, this wine is remarkably fresh and vibrant. Well done.
2019-2026 (94)

2014 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Vivid straw-yellow. Discreet but precise aromas of white peach, lime and sage on the crisp, varietally accurate nose. Then lively and juicy, showing a strong saline note to the white peach and orchard fruit flavors. Closes very long and smooth, displaying outstanding clarity. This isn't the most concentrated Pecorino wine Tiberio has ever made, but it showcases lovely acid/sugar balance and is a remarkably strong showing for a very difficult year. In fact, the 2014 vintage was one of the wettest in memory, but the white wines, though lacking in staying power, turned out better than anticipated. The main problem was the rain, which fell throughout the growing season and never let up, harvest time included. Tiberio harvested on September 9, and the grape skins were mostly in good shape.
2019-2022 (92)

2013 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Pale yellow. Yellow fruits, kiwi and crushed white flowers on the nose, along with mineral and diesel fuel nuances. Tactile, youthfully chewy and remarkably pure, boasting noteworthy mineral precision and impressive acid/sugar balance. The rising finish lingers nicely, echoing long on the aftertaste with hints of chamomile, anise, lime and white peach. This was the first vintage in which Tiberio used only the native vineyard yeasts, switching away from the commercial yeasts that the estate had employed up until then.
2019-2024 (94)

2012 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Luminous deep straw-yellow. Refined nose of ripe citrus jelly and sage, complicated by hints of pine resin and white flowers. Then discreetly mineral and gently scented, with peach and apricot flavors that linger nicely on the smooth, fresh finish. This was a hot year, like 2011, but the heat started early on in the growing season and the grapes were able to adapt. Hence, this wine is more typical in its aroma and flavor profile than the heavier-set 2011. Super stuff.
2019-2024 (92)

2011 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Bright straw-yellow. Expressive notes of balsamic oils, pine resin and spices (ginger) complement apple and pear aromas, strongly characterizing the slightly atypical but inviting nose. Then mellow and round, with less of an overtly spicy and balsamic quality in the mouth, and more typical flavors of ripe citrus fruit and herbs persisting nicely on the suave finish. The torrid summertime weather that hit all of a sudden must have triggered something in the Pecorino grape genetics (as well as causing excessively low yields), according to Cristiana Tiberio, prompting it to express a spicy aspect that is seldom seen in this variety's wines.
2019-2023 (90)

2009 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Good full bright yellow. Cool but thoroughly precise and ripe aromas of lime blossom, pear, white pepper and crushed stone. Then very classic in the mouth, displaying a seamless quality to the mineral-accented flavors of white peach, kiwi and sage. Hints of white flowers and saline minerality linger nicely on the powerful, well-balanced finish. This struck me as combining the best traits of Tiberio's 2015 and 2013 Pecorino wines. The 2009 vintage was the first one in which Tiberio used all the Pecorino grapes from her vineyard. This wine is the product of grapes picked at three different times (September 3, 8 and 12), with the musts of each fermented separately and then blended together. One of the tanks was fermented with selected yeasts, and another two with native yeasts. Cristiana remembers this vintage all too well, because it is the only time she wasn't physically present at the winery for part of it; on one of the three days of picking, she had to drop everything and run to the veterinarian because Tione, one of her beloved Abruzzo shepherd dogs, had a serious allergic reaction requiring immediate medical attention (happily, he recovered just fine).
2019-2024 (94)

2006 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Deep bright yellow. Aromas of anise, menthol, ripe pear and candied tangerine peel. Then more lemony in the mouth, the ripe fruit flavors nicely extended on the long back end by lively acidity. The suave finish repeats faded floral reminders that add complexity. Very impressive for such young vines. This is the first wine that showcased the huge potential of Pecorino from the Tiberio estate. This vintage is also the only one, along with the 2005, to have been made only with grapes picked from Tiberio's oldest, 1.8-hectare plot of Pecorino vines (those planted in 2000).
2019+ (91)

2005 Tiberio Pecorino (Colline Pescaresi)

Golden-tinged yellow. Poached pear, beeswax, sage, rosemary, cloves and menthol on the nose and in the mouth. Fleshy and ripe, with a creamy mouthfeel and a long finish boasting reminders of honey, lemon curd and crème brûlée. Lovely, rich and ripe, this wine expresses a noteworthy late-harvest, honeyed quality, probably because Tiberio waited a little too long to pick the grapes. This wine is the only one of two (along with the 2006) to have been made solely with grapes from Tiberio's oldest, 1.8-hectare plot of Pecorino vines (those planted in 2000).
2019+ (90)

The wines in this report were tasted in my office in October 2019.