

Communion wine

The Vatican oenologist

from Katrin Walter

Giovanni Russo is a rather reticent person, but open and extremely friendly, he listens patiently, thus giving every guest the feeling that he is welcome. In fact, he much prefers not to talk too much about himself, although eventually I was able to elicit a few details from him.



One of the last 6 bottles of the wine that was intended for His Holiness Pope John Paul II. Photo: Katrin Walter

["The wines for the Holy Communion for the Vatican, those I all make myself"](#), says the 78-year-old man with a little pride in his voice, and admits that, as the only oenologist authorised by the Vatican that he is responsible for the communion wine used by the pope, it is this responsibility for the quality and purity of his products that is a specially gratifying appreciation of his achievements at the pinnacle of his career, and he adds philosophically: ["In life you need professionalism, honesty, correctness and a little luck too. I have had a little of each. I have always been extremely honest and correct in my work, and that has been recognised. It was recognised financially, but morally and professionally as well."](#)

After all, he is a winemaker with a very special responsibility. Wine used at Holy Communion may not be just any common wine that one can buy in a supermarket or bottle store. It must have been made by natural means, it must be lively, and it may not have undergone any chemical treatment - whether in the vineyard or in the cellar - and no sulfides are added either. The white grapes for the communion wine are sourced from several producers, predominantly located in the region around Rome. The grape varieties used most frequently are the Procanico, Malvasia and Rossetto varieties, which are also the permitted varieties for the DOC Est!Est!Est!!! di Montefiascone. The other areas of origin can at least be guessed at when one looks at the grape varieties mentioned on the label: Pignoletto or Greco, for example.

His position as the Vatican oenologist is certified by a simple document dating back to 1996, he must personally accompany every delivery of wine to the Vatican state, no matter how small it is. He is the only one to order communion wine, a quantity of around 2000 litres annually just for the Basilica San Pietro - bottled in 1,5-litre bottles - used for the Eucharist, which is celebrated by the priests. The wine for the bishops, cardinals and for the pope himself are bottled in smaller bottle sizes, and are produced in accordance with an even more special procedure, developed by Professor Giovanni Russo himself, a procedure developed in 1998 and kept secret: passito wines that can, if requested, be personalised by the addition of the receiving persons favourite aroma. This is in accordance with the strict rules governing the purity of communion wine, so long as only natural aroma substances are involved, these are added exclusively during the fermentation process. The professore makes his special method known only in church circles, and travels the whole world with this message.



Professor Giovanni Russo in his wine archive. Photo: Katrin Walter

This wine is not only pure and unadulterated, it also has an exquisite taste, clear evidence of the meticulous care taken in its lengthy preparation. In addition, ever since 1998 the wines have had subtle aromas added in accordance with the preference of the recipient of the communion wine, this person's name is also reflected on the label. It comes as no surprise that the "queen of flowers", the rose, which has been an important symbol of Christianity since medieval times within the scope of the adulation of Mary (Mary was given names such as the "rose without thorns" or "most beautiful rose among all women") was the essence preferred by His Holiness John Paul II.. The communion wine of this adherent to the cult of Mary, a Pignoletto Passito, was therefore enhanced with the taste and bouquet of the petals of a fragrant pink rose cultivated in a special rose garden exclusively for His Holiness.

Russo, who studied natural sciences, has 55 years of experience in research and teaching, and is extremely versatile and agile. For instance, 35 years ago he started, together with his wife, to translate Salernitanic recipes from Latin into Italian, each year he extracts some 700 essences from fruits, flowers, herbs and spices, he writes poetry, and owns a private wine archive that includes wines dating from 1840 to modern times. The archive includes all the great vintages from all wine regions, all the great French châteaux, wines from the Rheingau and the Mosel regions, and naturally Italian wines. In addition to wines from the outstanding vintages, the collection also includes wines with special labels, or wines that have an interesting and unusual history. ["Here you will also find the history of Italy"](#) he says, pointing to a wine from the 1961 vintage, which [was vinified from all the 380 indigenous grape varieties found in the country, this was released as a "vino pazzo" on the occasion of the festivities held to celebrate a century of Italian political unity.](#)

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