

# Vegan FOR A PURPOSE

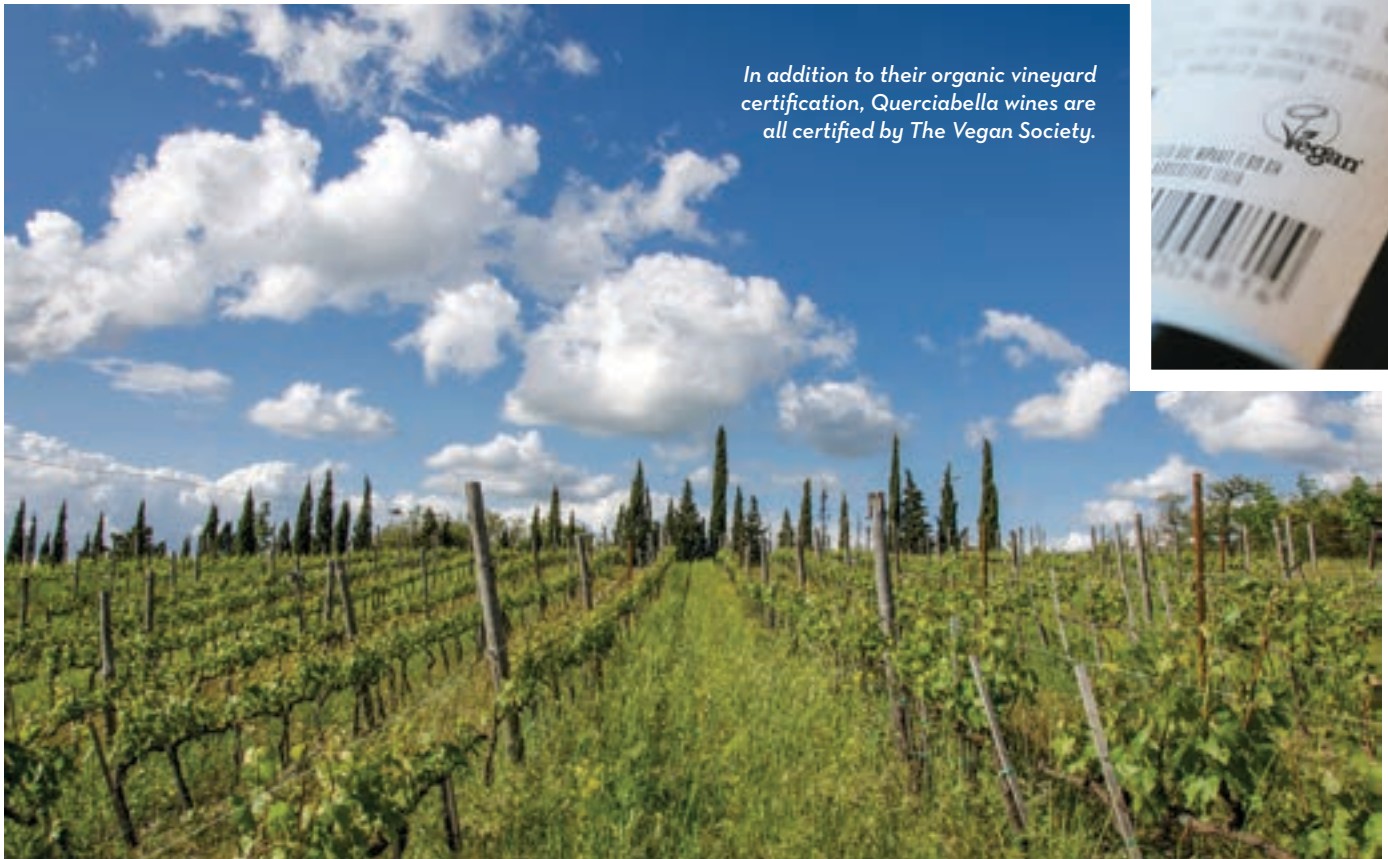
**QUERCIABELLA WALKS  
THE WALK WITH A PLANT-  
BASED APPROACH TO  
BIODYNAMIC FARMING**

story by Michelle Ball  
photos by Jeremy Ball

*The United States  
brand director for  
Querciabella, Sunny  
Gandara, Dip WSET,  
CWE, IWS, FWS,  
poses for a photo in  
the dining room of  
BAIA, a plant-based  
Italian eatery in San  
Francisco, CA.*



*The lineup for a recent luncheon  
featuring Querciabella wines  
included bottlings from the winery's  
current portfolio along with two  
library selections: the 1998 Chianti  
Classico and the 2011 Batàr.*



*In addition to their organic vineyard certification, Querciabella wines are all certified by The Vegan Society.*

*Spring at one of Querciabella's exceptional Sangiovese vineyards on a hillside in Greve, Tuscany.*

**Over the past two years,** millions of people have reassessed their careers, especially in the service industry. For some, it's about stability, but for others, it's about values, with the goal being to find a job that is truly meaningful to them. For Sunny Gandara, this realization arose in 2019, shortly before the pandemic hit. A professionally trained chef, WSET Diploma holder, and certified wine educator with extensive experience in both the food and beverage industries, Gandara sought a career at Querciabella out of admiration for the Tuscan winery's principles, which she first encountered shortly after adopting a vegan lifestyle in 2013. While its wines are certified both organic and vegan, Querciabella undertook a bold mission in 2010 to replace its traditional biodynamic methods with its own set of plant-based biodynamic practices after owner Sebastiano Cossia Castiglioni, a longtime vegetarian, converted to veganism.

Having communicated with Castiglioni for years online, Gandara mentioned that she would love to work for the winery if its team ever needed help in the States

and was soon hired as the brand director for the U.S. "I wanted to seek out a company that was in line with my values," says Gandara, who adds that her motivation was: "How can I make a difference in the world? How can I inspire someone? [How can] I inspire someone to go vegan through wine?"

We sat down for an interview prior to a luncheon at vegan Italian eatery BAlA in San Francisco, where we tasted through Querciabella's portfolio. Her first trip from New York since the beginning of 2020 was an opportunity for Gandara to connect in person with some of the Bay Area's elite wine directors and sommeliers. BAlA, which opened in the summer of 2020, is run by celebrity chef Matthew Kenney; a graduate of the French Culinary Institute, Kenney is known far beyond the vegan community for his innovations in plant-based cuisine, demonstrating that it is much more than just veggies and tofu. Castiglioni, an investor in over 65 plant-based companies, is one of Kenney's main partners. Therefore, Gandara's vast wine knowledge is put to great use in her

complementary role as the global wine director for all of Kenney's restaurants, including BAlA.

During her opening remarks at lunch, Gandara highlighted Querciabella's versatility with food—especially plant-based food—while sharing personal insights from the winery, reinforcing that its ethos is not a marketing push. "We are vegan for a purpose," she said, adding, "What we say is actually what we do."

### GOING BEYOND ORGANIC

In 1974, Sebastiano's father, top wine collector Giuseppe Castiglioni, purchased a small vineyard in Greve in the Chianti Classico DOCG. Named for Mount Querciabella, meaning "beautiful oak" after the trees that dot the region, Querciabella released its first wine in 1979 and has expanded its plantings from a single hectare to over 100 hectares throughout both Chianti Classico and Maremma. Sebastiano shared his father's love for fine wines, traveling with him on visits to Bordeaux and Burgundy, and developed a palate at a young age.



*Top row, left to right: Claude Rouquet, district manager for the San Francisco Bay Area, Maisons Marques & Domaines USA; Nicole Upshaw, business associate, Salt Partners Group; Greg St Clair, Italian buyer, K&L Wine Merchants; Gianpaolo Paterlini, wine director, Acquerello; Tonya Pitts, sommelier and wine director, One Market Restaurant; and Mark Guillaudeu, beverage director, Commis. Bottom row, left to right: Cyprien Roy, communications manager, Maisons Marques & Domaines USA; Sunny Gandara, United States brand director, Querciabella; Giovanni Cerrone, wine buyer, The Wine Spectrum; and Hillary Younglove.*

His work as an animal rights advocate also started in his youth. At 15, the young Castiglioni was handed a pamphlet protesting vivisection; his horror led to research on the mistreatment of animals that made him a vegetarian overnight. In the 1980s, his drive to protect nature merged with his entrance into the family's wine business, permanently changing the direction of Querciabella.

As the story goes, he convinced the vineyard team to use only organic treatments in the vineyards and later approached his father with an appeal for organic viticulture. Giuseppe dismissed the idea as infeasible until Sebastiano revealed that the vineyards had already been organic for a couple of years. Querciabella became one of the first wineries in Italy to be certified organic in 1988, and Sebastiano took the reins around that same time.

In 1997, he expanded Querciabella's estate holdings south to the shores of Maremma, at the time an unproven region that nonetheless showed great potential

for the varieties he wanted to produce. Its drier Mediterranean climate was also well suited for organic agriculture because disease pressure was lower. Curious as to the effects of biodynamic farming, whose holistic approach to viticulture appealed to him, Castiglioni chose to implement it from day one in Maremma. The trial proved successful, and in 2000, biodynamic practices were implemented at all the family's sites throughout Tuscany.

Although they started with traditional biodynamic protocols, that changed in 2010 when Castiglioni went vegan and made the decision to do the same at the winery. Instead of animal-derived preparations such as cow manure, which is often trucked in from factory farms, they employ "green manure": This compost is made from a meticulous blend of diverse cover crops, generally a mix of 32–36 different plants depending on the soil profile, varietal, and vigor of the vineyard. These not only benefit the vines nutritionally but also encourage a broader ecosystem of

plants, beneficial insects, and birds to thrive. "We are farming with nature, as many people say, but we also want to give back to nature and leave it in a better place than we found it. It's not enough for us to just respect it," explains Gandara. Yet because many of the applications in biodynamic farming require the use of animal products, this also means they can't be certified. One can't help but see the irony: Though the vision statement of Demeter, the only certifying body for biodynamic farming, is to "heal the planet through agriculture," a plant-based approach to its methodology doesn't qualify.

Nevertheless, Gandara noted that the vineyards have never suffered from the changes in protocol, and the proof is in the wine: "We have proven that you don't need animal manure to produce world-class wines. Our wines have never received higher scores, [even] from traditional wine lovers and critics who are not worried about the vegan aspect. It's just about good wine."

## TRANSPARENCY IN THE WINERY

Querciabella's painstaking approach to viticulture is mirrored in the winemaking facility. South African winemaker Manfred Ing, who joined Querciabella in 2010 after working a harvest in Barolo at the historic Vietti winery, works diligently to accentuate the team's attention to detail in the vineyard. Since he started, the winery has significantly dialed back its use of new oak and barriques while relying more heavily on 500-liter and 3,000-liter *botti*. According to Gandara, Ing particularly loves the quality of tannin that results from employing these sizable casks, and even has a 5,000-liter *botte* on order. In addition, he uses only extra-fine grained French oak from select coopers, including Baron, Sylvain, Taransaud, and Marc Grenier: "I think with Manfred taking over and with us really understanding the land year after year, it's about how [we can] coax maximum expression out of the fruit and let the oak be a supporting factor," explained Gandara.

markable value for by-the-glass programs, being universally recognized by numerous critics as overdelivering for the price. It's composed primarily of Sangiovese (50%) with equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, all from Querciabella's vineyards in Maremma. Bright red, prickly fruit; plum-skin tannins; and faint hints of fresh bay leaf surround a medium-bodied core, making the wine an ideal match for pizza and pasta. The first vintage of Mongrana Bianco, meanwhile, is made from 100% Maremma Vermentino and vinified in stainless steel to preserve freshness. With only 5,000 bottles made for the inaugural release, it offers a zingy lemon and orange-blossom profile marked by savory minerality reminiscent of the coast.

The winery's namesake Chianti Classico, Querciabella, uses primarily neutral oak to showcase a lively palate of bright red cherry, while the Riserva employs a touch more new oak for a more concentrated, broodier black-cherry profile laced with

blue and black fruit with herbal notes; with age, it maintains its dark red-fruit core with distinct juiciness but also shows dustier, more savory characteristics and hints of rosemary.

Lunch finished with an overview of Batàr, a white Super Tuscan made from 50/50 Pinot Bianco and Chardonnay. The Chardonnay, which is grown at a higher elevation of 1,300–2,000 feet, provides acidity, minerality, and freshness, while the Pinot Bianco offers the flesh. First made in 1988 for friends, it was designed to demonstrate that Tuscany could produce ageworthy white wines rivaling those of Burgundy. The 2011 proved as much while highlighting the warmth of the vintage with its rich flavors of stone fruit and tangerine as well as savory notes of chanterelle mushroom and brie rind.

The 2019, on the other hand, showed verve in the form of crunchy white peach mingled with flint, cardamom, racy citrus notes, and tremendous lift on the finish.



The buyers at the luncheon observed that Querciabella's offerings were indeed more energetic and less dense than their traditional counterparts. "The wines were fabulous and had a vibrancy that can certainly be attributed to the strong dedication they have to a 100% vegan practice and philosophy," said Nicole Upshaw, business associate for Salt Partners Group, which includes B-Side at the SFJAZZ Center in San Francisco.

The 2020 Mongrana Bianco (\$21) made its debut appearance at the event, reflecting the longtime success of the Mongrana Rosso. First released in 2005, the 2019 Mongrana Rosso (\$23) is a re-

leather and tobacco. "The testament to the life of the wine was being able to taste the 1998 Riserva," noted Tonya Pitts, sommelier and wine director for One Market Restaurant, which carried the vintage on its release. "The 1998 Riserva today is supple, elegant, and like silk on the palate. It's sublime. It proves the promise of aged Chianti Classico and Chianti Classico Riserva."

A side-by-side tasting of the 2008 and 2017 Camartina (\$137), Querciabella's flagship Super Tuscan made in only the best vintages from 70% Cabernet Sauvignon and 30% Sangiovese, followed. In its youth, the wine delivers fresh, vibrant

"People don't necessarily think of Pinot Blanc as something that can age, but we've totally proven them wrong because in that combination, it's pretty unique," explained Gandara, who added, "But I think it's also our understanding of the land." Over the years, the winery team has employed gentler contact with the lees as well as reduced the amount of new oak used throughout their portfolio to elevate their meticulous efforts in the vineyard. The result is a liveliness across the lineup, joined by an unquestionable purity of fruit that's reflective of their reverence for nature and desire to leave the environment better than they found it. *SJ*