Elisabetta Foradori decided to dedicate her life to making wine after cancer took her father, winemaker at their family estate, in 1976. She was 11 years old at the time.

But she meant it. While her mother managed the old family winery and kept it running, the young girl helped out in the cellars and vineyards. When she was old enough, she enrolled in one of Italy’s best enology schools. At 19, she took charge of her first harvest as Foradori’s winemaker. She excelled in the job. Over the next 16 years, she shifted the winery’s focus from bulk to bottled wines. As quality rose, sales improved. And her 1997 reserve cuvée, Granato, scored a classic 96 points on Wine Spectator’s 100-point scale.

But by 2000, Foradori was burned out. “I felt dead inside. I thought, my god—I don’t like these wines,” she says. “I had a recipe. It was simple: Take the grapes, add the yeast, control the temperature and—if you’re not stupid—the wine is done. The creativity of the young Elisabetta was dead. When I changed, it came back.”

What she changed was her entire approach to winemaking, trading science, she says, for philosophy. In the vineyards, she adopted biodynamics, a holistic, somewhat controversial approach to farming.
In the cellars, she developed a hands-off approach, a method some would label natural winemaking. She even began fermenting and aging her single-vineyard wines not in steel tanks or oak vats, but in clay amphorae.

What drives a winemaker with an enology degree from one of Italy’s top schools to make such radical changes?

The answer may lie in Elisabetta herself, a woman who lost her father so young and spent much of her life trying to preserve his legacy. It may dwell in the mountains that surround her winery, the Dolomites, with their weathered limestone peaks. Living in such a setting, it would be almost impossible not to appreciate the power and mystique of nature.

“I like this part that’s not science, this part you cannot explain,” she says. “You end up with a completely different relationship to the vine and to your wine. I regained the freedom to be creative.”

On a gorgeous early summer day, Foradori is trying to chat quietly with some guests inside her winery, but her dog is having none of it. Arco, a spirited Spaniel who is Elisabetta’s perpetual shadow, is barking outside the door, demanding to come inside. After the visitors insist they like dogs, she opens the door and Arco races in, immediately plopping his head in the first lap he comes to and looking up with eyes that demand affection.

Foradori, 47, smiles apologetically. Her face is soulful, weathered by sunny days in the vineyard, and her hands have been shaped by hard work. With long, graying hair and deep, brown eyes, she holds the look of someone warm and genuine who’s also a bit of a loner.

Foradori grew up in the winery her grandfather founded. It’s a charming building built in the Alpine style popular in Trentino, which lies just an hour’s drive from Austria. The winery is situated in the middle of several acres of vineyards Vittorio Foradori purchased in 1929, in the town of Mezzolombardo. Trentino is defined by the Dolomites, the southern peaks of the Alps, and the Adige river, which flows south through the heart of the province. Mezzolombardo lies in a spot where the valley widens as the Noce river flows in from the west to meet the Adige. The rivers have deposited layers of sand, schist and gravel here, and Teroldego, the local grape Foradori is known for, can thrive in these soils.

While she still works where she was raised, Foradori makes her home above the valley floor, in a house perched 2,400 feet up on a nearby mountain. She is an avid mountaineer who loves to hike the alte vie, or high paths. Mountain climbers tend to enjoy solitude. While tricky technical climbs require teams, it is impossible to stand thousands of feet up and not feel simultaneously small and alone, one with the raw power of nature.

Foradori is an only child. Her father worked much the way his father had, growing Teroldego vines in the tall, pergola fashion, crushing the grapes and selling the wine in large jugs to cooperatives. After his death, “My mother did not know anything about agriculture, but she managed the property,” Foradori says. Elisabetta helped out, and when she was 17 began studies at the Institute of San Michele all’Adige. “I did not enjoy studying viticulture, but I said to myself, I have to do what my father did. No one told me I had to, but I felt an obligation. What I did enjoy [studying] was biology, how the plant grows, how life works.”

When she took over Foradori at 19, she already knew that the winery needed to evolve in order to survive. Since World War II, local growers had depended on cooperatives to sell the wines. But there was little demand for Teroldego, which few outside the valley had heard of. Growers were ripping it up, along with Nosiola and other local vines, to replace with guaranteed sellers like Pinot Grigio and Merlot. Foradori doubled down on Teroldego. A descendant of Pinot Noir and a cousin of Syrah, it can produce wines with violet aromas, cherry flavors, subtle tannins and lively acidity—when its vigor is restrained. But the grape is not an ideal variety for cooperatives: If the vine is allowed to produce as much fruit as it wants, the wine tastes simple. Locals were still growing the vines on pergolas, which allowed them to reach 6 feet tall and produce an excess of grapes.
“Teroldego is elegant in these soils, but it’s also vigorous,” says Foradori. “In the old days, pergola worked because it was a polyculture—between the rows, you planted potatoes, beans, fruit. The pergola was part of a big family of plants. After the Second World War, what has happened? Poor clones, irrigation, fertilization—the pergola became a machine for producing volume. It was a disaster.”

In 1985, Foradori began replanting most of her 45 acres. She took cuttings from the best Teroldego vines growing in the two oldest parcels on her property, identifying about 30 unique biotypes in the process. While she kept the two old vineyards planted on pergolas, she ripped out everything else, training the new vines in the Guyot method, close to the ground, with naturally low vigor.

In the winery, she began fermenting the grapes in stainless steel tanks. After fermentation, she aged most of the wine in large oak casks, but she put some in small French oak barriques, adding structure by exposing the wine to more oxygen and oak tannins. The barrique-aged wine was included in a new blend she created: Granato, her reserva.

When people outside the region began to taste Granato, it was a revelation. Few had heard of Teroldego, and those who had were surprised it could be so interesting. Foradori began exporting, and today more than 80 percent of the wine’s production leaves Italy. When local appellation authorities told Foradori she would have to change her 1998 Granato because it was “atypical,” she ignored them and simply began bottling it as a generic IGT, not subject to appellation rules. Foradori had better brand recognition than the appellation.

After a decade and a half of striving to save Foradori, however, and having reached the summit, Elisabetta felt uninspired. (Her first marriage also ended around the same time.) Looking back now, she can appreciate the wines she made then. But they were made by a younger woman. “I see that girl, with passion and powerful energy,” she says.

In 2002, looking for a way to express herself, she began a new climb by adopting biodynamic viticulture. Its creator, Rudolf Steiner, was an Austrian philosopher who called for a more holistic approach to agriculture, arguing that a farm was an organism. He urged farmers to work with nature to restore life to the soil rather than rely on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. (His ideas are not without controversy—he frequently wrote of cosmic forces’ affect on vines—and scientific research has not been able to measure their effectiveness.)

To improve the vitality of her soils, Foradori now makes her own compost on-site, augmenting it with several homeopathic preparations described by Steiner. Between the rows of vines she has planted garlic and dandelions, which can improve soil fertility and force the vine roots to dig deeper for moisture. They also provide a home for predators of pests. She has replaced pesticides with herbal teas she makes from chamomile and nettles that she grows in her garden. She will spray copper sulfate, if necessary, to prevent mildew.

Foradori can’t quantify the results, but she feels better farming this way. “At school, I learned viticulture like I was working in a factory, not a vineyard,” she says. “And it was the same here when I graduated. I believed, ‘I am an enologist, I have a degree. I must work with technology.’ But in my garden, I always worked like this.”

Within a few years, the fruit she harvested was tasting better to her. That led her to change how she worked in the winery. “The most difficult part is to take this fruit, which is alive, and turn it into wine,” she says. “Fermentation is death and rebirth.”

By 2007, her Teroldego bunches had such a lovely mix of acidity and tannins that she could afford to be more hands-off in the winery. She began adding a percentage of whole clusters into her tanks, as much as 30 percent, because the stems were riper, imparting nice, structured tannins. She no longer adds yeast strains because the yeast on the grapes is healthy enough to kickstart fermentation. And she leaves the wine on the skins to macerate much longer, again because the skins are riper. She performs fewer punch downs during fermentation because she doesn’t need to extract as much color and flavor.

For all her wines, she adds sulfur dioxide (a preservative) less frequently—once when she racks the wine from one barrel to
another, and again at bottling. But she’s not getting rid of sulfur dioxide for good. “I’m not for zero sulfur. Maybe it works if you drink the wine here. You can’t ship without it.”

Much as a mountaineer can’t be so distracted by nature’s view that she forgets to watch where she steps, Foradori uses her knowledge to monitor every vat every day, tasting and deciding if she needs to intervene. “You don’t have to protect the fruit as much. Of course, I had some wine that was not good and I had to sell it in bulk. The problems come when you don’t pay close enough attention. The wine very quickly goes in a wrong direction.”

I used to make two single-vineyard wines, but I stopped in the early ’90s because it was too hard to explain four different Teroldegos to the world,” says Foradori. “But thanks to biodynamics, these vineyards had such a clear voice, in 2009 I began making them again.” She makes one wine from Morei, which has gravelly soils, and one from Sgarzon, which is sandier. Foradori also decided that she wanted to produce white wines, and leased 8 acres of vineyards to the south that are planted with Nosiola and Manzoni Bianco. But when she started thinking about how she would make the Nosiola, it led her down an unexpected trail.

Nosiola is an old variety in the area. Most of the examples available today are bland. That’s why many of the vines have been ripped out and replaced with Pinot Grigio, an easier sell. Foradori, however, had tasted older Nosiolas that had been fermented on their skins and were rich and complex.

Foradori walks down a flight of stairs to her barrel-aging cellar, accompanied by her son Emilio Rainier, 23, who is studying enology. (She has three children from her first marriage, all in their early 20s, and a 9-year-old son with her partner, Gerhart Gostner.) On the far side of the room, past several rows of barrels, two rows of massive clay jars sit atop gravel brought from the nearby Noce river. Each one is topped with a stainless steel collar and cap.

Foradori had seen clay amphorae in Sicily, used by Giusto Occhipinti at the winery COS. A tradition in the country of Georgia, where they are called qvevri, the vessels have fascinated several winemakers around the world in recent years. Foradori ferments Nosiola, Manzoni Bianco and her single-vineyard Teroldegos in amphorae (technically they’re tinajas, the Spanish term, because she sources them from a potter in La Mancha). For all the wines, she dumps in the juice, skins and some stems, then leaves the wine inside for six to eight months. She then removes the wine, ages it for a month in wood casks, and bottles it.

Capped with a stainless steel lid Foradori devised, each amphora is a special fermentation vessel. It holds a steady temperature during fermentation. The wide mouth at the top allows the cap of skins to macerate suspended in the juice. Once fermentation is over, the skins settle to the narrow point at the bottom where they decompose, slowly releasing chemical compounds that help preserve the wine. Unlike the Georgians, Foradori does not line her jars with beeswax, allowing the microscopic pores to let in tiny amounts of oxygen.

“In the wood, it takes longer for the various elements in the wine to come together,” says Emilio. “In the clay, the wine is more open and expressive.”

“Steiner always wrote that clay is an element that can connect the energy of soil to the energy of the cosmos,” Elisabetta adds. “It sounds very esoteric, but there is something in the clay. For a grape, it’s going back into the earth. Yes, it’s a smart way to preserve the wine, but it’s also a link to the soil. I think it preserves the energy.”

The clay also forces Foradori to be even more vigilant. “It looks easy, but it’s not,” she says, as she lowers a tube into the top of one and draws out some wine to taste. “You need to be here 100 percent of the time. The process is so intense that in less than a week a great wine can go bad. Everything is concentrated in this space. There’s no sulfur; there’s yeast, bacteria, grape skins. The life in here is very strong. You have to taste constantly and you have to be ready to move the wine the moment something seems wrong.”

Emilio smiles as he says that his mother may look soulful and dreamy, but she’s still the focused winemaker of 20 years ago. “She’s very passionate about what she does. But when you work with her, you have to be precise.”

Have all these sweeping changes worked? Every recent vintage of Granato has scored outstanding save the 2005, a tough year weather-wise. And Foradori’s 2010 single-vineyard Teroldegos from Sgarzon and Morei have achieved ratings of 91 and 90 points, respectively. Tasting them non-blind from the amphorae at the winery revealed a great vibrancy. They smelled like flowers and tasted bright and alive.

“Today, every day is different,” Foradori says. “Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t, but the wine is alive.”

Emerging from the cellars, Foradori sits down on a bench in the winery courtyard and basks in the sun while Arco lies next to her. Emilio takes the tasting glasses and tube off to be washed. She smiles as he walks away. He’s home from enology school, taking a few weeks before he starts an internship at a French winery.

“I would love for him to work in wine. But he has to have the freedom to find his way,” she says. “My dream is to make cheese.”

Thankfully, she doesn’t plan to make that career move any time soon. The changes she has made in the past decade have allowed her to enjoy both success and the ability to express herself in her work. For Elisabetta, there are still plenty of hills left to climb.