

■ WINE CONNOISSEUR

DIY excellence from Andrea Franchetti

**In just eight years,
he has turned a wild
bushland into one of
the finest wine
properties
in Tuscany**

By **N K Yong**

A MONTH ago I spent three weeks visiting wineries in Spain (Ribera and Priorato) and Italy (Tuscany and Piedmont) and met with surprises every day — discovering so many new wines that my mental and other sensory images became a blur of one excitement after another.

At the farmhouse half-way up the hill, the owner and winemaker Andrea Franchetti was waiting for us in his kitchen-dining room. He had already cooked lunch for us — open-fire grilled Chianina beef and chicken. The bottles of 1999 (barrel samples) and 1997 Trinoro and Palazzi were standing on the dinner table.

Andrea had taken the Saturday midnight train down from the Dolomites where he had been vacationing with his family, arrived at the winery in the early hours of the morning, and proceeded to prepare lunch while waiting for us to arrive.

Peter had told him that

He had said to Peter 15 years ago in Bordeaux: "I want to make great wines — the best possible." On Peter's advice he planted his first vines in 1992 — Cabernet Franc predominantly, some Merlot, and a little Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot — an astonishing cepage for Tuscany.

He did everything himself — planting the vineyards, overseeing the harvest, vinyfying and maturing the wines. Peter advised and assisted only when asked. Basically Andrea learnt to do everything himself — and learnt the hard way and fast.

His first release was 1997

Will the wines last? Who knows, the history is not there yet, but no matter — for now, the wines are true and honest, pure expressions of fruit and terroir, and the results of single-minded dedication, unyielding commitment and integrity.

Yet amidst such a plethora of riches, one winery stood out well above the others, superb as they were.

One weekend I was staying with a great friend, Peter Vinding-Diers, one of the most gifted white wine makers in Graves before he took himself off to Italy.

Peter recommended, nay commanded, that I visit his friend's new winery not too far away. We set out from his home in Buonconvento one bright sunny Sunday morning southwards, past Montalcino towards Val D'Orcia.

The passing scenery showed none of the rolling hills with vineyard-covered slopes and their tall cypress sentinels lining the roads around the wine villages of the Chianti Classico region of Tuscany. Instead there were undulating farmlands and uncleared woods.

We seemed to drive for undue kilometres. Finally we turned into a dirt track, and there between two majestic columns we saw the vineyards stretching out on the hillslopes beyond, distinguished further by two huge 17th century Sicilian urns mounted so as to look as if they were sailing on a green sea of vines.

wherever he was at this time, he had to come to meet us — no arguments again.

That was the start of the most exhilarating day I have ever spent in a winery. The wines, the perfectly grilled beef and chicken, (much the best meal of my whole trip in Italy), the view across the rolling hills and valleys — these were great highlights.

It was not simply the property itself — all 300-plus hectares of hill and valley, reaching an elevation of over 600 metres above sea level; only 25 hectares under vine; three 900-year old houses. It was the entire environment — a rustic wildness, suffused with a pervading atmosphere of history and generations-old tradition.

Andrea is not just a wine maker — he is a poet and an artist who makes wine, driven by a deeply-felt sense of history and tradition, and an equally deep passion for wine. He has transformed a wild bushland and farmland in the middle of Tuscany into one of the finest of the new Tuscan wine properties in the space of eight years.

His first release was 1997. 1999 is his third vintage — and his finest. What is Andrea's secret? Right clones, low yields, organic farming, late harvesting, as late as possible. No secret. Just hard work, and no greed driving the yield up to commercial levels.

Andrea makes two main wines — Trinoro and Palazzi di Trinoro. In 1999 he made a second wine Le Cupole di Trinoro. Trinoro consists of 70 per cent Cabernet Franc, 20 per cent Merlot and 10 per cent made up of Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Palazzi contains equal proportions of Cabernet Franc and Merlot.

In 1999, both wines are huge — black monsters, dense and powerful, ripe and intense, but through the almost overpoweringly rich flavour one finds the terroir expressing itself through the grapes. Complexity, concentration, balance, harmony and finesse — they are all there.