

## Magazine Archives: Oct. 31, 2018

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### Treasure Trove

Tuscany's big reds are at the top of their game in a string of excellent vintages

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Since its creation 30 years ago, the pure Merlot called **Masseto**, from the coastal region of Bolgheri, has earned a reputation as one of Italy's—and the world's—greatest red wines. The current release, from the warm, rich and concentrated 2015 vintage, is a stunning rendition.

"We've gone beyond the Bordeaux style, beyond international varieties," says Masseto winemaker Axel Heinz. "We feel we're now making the best possible wines as an expression of Bolgheri."

The Masseto Toscana 2015 (98 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, \$700), made from 100 percent Merlot, is ripe and powerful, yet polished and silky, its dense tannins well-integrated into the structure, with black cherry, blackberry, cedar and iron flavors framed by vanilla and toasty oak elements. Along with its sibling Ornellaia Bolgheri Superiore 2015 (97, \$255) and neighbor Tenuta San Guido Bolgheri-Sassicaia Sassicaia 2015 (97, \$245), Masseto is an example of the high quality reds coming from this tiny region that focuses on Bordeaux grape varieties.

Brunello di Montalcino and the top super Tuscans shine this year as well, with numerous bottlings in the classic range of 95 points or higher, yet Chianti Classico also makes a strong showing and should not be overlooked. In addition, Montepulciano fields a handful of classic-scorers, including both red and dessert wines.

Brunello di Montalcino is particularly dominant. Three of the four top-scoring wines are Brunello riservas from the extreme 2012 vintage: Altesino Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2012 (98, \$150), Eredi Fuligni Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2012 (98, \$210) and Casanova di Neri Brunello di Montalcino Cerretalto 2012 (98, \$300). (For more detailed coverage of Brunello di Montalcino, see "Old-School Brunello," June 30, 2018.)

The ripe, concentrated Casanova di Neri is the most tannic of the three, showing flavors of medicinal herbs, juniper, macerated cherry, plum, tobacco and spice. Although Casanova di Neri doesn't use riserva on its label, the Cerretalto has the requisite aging and is always released a year after the estate's other Brunellos. The Altesino is elegant and vibrant, delivering its characteristic balsamic notes of juniper, wild rosemary and sage, along with rose, cherry and berry flavors. The Eredi Fuligni, from vineyards near those of Altesino, is linear and tightly wound, yet also pure, packed with cherry, strawberry, floral and mineral notes.

Several more Brunellos from 2012 and 2013 weigh in at 97 points, as does a pair of super Tuscans from Chianti Classico: Antinori's Toscana Tignanello 2015 (97, \$135) and Castello dei Rampolla's Toscana Sammarco 2013 (97, \$117). In fact, the 2012, 2013 and 2015 harvests contribute almost equally to the nearly 70 Tuscan wines rated 95 points or higher in this report. Brunello accounts for the all of the 2012s and more than half of the 2013s (the rest is made up of super Tuscans, Montepulciano reds and Chianti Classicos), while 2015 is strongest for Chianti Classico and Bolgheri, including the super Tuscans from both areas as well as other parts of the coast.

These are the highlights from more than 750 Tuscan wines I have reviewed in blind tastings at our New York office since my previous report ("Challenging Times," Oct. 15 & 31, 2017). In addition to the classic-scorers, there are another 450 rated outstanding (90 to 94 points), making the current crop of new releases from Tuscany very desirable to Italian wine lovers. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

Despite a smattering of bottlings from 2011 and earlier, the wines under review mostly hail from 2012 to 2017, the vast majority of them from 2013, 2015 and 2016. These latter two vintages, which are being released now and over the next few years, are worth particular attention—they may be the most scintillating back-to-back vintages from Tuscany in the past three decades.

As you explore these new vintages, however, be aware that the Sangiovese-based wines are very different in structure and flavor profile than the 2013s and 2014s. The 2015s are dense, concentrated reds, with massive structures and muscular tannins coated with opulent textures, while the 2016s are ripe, pure and expressive, with vibrant structures. Both exhibit dark fruit flavors of black cherry, black currant, blackberry, plum, violet and mineral. The versions based on Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot are more similar to preceding vintages, if richer, more concentrated and more tannic.

## CHIANTI CLASICO

Chianti Classico was a major beneficiary of the warm, dry 2015 vintage. The Sangiovese achieved ideal ripeness, and vintners were able to harvest without any pressure from inclement or unpredictable weather.

"When ripeness in the grapes arrives gradually as in 2015, the vines have the possibility to do the best synthesis of the polyphenol and aromatic compounds—and that's what happened," reports Marco Pallanti, owner and winemaker at Castello di Ama, whose Chianti Classico Vigneto La Casuccia Gran Selezione 2015 (95, \$225) shows both drive and elegance. Four other Ama bottlings from 2015 also rated outstanding this year, including two Chianti Classicos and two super Tuscans: the vibrant Toscana L'Apparita (94, \$250) and powerful Toscana Haiku (92, \$60).

Castello di Ama is not alone in 2015 in fielding traditional Chianti Classicos, particularly riserva and gran selezione bottlings, that rival the region's super Tuscans. Overall, the appellation produced the greatest number of high-scoring examples of any vintage I've tasted to date. Many of the top Chianti Classicos carry the gran selezione designation, yet some of the best examples don't use it, so you won't see it in every case.

Poggerino, the Radda estate owned by brother and sister Piero and Benedetta Lanza, excelled with its Chianti Classico Bugialla Riserva 2015 (96, \$42), full of pure cherry, tobacco, rosemary, iron and tar flavors, and its Chianti Classico Nuovo 2015 (95, \$30), fermented in a concrete egg and sporting cherry, currant, licorice, spice and iron notes.

"The vintage is for me certainly one of the best along with 2010 and 1990," says Piero Lanza. "I think the reason the 2015s came out so well is that they are from Radda. It is one of the coolest zones in Chianti Classico, and therefore the vines did not suffer from the long, hot summer we had until the end of July. Another reason, important to me, is that I was able to harvest grapes from vines that are relatively old-between 15 and 25 years-and well-balanced, the result of the work of the previous years."

Other notable Chianti Classicos from 2015 include the Castello di Volpaia Chianti Classico Riserva (96, \$35), complex, concentrated and pure; the Fontodi Chianti Classico Vigna del Sorbo Gran Selezione (95, \$89), a muscular and powerful red; and the Poggio Bonelli Chianti Classico (95, \$25), with enticing aromas of black cherry, leather, tobacco, iron and earth.

As the price tag for the Poggio Bonelli indicates, value is another hallmark of this historic Tuscan region, which delivers it in spades in both 2015 and 2016. Casaloste's Chianti Classico 2015 (94, \$21), Castello di Monsanto's Chianti Classico Riserva 2015 (94, \$25) and Chianti Classico 2016 (93, \$20), San Felice's Chianti Classico 2016 (94, \$17) and Lanciola's Chianti Classico Le Masse di Greve 2015 (93, \$22) all offer fantastic quality for the price.

There are also impressive examples from the more austere 2013 vintage. The Antinori Chianti Classico Badia a Passignano Gran Selezione 2013 (95, \$60) is vibrant and solidly built, with black cherry, black currant, olive, cedar and tobacco flavors, while the Capraia Chianti Classico Effe 55 Gran Selezione 2013 (95, \$30) offers cherry and berry flavors that show purity and complexity.

## MONTEPULCIANO

Farther inland from Montalcino lies Montepulciano, which sees slightly higher levels of rainfall than either Montalcino or Chianti Classico and whose soils are richer in clay. This infuses the area's Sangiovese-based reds, called *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, with ample acidity and tannins. Though the regulations here stipulate a minimum of 70 percent Sangiovese in blends that can include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah, more and more wineries are producing versions from 100 percent Sangiovese, whose local clone is Prugnolo Gentile, or relying on other native Tuscan grapes such as Mammolo, Canaiolo and Colorino for their blends.

Among the best examples I tasted this year are two from Boscarelli: Its single-vineyard *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Il Nocio* 2015 (95, \$170), from 100 percent Sangiovese, has a beam of pure cherry, strawberry, floral and mineral flavors, with the backbone to age, while its *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* 2015 (94, \$41), a blend of 85 percent Sangiovese with Canaiolo, Colorino and Mammolo, shows purity and finesse, with rose, cherry, strawberry and graphite notes. Carpineto's *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Riserva* 2013 (95, \$30) offers more weight, density and fruit, with enticing flavors of black cherry, black currant, leather and woody spices.

With the 2015 vintage, Avignonesi has debuted a series of single-vineyard *Vino Nobile*, all from sites located in the southern part of the appellation, where there is more limestone mixed in with the sand and clay soils. The *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano La Banditella 2015* (93, \$45) is supple and fresh, the *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Oceano 2015* (93, \$45) shows breadth and power, the *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Caprile 2015* (92, \$45) is sleek and vibrant, and the *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano La Stella 2015* (92, \$45) is generous and fleshy. As its name implies, *La Stella* comes from a star-shaped parcel at the Avignonesi property in the eastern Valiano sector of Montepulciano adjacent to Cortona.

Avignonesi is also known for its excellent *Vin Santo*. The newest releases keep the quality streak going with the intense *Vin Santo di Montepulciano Occhio di Pernice 2002* (96, \$280/375ml) and vibrant *Vin Santo di Montepulciano 2002* (95, \$220/375ml).

## BOLGHERI AND THE TUSCAN COAST

Bolgheri has been the source of excellent reds for some years now. It's a small area, at just less than 2,900 acres, which gives the wines a regional identity when compared with the rest of the Tuscan coast—stretching from Livorno to south of Grosseto—that surrounds it. (For more on the rise of this important region, see "Tuscany's Napa," April 30, 2018.)

In addition to *Masseto*, *Ornellaia* and *Sassicaia*, other notable new releases from Bolgheri include *Castello di Bolgheri's Bolgheri Superiore 2015* (96, \$75), *Le Macchiole's Toscana Messorio 2013* (96, \$225), *Argentiera's Bolgheri Superiore 2015* (95, \$75) and *Grattamacco's Bolgheri Superiore 2015* (95, \$110).

There are good values to be found in Bolgheri as well. The *Argentiera Bolgheri Poggio ai Ginepri 2015* (93, \$20) relies on a blend of *Cabernet Sauvignon*, *Merlot*, *Syrah* and *Petit Verdot*, resulting in ripe black currant, blackberry, licorice, cedar and graphite flavors. The *Grattamacco Bolgheri 2015* (92, \$30) is dense and monolithic, while the debut *San Felice Bolgheri Bell'Aja 2016* (92, \$30) delivers power along with notes of blackberry, pomegranate, earth, tobacco and mineral.

Not far from Bolgheri, to the south, lies *Suvereto*, where *Tua Rita* owns vineyards on an outcropping of reddish soils high in iron. It's the source of the lush and polished *Toscana Redigaffi 2015* (95, \$330), a pure *Merlot*. To Bolgheri's north, *Riparbella* is an interesting outcropping of hills, home to the *Caiarossa Toscana 2013* (94, \$65), which blends approximately equal parts *Merlot* and *Cabernet Franc* with decreasing amounts of *Cabernet Sauvignon*, *Syrah*, *Sangiovese*, *Petit Verdot* and *Alicante*.

## OTHER TUSCANY

Elsewhere in Tuscany, *Tenuta di Trinoro* sprawls across the hillsides in the southern part of the *Val d'Orcia*, near the borders of *Umbria* and *Lazio*. *Andrea Franchetti* has found success with *Bordeaux* varieties there, particularly *Cabernet Franc*. Its top wine, the *Toscana 2015* (96, \$250), blends *Cabernet Franc* (50 percent) with *Merlot* (36 percent), *Cabernet Sauvignon* (10 percent) and *Petit Verdot*, while its *Toscana Palazzi 2015* (96, \$110) is pure *Merlot*. There are also three vineyard-designated *Cabernet Francs* that express the different terroirs of the estate: the muscular, exuberant *Toscana Campo di Magnacosta 2015* (95, \$110); the fresh, juicy *Toscana Campo di Tenaglia 2015* (95, \$110); and the rich, dense *Toscana Campo di Camagi 2015* (94, \$110).

There are nearly 50 white wines included in this report, with several outstanding examples. Mostly these are from *Vermentino* and *Vernaccia*, yet the highest-rated white this year is a *Trebbiano*, the second vintage produced by *Petrolo* in *Val d'Arno di Sopra*, near *Arezzo*. Its *Toscana White Boggina B 2015* (92, \$75) shows a deft use of oak, adding roundness and spice to its rich flavors of apple and pear. Unfortunately, there's not much of it available.

Easier to find is the Collemassari Vermentino Montecucco Melacce 2017 (91, \$20), exuding intense apricot, melon, orange and honeysuckle flavors. From San Gimignano, I like both the Capella S. Andrea Vernaccia di San Gimignano Clara Stella 2016 (90, \$19) and Simone Santini Vernaccia di San Gimignano Tenuta Le Calcinaie 2017 (90, \$18).

Rounding out the outstanding honors among the whites are Grattamacco's Vermentino Bolgheri 2016 (90, \$45), under the same ownership as Collemassari and both made by winemaker Luca Marrone; Ornellaia's Toscana White Poggio alle Gazze 2016 (90, \$82); and Simone Santini's Vernaccia di San Gimignano Tenuta Le Calcinaie Riserva 2015 (90, \$30).

The stellar 2015 reds currently available and the 2016s that are now arriving will thrill any fan of Italian wine in general and Tuscan wine in particular. If you love Sangiovese, don't miss the Chianti Classicos and Vino Nobiles from these two vintages. They are delicious now and will also repay aging. And if the 2017 whites are any indication, this may be the third in a series of excellent harvests. It all adds up to a treasure trove from central Italy's most exciting region.

*Senior editor Bruce Sanderson is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Tuscany.*

## See Also

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