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## FALL AND RISE IN TUSCANY

SELLING ORNELLAIA WAS LODOVICO ANTINORI'S BIGGEST MISTAKE. HERE'S HIS COMEBACK STORY

ITALY: FIVE SURPRISING TRENDS

SAUVIGNON BLANC VALUES FROM NEW ZEALAND

RUSSELL BEVAN: NAPA MAVERICK

# ITALY'S *Cutting Edge*

## AMID AN ABUNDANCE OF GREAT WINES, HERE ARE FIVE ITALIAN HOT SPOTS WORTH YOUR ATTENTION

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TACKLING THE WINES OF ITALY is a daunting task, even for those who have more than a beginner's acquaintance with this vine-laden peninsula.

For starters, Italy boasts at least 375 indigenous grape varieties and possibly as many as 500. France, with about 200 different varieties, isn't even a close second. Then there are 20 delimited regions, ranging from the postage-stamp Valle d'Aosta, tucked under the Alps in Italy's northwest corner, to the massive island of Sicily, practically a continent in its own right, off the country's southern coast.

There are many starting points for exploration. In this package, we spotlight various ways to dig deeper into Italy's bounty, focusing on the regions, grapes, styles and vineyards that are changing the face of Italian wine.

Chianti, Barolo and Amarone have long been stalwarts on restaurant wine lists in the United States, yet a closer look reveals a number of emerging regions where passionate vintners and investors, many of them from outside the area, are deeply committed to quality. The two regions we examine here are Alto Piemonte, which produces its own expression of the noble Nebbiolo grape, and Sardinia, offering a cornucopia of grapes and wine styles.

Signature grape varieties such as Sangiovese, Nebbiolo and Trebbiano offer another familiar access point for American wine drinkers, yet even these have many permutations, depending on where they are grown. Tuscany, for example, offers different biotypes of Sangiovese—from Sangioveto in Chianti Classico to Prugnolo Gentile in Montepulciano—each producing distinctive wines. Here, we explore the Aglianico grape, which makes flavorful reds in Campania, Puglia and Basilicata.

When it comes to identifying special vineyard sites, not to mention classifying the best vineyards in the country as a whole, Italy is still in its infancy compared with France or Germany. Yet vineyard-mapping exercises are taking place across Italy, with regions such as Alto Adige, Barolo and Barbaresco delimiting their vineyards and enshrining historic *crus* into law. Our focus here is on the single-vineyard stars of Tuscany, which is working its way toward a recognition of the region's top sites.

Italy is also riding the rosé phenomenon, a category that has global dimensions and whose popularity shows no signs of slowing down. Italian *rosato* comes in many colors and flavors, depending on the grape variety and region of production. With dozens of new entries appearing each year, the country is building on a long tradition of making rosé.

Each of our five areas of focus includes a list of recommended wines. We hope these selections enhance your enjoyment of Italian wine and give you a better understanding of the country's dolce vita.

*Map by* LASZLO KUBINYI • *Still lifes by* JEFF HARRIS

# *Tuscany* GRAND CRU

There are exciting developments in Tuscany today, led by the storied, 300-year-old Chianti Classico region. Long defined by its regulations stipulating allowable grape varieties and aging requirements, Chianti Classico is undergoing an evolution, driven by a handful of producers focused on identifying the region's best sub-zones and vineyards.

Once led by French grape varieties and top bottlings generically labeled *vino da tavola*, the current makeover of Tuscan wine is centered on a renewed emphasis on Sangiovese, thanks to new clones and selections. Quality is improving as vineyards are not only replanted with higher density and better rootstocks, but also farmed with more precision, enhancing their ability to express differences based on site, elevation, soil type and geography.

## TUSCAN PRODUCERS HAVE LONG RECOGNIZED SPECIFIC PLOTS THAT YIELD SINGULAR WINES WITH DEFINING ATTRIBUTES.

This is an outgrowth of the designations that for decades have regulated Chianti Classico and other Tuscan appellations by grape variety and aging, without any ties to place other than the larger geographically defined region. The *gran selezione* designation, introduced in 2013, requires estate-grown grapes, but falls short of stipulating 100 percent Sangiovese from single vineyards.

Now there is a trend toward the delineation of sub-zones with common characteristics. These classifications do not designate single vineyards themselves, yet certain producers have long recognized specific plots that yield singular wines with defining attributes year in and year out. Here is a short list of those *crus*, not only from Chianti Classico, but also Montalcino and Montepulciano in the Tuscan hills and Bolgheri on the coast. Though by no means exhaustive, this list can serve as a guide to some of the region's top sites, while offering a glimpse at the changing face of Tuscan wine.

### Castello di Ama Vigneto Bellavista Gran Selezione

High in the hills of Chianti Classico, in the commune of Gaiole, lies the Castello di Ama estate. The vineyards occupy four valleys: Bellavista, La Casuccia, Montebuoni and San Lorenzo. Bellavista is a model for ripening Sangiovese: Ranging from 1,500 to 1,730 feet in elevation, it consists of limestone and clay soils and faces south-southwest.

Bellavista was part of the original acquisition of the property by four partners in 1972. It debuted as a single-vineyard bottling with the 1978 vintage. A blend of Sangiovese (at least 80 percent) and Malvasia Nera, Vigneto Bellavista is a red with great finesse, perfume and structure. It's the archetype of high-altitude Sangiovese.

Marco Pallanti, who has made the wines at Castello di Ama since 1982, chose to focus from the beginning on the Chianti Classico appellation rather than creating a super Tuscan, and the results have been consistently outstanding. Of the 23 vintages of Vigneto Bellavista *Wine Spectator* has tasted going back to 1983, almost all have scored more than 90 points, with a handful of them rating 95-plus. Bellavista is also the source of Ama's 100-percent Merlot, l'Apparita.

### Fèlsina Rancia Riserva

Fèlsina dates to 1966, when Domenico Poggiali bought the estate at the end of the *mezzadria* era, a period in which Chianti's agriculture was dominated by sharecropping. Its vineyards lie in Castelnuovo Berardenga, straddling the southeast corner of Chianti Classico and the adjoining Colli Senesi. Poggiali's son-in-law, Giuseppe Mazzocolin, established the estate's reputation with two wines born in 1983: a Sangiovese called Fontalloro, sourced from both portions of the estate, and Rancia Riserva, a single-vineyard Chianti Classico.

Rancia is named for the former monastery at the top of the hill from which the vineyard descends, falling away from roughly 1,400 feet to the southwest. The site's limestone and clay soils are studded with a mix of *albarese*, the hard calcareous mother rock of the Classico hills, and *galestro*, the friable schist also common to the area. The result is a wine with density and grip, showing flavors of cherry, currant, tobacco and spice. It's not oaky, despite an 18- to 20-month sojourn in new French oak barrels, followed by six to eight months in bottle.

Reviews spanning 25 vintages, including the inaugural 1983, demonstrate the pedigree of Rancia, with most vintages in the outstanding range. On a visit I made to Fèlsina in 2013, Mazzocolin, Giovanni Poggiali and enologist Franco Bernabei opened several vintages of Rancia and Fontalloro back to 1985. The 1985, 1988 and 1990 attested to Rancia's aging potential.

### Fontodi Vigna del Sorbo Gran Selezione

Fontodi is the leading estate in Panzano, a village in Chianti Classico's Greve commune. Owner Giovanni Manetti enjoys a well-earned reputation for his Flaccianello delle Pieve, an IGT made entirely from Sangiovese. Flaccianello was a vineyard-designated wine until 2001, when it became a selection of the estate's best Sangiovese grapes.

Fontodi's remaining single-vineyard bottling is Vigna del Sorbo, since 2011 its *gran selezione*. The Vigna del Sorbo parcel is planted on the *galestro* soils of Panzano's famed Conca d'Oro, an amphitheater of south- to southwest-facing vineyards that enjoy great *terroir*. In 1979, Manetti grafted the site's Canaiolo and Malvasia Nera vines to Cabernet Sauvignon, thereby creating Vigna del Sorbo's signature blend of Sangiovese (90 percent) and Cabernet Sauvignon (10 percent).

The Cabernet component gives Vigna del Sorbo a modern feel, with a lush texture that's also the result of malolactic conversion in *barriques*, 50 percent of which are new. The wine always shows plenty of dark fruit, with dense underlying tannins. As much about the texture as the flavors, Vigna del Sorbo has shone consistently for the past two decades.

### Altesino Brunello di Montalcino Montosoli

Montalcino only began mapping its vineyards in 2016, a step the region had resisted until this year. This is partly because many estates blend grapes from different sites and partly because of how

### RECOMMENDED GRAND CRU WINES FROM TUSCANY

| SCORE | WINE | PRICE |
|---|---|---|
| 94 | **Masseto** Toscana 2012 | $625 |
| 93 | **Altesino** Brunello di Montalcino Montosoli 2011 | $110 |
| 93 | **Castello di Ama** Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista Gran Selezione 2011 | $220 |
| 92 | **Boscarelli** Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Il Nocio 2011 | $100 |
| 91 | **Fattoria di Fèlsina** Chianti Classico Berardenga Rancia Riserva 2012 | $53 |
| 90 | **Fontodi** Chianti Classico Vigna del Sorbo Gran Selezione 2013 | $82 |

Castello di Ama's Bellavista vineyard, which lies in the Chianti Classico hills at an elevation of more than 1,500 feet, has been bottled as a single-vineyard wine since 1978.

recent much of the region's growth has been. Yet it is apparent there are variations within the zone, certainly between the north and south but perhaps even more so among various sub-zones that show specific characteristics. What has long been recognized, however, is that if Montalcino has one great vineyard, it is Montosoli.

Montosoli deservedly enjoys its reputation from the Altesino bottling that bears its name. Always one of the top Brunellos, it has earned 95 points or higher in more than half of the vintages we have tasted since 1988. Showing floral berry fruit and balsamic aromas, the Montosoli profile is refined, with harmony and balance.

Yet the beauty of Montosoli is that several estates own vineyards there. Caparzo's La Casa also comes from Montosoli, but from the other side of the hill, facing southwest as opposed to Altesino's northeast exposure. This yields a more powerful, muscular red, which typically comes close to the heights of Altesino's Montosoli, if with less consistency from vintage to vintage. Both Altesino and Caparzo are owned by businesswoman Elisabetta Gnudi Angelini.

The Baricci estate also owns a large chunk of Montosoli, as does Valdicava, whose Montosoli parcel goes into its *annata* bottling in the best vintages. It was Valdicava owner Vincenzo Abbruzzese's grandfather Bramante who sold parcels of Montosoli to Altesino and Caparzo after buying the vineyard in the 1960s.

### Boscarelli Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Il Nocio

The history of winemaking in Montepulciano dates back centuries, and perhaps much longer, yet the region only recently mapped its districts, some of which include single vineyards. Of the several producers that designate vineyards for their *riserva* labels, Boscarelli owns one of the best, Vigna del Nocio.

The vineyard is in the southern area of Montepulciano, in a warm, breezy area known as Cervognano. It was planted in 1988 and 1995 in red soils comprising hard clay and sand, using a mass selection of Sangiovese from Montepulciano, Montalcino and Chianti Classico. Sitting at an elevation of 1,155 feet, it faces fully south.

Earlier vintages of Vigna del Nocio were blended with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, but since 2001 the wine has been 100 percent Sangiovese. Though quality has been inconsistent over the years, recent vintages show the potential of the site. The wines are traditional Vino Nobile: austere in their youth, with a core of pure cherry and berry fruit, backed by tobacco, cedar and mineral notes and dusty tannins.

### Masseto Toscana

Among the original plantings of Bolgheri's Tenuta dell'Ornellaia in 1981 were three contiguous parcels of Merlot on clay soils in the heart of the estate. Those parcels—Masseto Alto, Masseto Centrale and Masseto Junior—impart naturally low vigor and balance to the Merlot vines. According to winemaker Axel Heinz, Alto gives finesse; Centrale, with its high proportion of gray clay, imparts opulence and density; and Junior mellows the overall blend. Though a Merlot was made in 1986, it wasn't until the 1987 harvest that Masseto was born.

Rarely does Masseto disappoint, with only the 1989 vintage falling below an outstanding score. More often than not, the wine has rated classic. Concentrated with black cherry, plum, cedar and spice flavors from its 100 percent new oak maturation, Masseto is a powerful, modern expression from the Tuscan coast.

*—Bruce Sanderson*

ALESSANDRO MOGGI