

# SANGIOVESE SEDUCTRESS OR SAINT?

WHILE POPULAR OVERSEAS, THERE IS A SMALL AMOUNT OF SANGIOVESE MADE LOCALLY. **ELSIE PELL** DESCRIBES ITS BACKGROUND AND BEAUTIFUL HISTORY, SHARING THE MAGIC OF ITS MOTHERLAND.

Even though the first Sangiovese came into South Africa in the mid-seventies, the uptake among local producers has not been enthusiastic. It seems a pity that we are not paying more attention to this variety that suits our climate and has already proven to make deliciously drinkable wines – even if it is simply as a large component in blends.

Antonij Rupert and Bouchard Finlayson were among the first to plant the variety. Antonij Rupert Wines released the first varietal wine under the Terra del Capo label in 1998. The original bush vines have now been trellised, allowing canopy management to protect fruit from sunburn, resulting in better quality fruit. The 2008 vintage has bright cherry fruit with well-rounded structure and appetising acidity.

Bouchard Finlayson makes a very successful Sangiovese blend, The Hannibal, which is half Sangiovese with a vinous United Nations mix of Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo, Mourvedre, Barbera and Shiraz. The wine is complex but deliciously drinkable, one of the great features of good Sangiovese.

Morgenster's Super Tuscan-style Sangiovese blend, called Tosca, is stylish and smoothly textured with succulent red and black cherry fruit encasing a well-honed structure. The wood treatment is integrated and well executed. The 2008 vintage has 80% Sangiovese blended with Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot and will grace any table.

*Platter's SA Wine Guide* lists ten producers of varietal Sangiovese: The Three Foxes (a once-off), Antonij Rupert, Anura, Dragonridge, Fairview, Raka, Koelenhof, Monterosso, Idiom and the discontinued Tukulu. Given the recent interest in growing more unusual varieties here, it is with high hope that more producers will plant this excellent variety, best known from its native home in Italy, where it is a jewel among the many treasures in the country's varietal crown.

It is impossible to be bored by Italian wines and trying to understand them can be a life-long adventure. Not only is there remarkable diversity of styles made in a multitude of regions, but also more than 1 000 indigenous grape varieties – not that anyone can be sure. Most of these are reluctant travellers and therefore not



Grapes in Chianti,  
Tuscany (for reals).



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often seen or tasted outside their region. To complicate matters even further, the same grape variety will be re-christened in different areas. Sangiovese has more than 20 synonyms in different parts of Tuscany, with an equally elusive personality. It could be called, Sangiovese, Brunello in Montalcino, Prugnolo Gentile in Montepulciano or Morellino in Scansano on the West Coast, to name a few. If you already feel bemused or confused, do not give up. The rewards of a little tasting and learning will delight and intrigue.

A Tuscan winemaker said: 'It's the Tuscan vine par excellence, seeming to embody the character of the Tuscan people: temperate, precise, at times coarse; tart but fundamental; simple, with implication of noble lineage...'

Sangiovese is the most planted red variety and has always been the dominant variety of Central Italy, in particular in Tuscany, but can be found as far south as Sicily and north as far as Lombardy and Veneto. Its name means 'Blood of Jove' and genetic instability results in great variability in the vineyards with a mix of more than 600 clones. Clonal research is isolating quality material for flavor, colour and concentration, not for high yields. The large-berried Sangiovese Grosso, includes Prugnolo Gentile and Sangiovese di Lamole, while Sangiovese Piccolo has smaller berries. Current thinking is that quality is not based on berry size.

### Chianti and Chianti Classico

Wine history dates back to Etruscan settlement in Italy around the 8th century BC. Much later the Romans spread the cult of Bacchus to the far-flung corners of their Empire. Vines found a natural home in the varied topography and became part of the landscape and the hearts of the Italian people.

In the mid-19th century, Baron Bettino Ricasoli, established the pre-eminence of the Sangiovese grape in his 'formula' for Chianti. It was 70% Sangiovese, 15% Canaiolo Nero, 10% Trebbiano and/or Malvasia and 5% Mammolo and/or Colorino and remained the same for more than 100 years. The Ricasoli family is still at the forefront of quality improvement in Chianti.

During the 60's and 70's Chianti, the Sangiovese-based wine in the straw covered flask, called a fiasco, became a world traveller, but it was near impossible to discover the grape's true characteristics. Although the packaging conjured up images of picnics under shady olive trees, the wine was usually less picturesque and the quality pretty unpredictable.

The quality revolution and renaissance of modern Italian wine fittingly began in Florence, a centre

Opposite, clockwise from top left: bottles, etc, etc, etc, etc, etc, etc. Below: really old bottles.

of creativity and quality for centuries. In the 70's Marchese Piero Antinori set a fashion for what became known as the 'Super Tuscans' by releasing his groundbreaking Tignanello, a blend of 80% Sangiovese with 20% Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. He not only changed the traditional blend, but also the oak regime, using French barriques in stead of the usual large, upright Slovenian oak botti. To complete the revolution, he bottled the wine in a stiff-necked Bordeaux bottle instead of the relaxed, sloping shouldered fiasco. It had to be labeled *Vino da Tavola*, because it obeyed no rules.

Decanter man of the Year 2011, Giacomo Tachis, joined Antinori in 1961 and is most famous for introducing Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties to Tuscany. As a junior oenologist he lent a hand at the San Guido Estate on the Bolgheri coast, to create Sassicaia which set a new paradigm for Italian wine. When Sassicaia was awarded first place in an international Cabernet tasting at Decanter magazine in 1978 the world sat up and noticed. He went on to create Tignanello and Solaia (Cabernet Sauvignon/Sangiovese), with Marchese Antinori, to great acclaim. The dream of producing world-class quality wines in Tuscany was re-kindled and the new trend started gathering momentum. In his quest for quality he advocated clonal selection, high density planting, low yields, refinement in malo-lactic fermentation and changed oak maturation regimes.



## Chianti and Chianti Classico – the difference

Chianti Classico is the original and oldest zone and may not produce wine labeled Chianti. It is the heart land of Sangiovese with great importance in the variety's stylistic evolution over the last three decades. The low-vigour soils consist of sandstone and limestone/clay (albarese). Planting is dense and must be at least 4 400 vines, with a maximum yield of 7,5 tons per hectare. Wines may be 100% Sangiovese or at least 80% with 20% additions of Canaiolo Nero, Colorino or Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah allowed. No white grapes may be added since 2006. There is a growing movement to produce 100% Sangiovese versions. Wines traditionally display the distinctive symbol of the black cockerel or Gallo Nero on the bottle. The regular bottling may be sold from 1 October of the year following harvest, while the Riserva has to be aged for 24 months.

Chianti may use 75-90% Sangiovese, 5-10% Canaiolo and 5-10% Trebbiano/Malvasia/Bianca Lunga. Yields of 10,5 tons are allowed and most wines labeled Chianti are early-drinking. The practice, called governo all'uso, is allowed to raise the alcohol and improve mouth feel.

In 1984, the Italian government extended the Denominazione di Origine Controllata Garantita (DOCG), to the Chianti region and recognized seven sub-zones including Chianti Classico. The Classico producers were not happy as they comply with stricter production codes. A long battle for independence from the greater Chianti region followed. This succeeded in 1996 when the Chianti Classico DOCG appellation regulations became separated from those of the Chianti DOCG.

This year at the anteprima tastings in Florence it was announced that the legal separation was now complete. Reaction amongst most producers was positive but there are concerns that the consumer often does not understand why a bottle of Chianti Classico costs double the price of Chianti. There is still work to be done.

The sub-zones are Chianti Rufina where limestone marls produce wines with great structure and longevity, Colli Fiorentini situated in the hills surrounding Florence, Colli Aretini, Colli Senesi with its two famous portions known as Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, Colline Pisane, Montespertoli that gained independence from Colli Fiorentini and was established in 1997 and lastly, Montalbano including Carmignano DOCG.

This year in February, more than 140 Chianti Classico producers offered their 2009 anteprima (en primeur) for tasting in the Stazione Leopolda in Florence. A sprinkling of 2010's made a good impression. Also presented were Riservas from 2009 going back to 2006. The 2009 vintage was difficult and hot with little rainfall. Quality was good with clean winemaking and many wines already quite accessible with excessive wooding less apparent than in previous years. Some 2008 are still not released. I found the 2007 very good overall with the best Riservas able to improve another



## UNDERSTANDING THE LABEL

### Vino da Tavola (VDT)

Usually indicates a basic wine, made for local consumption.

### Indicazione Geografica Tipica (IGT)

Indicates that a wine is from a specific Italian region. The appellation was created in 1992 for wines considered to be of higher quality than table wines, but which did not conform to strict regional wine laws. Before the IGT was created, 'Super Tuscan' wines such as Tignanello were labeled Vino da Tavola.

### Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC)

Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG)

Both DOC and DOCG wines refer to zones that are more specific than an IGT and the permitted grapes are specified and controlled.

seven years or more. The star vintage of 2006 reigns supreme with many of the Riservas approachable with fragrant, bright cherry fruit, appetizing acidity, firm structure and that signature savoury twist.

## Chianti – the beauty of the area

The Chianti Classico area straddles the provinces of Florence and Siena. Heading south out of Florence towards Siena the road winds through the gently rolling hills enveloped in vines, grey-green olive groves, woodland and the ever present rows of dark green cypress trees etched against the muted landscape. The genius loci, or spirit of the place reigns supreme and draws one into its ancient embrace.

In the vine-clad hills around Greve in Chianti and along the Via Chiantigiana, one can find many beautiful examples of fortified castles and residences transformed into important farm estates producing wine and olive oil, often with stylish accommodation or small hotels as an added attraction.

One of these is an imposing 15th-century villa called Vignamaggio where Mona Lisa Gherardini was born in 1479. She became immortalised when, in 1503, her portrait, now hanging in the Louvre, was painted by Leonardo da Vinci. The estate has been selling wines since 1404.

The Castello Vicchiomaggio owned by the Matta family makes wines that are focused and elegant with a wonderful sense of place. John Matta has been named Italian winemaker of the year in 1997, 2002, 2005 and 2010 by the International Wine and Spirits Competition in London.

Continuing to climb on the winding road to Radda in Chianti a chill sets in and one understands why site selection and the ability to blend the slow, late ripening Sangiovese is important. The traditional blending grapes or the 'intruders' such as Cabernet Sauvignon can add colour and structure while Merlot will add softness to the somewhat highly strung personality of Sangiovese.

A selection of excellent estates include Badia a Coltibuono particularly their Sangiovese di Toscana, Brancaia, Castello di Verrazano, Castello di Volpaia especially the single vineyard Coltassala, Castello Vicchiomaggio, Isole e Olena, Fontodi, Il Molino di Grace, Villa Caffagio and Felsina.

The best examples of Sangiovese have the fragrance of cherry, violets and a tomatoey savouriness which does not need the support of excessive proportions of new wood to make it palatable. The natural bitter-sweet finish leaves the mouth clean and ready for the next mouthful of food. It is a delicious alternative to some of the heavily wooded French varieties or blends on offer. ♦

See the Glossary on page 158 for further contact details.