

THERE was a time, not so long ago, when bottles of Chianti were more appreciated as candlestick holders than for their content. Even the wines of Montalcino and Montepulciano hardly ever lived up to the reputation or price tag they carried. Well into the 1980s the area that enriched our culture with people like Leonardo da Vinci and enlightened European thinking through the Renaissance, was still churning out millions of litres of indifferent wine.

Thankfully, the 1980s brought with them another renaissance, or as I prefer to call it, the Tuscan wine revolution. It was in the minds and cellars of Tuscan wine-makers that the spark for this revolution was ignited. Thanks to the introduction of French grape varieties and the use of small oak barriques, this revolution brought an unprecedented upheaval in the wine regime of Tuscany and eventually in the whole of Italy. It changed the way Italian wine and law makers made, grew and administered their wines.

The barrique was introduced largely to tame the harsh tannins of the local dominant red variety Sangiovese. This was previously achieved by mixing in white varieties such as Trebbiano. Another positive contribution that the barrique has given is that the wines achieve a much cleaner and fresher style. The use of international varieties was seen as a way to bring Tuscan wines into the 20th century as well as to show that the area can

Bella Toscana

WINE TALK

by Michael Tabone



PIERO ANTINORI

compete on par with the best wines of France. On the negative side, the barrique brought the danger of losing typicity while the planting of Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varietals brought about the danger of Tuscan wines losing their soul.

Of course International varietals have been planted in Tuscany for



confirmed by all those present at last month's sessions of *Scuola di Vino* and *Id-dielja* wine club, where I was asked to talk about *Bella Toscana*.

One cannot do a presentation of Tuscan wines and not show some wines from Antinori. This famous family have been making wines since 1385. For nearly 650 years and 26 generations, the Antinoris have been at the forefront of Tuscan viticulture but quite possibly none were more influential than the present head, Marchese Piero Antinori, who was largely responsible for the above mentioned revolution and the creation of the *super vini*.

Solaia is one such wine – 80 per cent Cabernet and 20 per cent Sangiovese – grown in the heart of Chianti Classico. The 2000 version is a wine of immense calibre. Dark purple, intense and concentrated. Still very closed, with well integrated tannins. Underlying currant fruit and spices. Could easily be mistaken for a top Bordeaux. A definite wine for cellaring.

Rummaging round my cellar I managed to find a couple of bottles of Antinori's other original 'Super Tuscan'. *Tignanello* is a blend of 80 per cent Sangiovese and 20 per cent Cabernet grown alongside the vineyards of *Solaia*. I have always maintained that of the two, *Tignanello* has a more 'Tuscan' breed, largely due to the dominance of Sangiovese. The vintage was 1988. Orange, brick in colour, rather mature nose with complex gamey, animal flavours. Still very fresh and highly enjoyable. Ready to drink.

Frescobaldi's history and importance in the area is on a par with Antinori's. They have been making wine since 1300. As one can see from their new *enoteca* at Rome's Fiumicino airport, the range of wines they produce is impressive. Two of their latest headline attractions are the Cabernet-based *Mormoreto* and the Merlot-based *Lamaione*. Both wines are difficult to get hold of and no doubt we will see a price jump over the next few years. Still,

many years. Pioneering wines such as *Sassicaia* in Bolgheri, which was planted with Cabernet cuttings from Lafite in the 1940s, is an institution in itself and one can say that it was an underlying influence for the revolution.

Today, large areas in the Maremma, the coastal area of Tuscany, are being planted with international varieties. The offerings so far show great promise but it is still too early to conclude on and if the argument of typicity will play a role in consumer demands. Evidently, as elsewhere where fine wine is made, the vineyards of Italy and in particularly Tuscany, have become the battlefields of ideology between the so called modernists and traditionalists.

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WHETHER you are a modernist or a traditionalist, there is no doubt that, in general, Tuscan wines have never tasted so good. This was

Mormoreto 1999, which is grown in Chianti Rufina, is unashamedly a modern wine.

Dark, nearly black, impressive intensity both in colour and in aroma. Massive, blackcurranty with polished tannins. The sort that some of my wine friends would call *bomba*. For my liking the sort of wine you have to drink a litre of water to wash your mouth afterwards. Undoubtedly a good quality tasting wine.

Lamaione 1999 is also massive and un-Tuscan. This one is grown in the Castelfiorentino estate in Montalcino. At 14.5% alcohol, the tannins are softer, more jammy and sweeter. Rich and very long lasting finish, it is very New Worldish.

From Castello di Nipozzano in Chianti Rufina we tasted Frescobaldi's *Chianti Riserva* 1997. Largely due to its higher altitude, Rufina is the best of the six zones that form the greater Chianti region. Here wines are slightly more acidic and therefore fuller and longer lived. This one is Sangiovese based. Ruby red, with a good degree of small red fruits on the nose which continue in the mouth. Flowery with hints of spices. Medium bodied and highly enjoyable. Very Tuscan and food-friendly.

From the great 1997 vintage we also tasted Frescobaldi's *Castelfiorentino - Brunello di Montalcino*. This is possibly one of the best priced Brunellos at this level of quality. (100% Sangiovese). Classical and complex, an intellectual wine for long conversations, good food and company. Rich, ruby red, with an intense bouquet. Just beginning to show maturity. Smooth and harmonious. Full bodied with a great feel and structure.

The Maremma has attracted huge investments in viticulture. *Morellino di Scansano* is one of its longest established DOCs. It is not very well known here but very good value for money wines are produced. Fattoria Le Pupille is owned by Elisabetta Geppetti.

When, as a student in 1982 Elisabetta met Giacomo Tacchis (famous Tuscan winemaker), her fate was sealed. Since then, with the help of Tacchis, Cottorella and since 1999 Christian Le Sommer, who was at Latour in Bordeaux, her estate and wines have become a source of inspiration for the whole region.

The 2000 Morellino, which is made with 85% Sangiovese, 15% Alicante and a little Malvasia Nera grown in the arid soils around Scansano, is simply a fantastic drinking wine – a bit rustic with good fruit concentration and balance, it has a rich, full bouquet with very long finish. Excellent food wine with a real sense of place.

From Montepulciano, Fassati are offering the wonderful *Vino nobile di Montepulciano DOCG*. Fassati is owned by the same people who own Fazi Battaglia in the Marches (*Verdicchio*). Their *Passiteo Riserva* 2000 is showing very well at present. Lively and forthcoming, it smells of violets with touches of bitter almonds; it is chewy in the mouth with a long, vigorous finish – well made and well priced.

I must admit, I have neglected Tuscany in my choice of wines in the past. Redemption is well under way and a lot more Tuscans are going to be making their journey into my dark deep, cool cellar.

Now I am off to Bordeaux to taste the very hot, much discussed vintage of 2003. I will tell you all about it in my next offering.

Solaia 2000 – Wands Ltd, Lm65
Tignanello 1988 – Wands Ltd, est. Lm70

Mormoreto 1999 – The Bottle Vault (Stivala Ltd), Lm17

Lamaione 1999 – The Bottle Vault (Stivala Ltd), Lm18.50

Castelfiorentino 1999 – The Bottle Vault (Stivala Ltd), Lm15

Castello di Nipozzano 1997 – The Bottle Vault (Stivala Ltd) Lm6

Fassati 2000 – Charles Grech, Lm4.50

Fattoria Le Pupille – N/A, approx Lm4

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