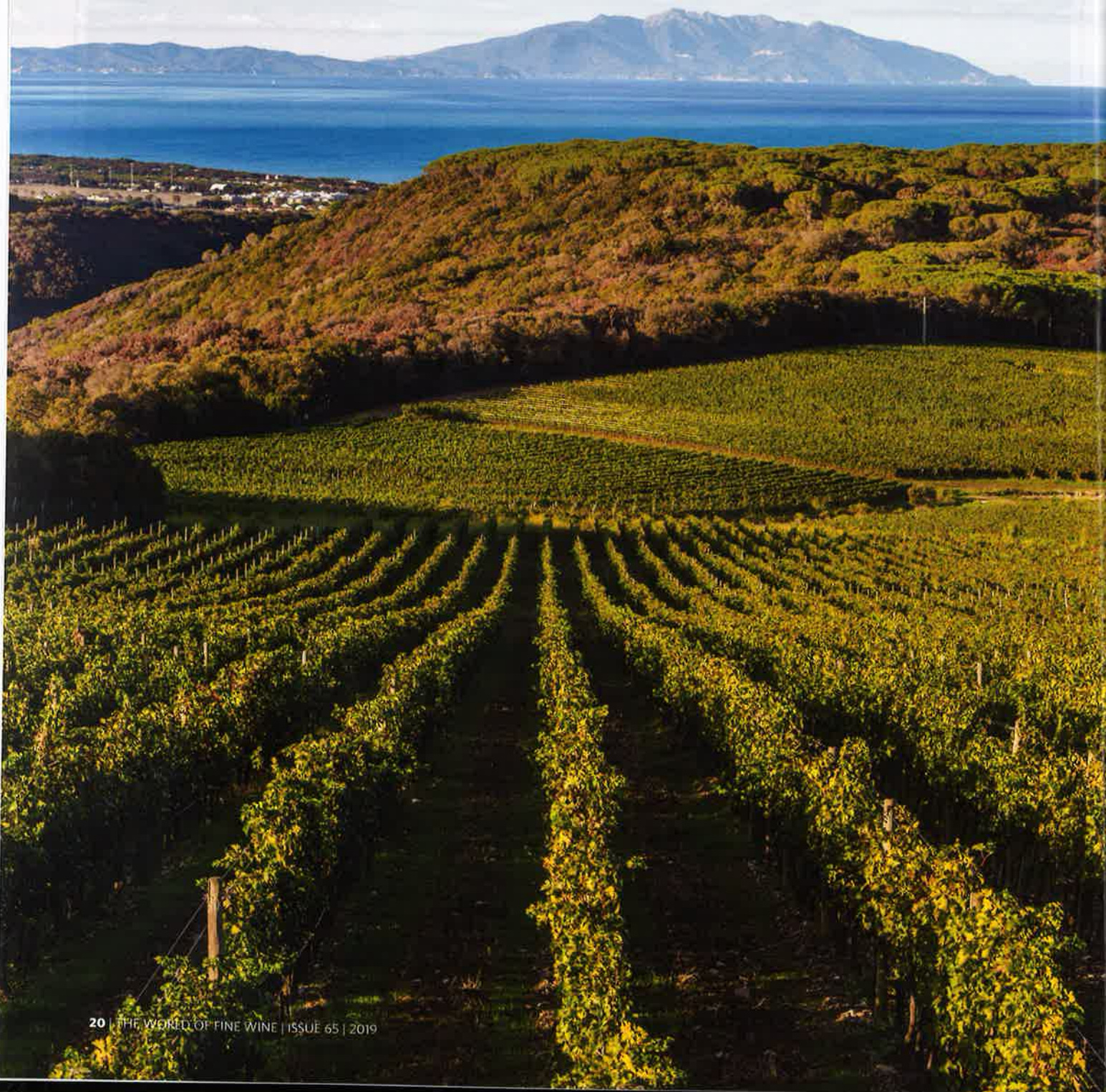


Bolgheri reds at 25: Growing up right

For years, the Bolgheri name was secondary to the brands that were made there. But, as the coastal DOC marks a quarter-century since the admission of the Super-Tuscans, a clear regional identity is emerging, says **Jim Clarke**



Few appellations live in the shadow of their wines as much as Bolgheri. Wine lovers are unlikely to forget that Opus One is from Napa Valley. But for a long while, the wines of Sassicaia, Ornellaia, and their neighbors have been known as Super-Tuscans first and perhaps even as Bordeaux-style blends second, before the word Bolgheri came to mind. That has changed. 2019 marks 75 years since Mario Incisa della Rochetta first planted Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc on a property that he originally intended for horse breeding, leading to the creation of Sassicaia. It also marks 25 years since the red Super-Tuscans of that particular stretch of the coast were welcomed into the Bolgheri DOC, an official nod to the region's capacity for world-class red wines.

The DOC itself predates the wines that have made it famous. Instituted in 1983, originally Bolgheri was a barely acknowledged appellation devoted to white and rosato wines. Vermentino had an historical presence there, but a red revolution was stirring. Sassicaia was well established but, so far, a marvelous anomaly. Grattamacco had released its first red wine the year before the appellation was approved, the same year Ornellaia planted its first vines. In 1983 itself, Michele Satta made his first wines at the southern end of the appellation, and Eugenio Campolmi purchased and planted vines on the property that would become Le Macchiole. With so few examples, red wines most likely seemed an outlier then, but given their

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dominance now, one wonders why the DOC was formed at all before that.

Most producers embraced the appellation promptly. At first, the DOC's 1983 regulations confined reds to blends, reflecting the practice of producers in the 1990s. Masseto, a 100 percent Merlot, had appeared in 1987 but remains to this day a Toscana IGT wine, despite the fact that the DOC opened up the possibility of monovarietal Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot wines in 2011.

A clearer identity

It may well be that the emphasis on blends slowed some wine consumers' understanding of the appellation as such. Blends were part of wine drinkers' conception of the Super-Tuscans, a designation that, for many, effectively trumped both variety and regional specifics. Even just six or eight years ago, when I was wine director at the Armani Ristorante in Manhattan, guests, if they knew anything about Super-

Tuscans, "knew" that they were red blends from Tuscany. That monovarietal Sangioveses such as Montevertine and Felsina's Fontalloro had a place in the same category seemed to come as a surprise to many. At the same time, the mainstream press often framed Super-Tuscans as rule-breakers working within established winemaking areas, rather than pioneers seeking out less familiar terroir like the stony, swampy coast. In the era that these wines emerged, "wine is made in the vineyard" was not yet a cliché, and at least some of the audience for Super-Tuscan wines fixated on what the winemaker did rather than where the fruit came from. From this point of view, Super-Tuscans were more radical because they were made with international varieties than because they came from what had once been an unknown backwater.

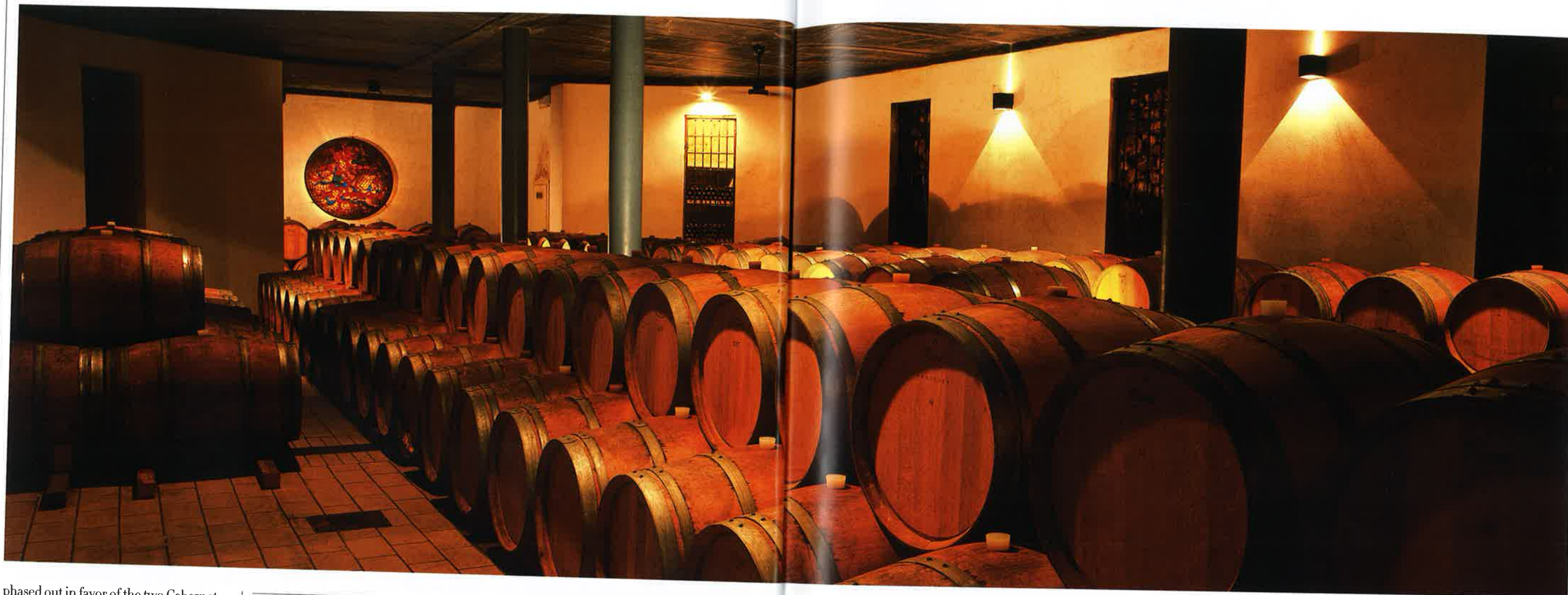
Cabernet Sauvignon was and remains today the most planted of these blended varieties, in keeping with its popularity worldwide. It's followed by its Bordelais brethren Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Sangiovese and Syrah, both allowed as up to 50 percent of a Bolgheri blend, still come as relative surprises. Grattamacco and especially Michele Satta are strong supporters of the former, and Satta in particular bristles at the suggestion that Italy's most planted variety can't suitably express itself in Bolgheri. All but one of his reds include Sangiovese in the blend, and his Cavaliere, labeled as a Tosana IGT, is a monovarietal example. Nonetheless, Sangiovese makes up less than 2 percent of Bolgheri's vineyards. Syrah, which Satta also cultivates, is more widespread, occupying almost 7 percent of plantings. In 2015, Satta reaffirmed his commitment to both grape varieties with a new wine, Marianova, which blends Sangiovese and Syrah together and was the first Bolgheri wine to include no Bordeaux varieties whatsoever.

For red wines, then, the basic building blocks seem well established by now, but details remain with which to tinker. Some of that is part of the natural growth process of a young appellation; some is in response to climate change. Merlot, in particular, seems to be receiving some scrutiny. At Ca' Marcanda, Angelo Gaja's Bolgheri property, Merlot has been



Photography (left) by Sam Matthews; (right) courtesy of Grattamacco

Opposite: Argentario, the appellation's high point. Left: 1992 Grattamacco, then still a vino da tavola.



phased out in favor of the two Cabernets. While the 2013 Ca' Marcanda comprised 50/40 Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot, plus 10 percent Cabernet Franc, the 2015 is an 80/20 blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Magari, the middle child in Ca' Marcanda's family of three red wines, actually became Cabernet Franc-dominant, making up 60 percent of the 2015 alongside Cabernet Sauvignon and a healthy 10 percent dose of Petit Verdot. Only the earlier-drinking Promis will keep its Merlot, where it typically makes up 55 percent of the blend.

Ca' Marcanda is not the only property to embrace Cabernet Franc, and in many cases Merlot's loss is Cabernet Franc's gain. Not always, though. In the 2007 Guado al Tasso, Merlot remained while Syrah fell under Cabernet Franc's attack, allied with a smaller portion of Petit Verdot. In subsequent vintages, the latter slowly diminished and Cabernet Franc grew to 20 percent or so of the blend. Axel Heinz, estate director at Ornellaia, is also a big believer, having previously worked

Gaja's Ca' Marcanda is not the only property to embrace Cabernet Franc. Axel Heinz, at Ornellaia, is also a big believer. For the past few years, its presence in the blend has crept higher, reaching 18 percent in the 2016 release

with the grape in Bordeaux; he has said that Cabernet Franc can be challenging to grow but contributes aromatic complexity. For the past few years, Cabernet Franc's presence in the blend at Ornellaia has crept higher, reaching 18 percent in the current 2016 release, when ten years ago its contribution hovered in the 10–12 percent range.

As at Ca' Marcanda, that increase comes at Merlot's expense. Not that Heinz feels the grape doesn't have a hugely

important place in Bolgheri; Masseto, which he also oversees, has shown what the grape can achieve on the right soils there. But he concedes that avoiding overripeness is the challenge for Merlot in Bolgheri, perhaps increasingly so. Merlot remains 25 percent of the plantings in Bolgheri, whereas Cabernet Franc is less than ten.

A return to whites

Heinz feels that the style and quality of Bolgheri's reds is now sufficiently well established for it to be time to see what can be done on the white front. Whites make up only 8.5 percent of the region's production; many fall in the light, summery style that can be a pleasant quaff when one leaves the vineyards and heads down to the beach for dinner. Nothing wrong with that, but they can seem slight stuff when shown alongside their red counterparts, especially if they

Above: The barrel cellar at Grattamacco, an early pioneer whose first red wine predates DOC status.

strive for an ambitious price bracket. A few producers have taken an opposite approach and indulged in oaked, powerful, weighty wines that clearly proclaim a seriousness of intent, even if they don't necessarily provide a lot of pleasure.

Walking the tightrope between the two is the challenge. Ornellaia's two whites, the Ornellaia Bianco and the Poggio alle Gazze, both hew close to Heinz's goal to avoid both a "simple summer white" and, at the other extreme, "an ostentatious wine." Neither is varietally labeled, though Heinz and winemaker Olga Fusari leave the door open to making a single-variety wine. The Bianco is, in principle, a Sauvignon Blanc-based blend with Viognier and perhaps Petit Manseng. In its short life, however—the first vintage was 2013—half of the releases have been 100 percent Sauvignon Blanc. Whatever the varietal composition, the style, which would seem fairly familiar to fans of serious white Bordeaux, has remained consistent.

The Poggio alle Gazze is the older white wine in the Ornellaia lineup. While also Sauvignon Blanc-led, many vintages incorporate Verdicchio or Vermentino; indigenous varieties have yet to earn the right to the Ornellaia name. Overall, the style of the Poggio alle Gazze is rounder and less toasty.

Neither of the Ornellaia whites is Bolgheri DOC; while a varietal Bolgheri Sauvignon exists, it calls for a minimum 85 percent of the grape, which neither wine achieves consistently. The non-varietal Bolgheri Bianco DOC, on the other hand, requires significant proportions of Vermentino or Trebbiano Toscano and allows a maximum of only 40 percent Sauvignon Blanc. Ornellaia is not the only producer in the area whose white wine fails to fit the DOC's requirements. While the "right" red varieties seem to have found homes in Bolgheri almost serendipitously, the regulations for white wines seem to have been set before ambition, money, and perhaps climate change beset the region.

Acquiring a more local accent

Once red wines joined the DOC, they rapidly became the face of it. Outside investment began. Sassicaia had started as a potential stud farm—Grattamacco, a lodge for fishing getaways. More and more of Bolgheri's future names would come from outside and come with the intent of making wine from the very beginning. Angelo Gaja's Ca' Marcanda was born in 1996 after repeated visits to badger the property's former owner, stopping by whenever Gaja found himself driving between Piedmont and Montalcino. The name, in Piedmont's dialect, translates as "the house of endless negotiations." The Veneto's Marilisa Allegrini, together with the US importer Leonardo Locascio, created Poggio al Tesoro in 2001.

This period, as Bolgheri's reputation grew, coincided with the dominance of the so-called international style in the world market. While it could be argued that many of the wines of the late 1990s and early to mid-2000s retained some



sort of innate Italian character, the demand for rich, extracted, oak-laden red wines was one Bolgheri could and did meet with aplomb. Sometimes this was at the cost of individuality, at least while the wines were young; the best often shed their baby fat and show remarkable finesse and character with age. More recently—now that restraint has regained the attention and respect of more wine drinkers—newer releases are showing character and expression more readily, and winemakers have made that transition without forcing austerity on the young wines. So far, it seems that the core mark that characterizes Bolgheri's red wines, distinguishing them from wines made from the same varieties grown elsewhere, is a Mediterranean savory, wild-herb character. This is becoming clearer and easier to pinpoint of late, without having to wait for time to calm the influence of alcohol and oak. It may also help calm critics who take issue with non-indigenous varieties

Above: The road to the Castello di Bolgheri flanked by cypress trees and olive trees as well as by vines.

claiming pride of place; the vines seem to have adopted more of a local accent.

As in many regions, how and how much Bolgheri's character will change and develop, now that market-driven stylistic pressures are less pressing, remains to be seen. Nonetheless, all the pieces are in place. The challenges facing the region on its 25th birthday are ones most regions would be happy to have. The DOC is also fortunate to be led by the top and not the bottom. The mainstay of Bolgheri production is in the hands of the most famous and highly regarded producers; Guado al Tasso, Sassicaia, Ornellaia and Masseto, Ca' Marcanda, and a few other very distinguished names make up as much as 70 percent of Bolgheri's production. This sets a high standard compared to regions where the top producers are also the most boutique. In any case, the Bolgheri Consortium still has only 55 members, with less than 1,200ha (2,965 acres) of vineyards between them. Working on that scale, with fairly stringent yield maximums baked into the regulations (90hl/ha for Rosso, 80hl/ha for Superiore),

trying to operate a volume-driven business would be impossible. The inverted quality/volume pyramid also applies to the output of many individual producers; for them, the most expensive wine constitutes the majority of production, with lower-priced wines functioning more or less as second labels. For several, a flagship blend dominates, and monovarietal wines round out the portfolio. Having your biggest revenue generator also be your biggest volume product is a sound marketing plan that few producers elsewhere have the capacity to pursue.

According to Riccardo Binda, director of the *consorzio*, it's this high-end, quality-led mind-set that explains an odd fact: that the home to some of Italy's top wines is "only" a DOC and not a DOCG. Bardi argues, in essence, that Bolgheri doesn't need the "G" to reassure customers about the quality and standing of the wines, so why chase after it and endure the extra bureaucracy? At 25 years old, choosing to avoid paperwork rather than stroke one's ego shows a great deal of maturity. ■

Photography courtesy of Ornellaia



In 1877 the Ruffino winery was established in Pontassieve, a small village near Florence.

In few years, Ruffino Chianti wines became very popular thanks to their unique taste; in 1890 the Duke of Aosta chose Ruffino Chianti Stravecchio as the wine to be served at the royal court.

This is the history of Riserva Ducale, the selection for the Duke; in 1947 it was enriched with a golden label to celebrate a memorable vintage: this was the genes of Riserva Ducale Oro.



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