



Italy's reign of terroir

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when the tiny Tuscan region of Bolgheri mutated out of virtual obscurity into Italy's most exciting, fashionable and dynamic fine wine region. Some might argue that it was 1994, when its most famous estate wine, Sassicaia, became the first in Italy to be rewarded with its very own DOC (*denominazione di origine controllata*) appellation. Others suggest that it was when the great Piedmontese vintner Angelo Gaja cannily bought into Bolgheri in 1996. Or perhaps it wasn't until 2002, when the 1998 Ornellaia collected *Wine Spectator's* Wine of the Year Award, forcing the magnificent 1998 Cheval Blanc into second place. What is beyond doubt is that Bolgheri has hit the big time.

Few regions have experienced such a meteoric or surprising rags-to-riches transformation. For centuries, Bolgheri was barely on the wine map dominated by its Tuscan cousins Chianti, Brunello and Montepulciano. This was largely because the coastal strip of land south of Livorno, known as the Maremma, was a malaria-infested marshland, preferred only by

unusual wines were beginning to mature and mutate from gangly, ugly ducklings into elegant swans. In 1968, Niccolò Antinori's son, Piero, who by then had taken over the reins of the family firm, recognised their potential. Piero started to vinify Sassicaia at his own winery. He also sought the technical advice of Professor Emile Peynaud, the great Bordeaux wine guru, and brought him in to work with Antinori's own oenologist, Giacomo Tachis. Between them, they polished up the wine and advised Mario Incisa where to plant more vineyards. Having also agreed to distribute the wine, Antinori sent a sample of Sassicaia's first commercial vintage to Italy's leading wine critic, Luigi Veronelli, who immediately anointed it as Italy's brand-new "First Growth".

Since then, Sassicaia has been catapulted on to the world stage, where it has remained in lights ever since. Today, collectors and commentators alike revere and regard it alongside the great Premiers Crus of Bordeaux for its elegance, balance and remarkable ability to age. Robert Parker gave 100 points to the 1985 vintage and judged it to be "one of the greatest wines made this century. Tasting after tasting continues to confirm this wine's surreal level of quality." Such praise and repute inevitably comes with a price tag to match. The 1985 currently retails for up to £1,000 a bottle, making it more expensive than every single First Growth of that or any other 1980s vintage.

At that time, though, Cabernet Sauvignon was not permitted under Italy's antediluvian wine laws and so Sassicaia had to be sold as a humble *vino da tavola*.

A corner of Tuscany is producing wines with a remarkable ability to age. John Stimpfig reports on Italian "clarets" that rival the best of Bordeaux. Illustration by Chris Burke.

bandits and brigands. Even after the swamps were drained in the 1930s, most of its harsh terrain remained fit only for horses, cattle and wild animals, not vines.

The area's principal claim to fame was its landlord: the Gherardesca family, which owned most of the land around the picturesque hamlet of Bolgheri. Perhaps the most notable of the lot was Ugolino della Gherardesca, Count of Pisa, whose excruciating death featured in Dante's *Inferno*. Centuries later, another Gherardesca planted the avenue of cypress trees immortalised in Carducci's 19th century poem, "Before San Guido". In more recent times a scion has been in the news (or at least in *Hello!*), linked to the Duchess of York. Around Bolgheri, not much has happened without a Gherardesca being involved. And so it was with Bolgheri's wine boom.

At the beginning of the 20th century the family had fallen on hard times and sold its

Bolgheri estate to a rich American in 1903. But by a strange twist of fate, the estate was left to two Gherardesca daughters: Carlotta, who married the Piedmontese Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, and Clarice, who married the Florentine Marchese Niccolò Antinori, whose family had been making wine in Tuscany since 1385.

Given their deep wine roots, it might have been the Antinoris who took the lead in "discovering" Bolgheri's extraordinary vinous potential. In fact, it was Mario Incisa who, in 1944, had the vision to plant the great Bordeaux variety of Cabernet Sauvignon (rather than the Tuscan Sangiovese) on his Tenuta San Guido estate - in the hope that he might replicate the classic clarets he so avidly collected and enjoyed. This was no idle whim. Mario Incisa believed that Bolgheri's maritime microclimate was remarkably similar to that of Bordeaux. So too was its rocky Graves-like soil. Hence he

christened his wine Sassicaia, meaning "stony place" in the local Tuscan dialect.

Much to his disappointment, the early vintages did not exactly meet with rapturous acclaim. Indeed, there is a tale of the occasion when Baron Philippe de Rothschild of Mouton Rothschild first tried a glass, only to splutter, "Qu'est-ce que c'est, cette cochonnerie?" "It's a good story, but entirely apocryphal," says the current marchese, Niccolò Incisa della Rocchetta. "The baron never described Sassicaia as pigswill. What he actually said to my father was, 'My dear friend and colleague, I found your wine a little unsociable...'"

So did everybody who tasted those early, rustically tannic Sassicaias. The general consensus was that Mario Incisa should continue to do what he was best at: breeding racehorses such as Ribot, who won at Longchamp and Ascot in the 1950s. Nevertheless, Mario Incisa persevered in producing a few hundred bottles each vintage, some of which he laid down in his cellars in the hope of a vinous miracle.

By the 1960s, it was becoming clear that with a decade of bottle ageing, these



from its very first vintage in 1985, has most definitely taken its place in the wine firmament as one of Italy's leading Cabernet acts.

Unlike Sassicaia, Ornellaia produces a number of estate wines including the now cultish Masseto, made from a tiny seven-hectare single vineyard within the property. A pure, opulent, 100 per cent Merlot aged for 12 months in barriques, Masseto has become a collector's item not just because of its remarkable quality but also because it seems to encompass the elegance of Pomerol with the richness of California in one unique and perfect package.

Above: Bordeaux vines destined to become Sassicaia at Tenuta San Guido. Below left: cellar of Antinori's Guardo Tasso estate.

in 1996 and commissioned Giovanni Bo to build a stunning subterranean winery.

When news of Gaja's purchase got out, it raised the stakes overnight and prompted a speculative grab for the few hundred hectares of DOC land that were left to plant. Inevitably, real estate prices went through the roof. Before Gaja's arrival, the average price of planted vineyard land was around £40,000 per hectare. Five years later, at the height of the wine boom, some people were paying the astronomical figure of £340,000 for a single hectare of olive grove or orchard. It would then cost up to

something very, very special. Already, the standards are breathtakingly high."

However, Bolgheri isn't the only area in the Maremma that has been mined by ambitious vintners. In recent years, investors from Italy, France, Japan, Switzerland and Belgium have scoured the coast in search of great terroirs on which to fashion the next designer label. A number hope to strike it lucky in the southerly commune of Suvereto in the Val di Cornia, where established producers such as Montepuloso, Gualdo del Re and Tua Rita are beginning to attract attention. Tua Rita recently picked up a perfect 100 point Parker score for its sublime 2000 Redigaffi Merlot.

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How to spend it



Nevertheless, when other Tuscan producers observed that this oak-aged, Cabernet-based table wine was also Italy's most expensive red, several itched to follow suit. Suddenly, it seemed that almost everyone in Tuscany was planting French varieties and buying in French barriques in an attempt to replicate Sassicaia's success.

Many of these controversial Super Tuscans, as they were nicknamed, simply failed to live up to the quality standards set by Sassicaia. But there were exceptions, including a wine made by Piero Antinori's younger brother Lodovico, who planted the classic Bordeaux varieties on a vineyard adjacent to San Guido in the mid-1980s. The estate was called Tenuta dell'Ornellaia and proved to be almost as sensational as its next-door neighbour.

Some suggest that Ornellaia was prompted by family rivalry – that Lodovico wanted to prove something to his elder brother and his cousin, Nicolo Incisa. Whether this is true or false, Ornellaia,

Finally, of course, came Piero Antinori's Guado al Tasso estate, which only produced a basic rosé and which, for many years, the family regarded largely as a summer retreat. But with the sensational success of Ornellaia just over the hill, Piero Antinori has hopped smartly onto the Bolgheri bandwagon. In 1990, he replanted some more elevated vineyards with Bordeaux varietals and rolled out a classily upholstered red called, simply, Guado al Tasso.

However, while the descendants and in-laws of the Gherardescas certainly led the plot in Bolgheri, they weren't quite the whole story. Other pioneers also spotted the area's viticultural potential and busily ripped out olive groves and replaced them with vineyards. By the 1990s, producers such as Grattamacco, Michele Satta and Le Macchiole were also beginning to craft some exquisite wines, albeit on a much smaller scale. Most recently, Le Macchiole was one of only two estates in Italy to scoop a hat-trick of Tre Bicchieri awards in the annual Gambero Rosso guide to Italian wine. The winners were three 2001 reds – Messorio, Sciro and Paleo Rosso.

While the locals made the running, more and more outsiders were beginning to prospect for vineyards, especially after 1994, when Bolgheri secured its own DOC – meaning it became "legal" to plant Cabernet Sauvignon alongside other approved varieties. Back then DOC vineyard land was not only still available but also relatively cheap. In 1996, one of Italy's most celebrated vintners, Angelo Gaja, quietly picked up 70 hectares of top-class terroir

another £70,000 to plant vines. Local farmers (and their real estate agents) could hardly believe their good fortune.

Since those heady days, the gold rush has subsided – partly because the economic climate is no longer so propitious but also because Bolgheri's best terroirs have been bought and planted. Now, the key question is whether these new boutique projects can live up to the hype, as

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some people are already comparing Bolgheri's Premier Crus to the very best of Bordeaux. Piero Antinori, though, is more circumspect. "It's really too soon to tell because a lot of the vines are very young. Plus you need 50 or 60 years to see how the wines will age," he says. "Having said that, I do believe that this area could be second to none. This is a region where everyone would like to own a vineyard."

Someone who does is Stefano Gagliardo, a Piedmontese vintner who bought a tiny plot of land at the height of the boom with the Californian producer, Delia Viader. Perhaps not surprisingly, he agrees with Antinori's assertion. "It's not just the climate or variety of great soils in Bolgheri that makes it so special for growing the Bordeaux varieties. It's also the extraordinary concentration of great names here including Gaja, Antinori, Frescobaldi, Allegrini and Folonari as well as Sassicaia. There's no point being here unless you are going to make

To the north, some have put their faith in the Montescudaio DOC, where La Regola and Castello del Terriccio are both producing some genuinely sensational red blends. Or perhaps the Holy Grail has already been found down the coast from Grosseto, where Le Pupille has blazed a trail.

But then again, the smart money might be closer to home, in the relatively virgin territory of Bibbona, abutting Bolgheri's

northern border. There, Piero and Lodovico Antinori have teamed up to create their Campo di Sasso estate with the express intention of producing another world-class Bordeaux blend. According to Piero Antinori, the climate and soil type match Sassicaia's almost exactly and the objective is to produce another wine to rival it and Ornellaia. What's more, they aren't the only big names in this brand-new DOC because Angelo Gaja has also bought land there. Could Bibbona be the next Bolgheri? Given its newest inhabitants, you wouldn't want to bet against it. +

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Gaudo al Tasso, Berkman Wine Cellars, 12 Brewery Road, London N7 (020-7609 4711).
Grattamacco, Fine & Rare Wines, 020-8960 1995.
Masseto, Corney & Barrow, 020-7265 2400 and branches. **Sassicaia, Ornellaia and Gaja**, John Armit Wines, 020-7908 0600; www.armit.co.uk.
Tua Rita, Castello de Terriccio and Le Macchiole, Lea & Sandeman, 020-7244 0522 and branches.