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REBELS WITHOUT A CAUSE? THE DEMISE OF SUPER-TUSCANS

Once considered the future of Italian winemaking, Super-Tuscans might finally have run their course. Kerin O'Keefe considers the past, present, and future of these wines.

Photography by Jon Wyand

Super-Tuscans undoubtedly hailed a new era of winemaking in Italy. Rebels with a cause such as Sassicaia and Tignanello, originally labeled as table wines because they did not adhere to the winemaking laws of the time, shook up what were exasperatingly uninspiring practices and production codes. Ambitious producers across the region, armed with international varieties, brand-new barriques, and a fancy label sporting a proprietary fantasy name, began turning out their own Super-Tuscans and were soon followed by winemakers throughout Italy. But today, inundated with far cheaper but similar bottlings from the New World, consumers are apparently turning their backs on these once trailblazing wines.

"While Super-Tuscans may be super, in the sense that they are amply structured and powerful, they've become less and less Tuscan," says Marco Pallanti, winemaker and director of Castello di Ama, one of Italy's top estates, and president of the Chianti Classico *consorzio*. "Muscular and deeply colored with sweet tannins, the latest wave of Super-Tuscans are like wines made everywhere, so they are no longer identifiable as being Tuscan. This might be one of the reasons consumers have become somewhat sick of them," explains Pallanti, who feels that it is their predictable style more than their hefty price tag that is turning consumers off. He also concedes that Super-Tuscans have lost their true significance—that of experimenting with new ideas to raise the bar on quality, in a period when stifling production codes were geared toward quantity. "What is innovative or exciting today about experimenting with the same wines made from the same Bordeaux grapes? It's far from original," declares Pallanti.

No stone left unturned

When the first examples of these technically perfect, groundbreaking wines debuted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they not only defied local regulations and customs, but they also injected new life into Italy's backward and stagnant winemaking scene—and none more so than Sassicaia. Although an extraordinary amount of wines claim to be "the first Super-Tuscan," most would agree that this credit belongs to this legendary bottling. One of

the first wines in Italy to be made with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc and to be aged in French barriques, it has become a modern-day classic and, as such, remains unscathed by the current consumer backlash that most other Super-Tuscans are suffering.

Sassicaia was the brainchild of Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, who planted Cabernet Sauvignon on his Tenuta San Guido estate in Bolgheri back in 1944, when this strip of Tuscan coast, known as the Maremma, was a malaria-infested backwater with virtually no tradition of quality winemaking. According to Mario's son Nicolò, who now runs the property, "My father loved fine Bordeaux and decided to try hand his hand at making red wine. He chose the first and subsequent vineyards not only for the right sun exposure and altitude, but above all for their rocky soils—unique in Bolgheri and Italy but similar to the gravel found in Graves." Nicolò also points out that the original Cabernet Sauvignon his father planted in the 1940s was not imported from Château Lafite as legend has it, but was instead cuttings from 50-year-old vines from a friend's estate near Pisa, long since pulled up. The *marchese* maintains that the particular origin of their Cabernet Sauvignon may be another reason for the wine's immediate and continued success. "Most of our vineyards are planted with this clone from these old vines that have had over a century to adapt to Tuscany's climate," explains Nicolò. Though for years Sassicaia remained the *marchese's* personal wine, his son and nephew Piero Antinori convinced him to release it commercially, starting with the 1968 vintage, which was unveiled in 1971.

Though initially there were only a few thousand bottles available, Sassicaia was an immediate hit with critics—including Luigi Veronelli, who dubbed it a *vino da favola* ("fairy-tale wine")—and drinkers, thanks to the wine's complex bouquet and finesse. To keep up with the sudden demand, the *marchese* hired consulting enologist Giacomo Tachis to further refine the wine while increasing production. History was now in motion. Over the next few years, Sassicaia would demonstrate to the world the remarkable potential for Cabernet in Bolgheri, and by the late 1970s and early 1980s, investors flocked to the



village and its outskirts, including Lodovico Antinori and a young agronomist named Michele Satta. By the mid-1980s, landmark bottlings, such as Grattamacco, Ornellaia, Paleo, Guado al Tasso, and later Piastraia, were dazzling palates in major markets around the world, particularly in the USA, and the enological revolution triggered by Sassicaia was in full swing.

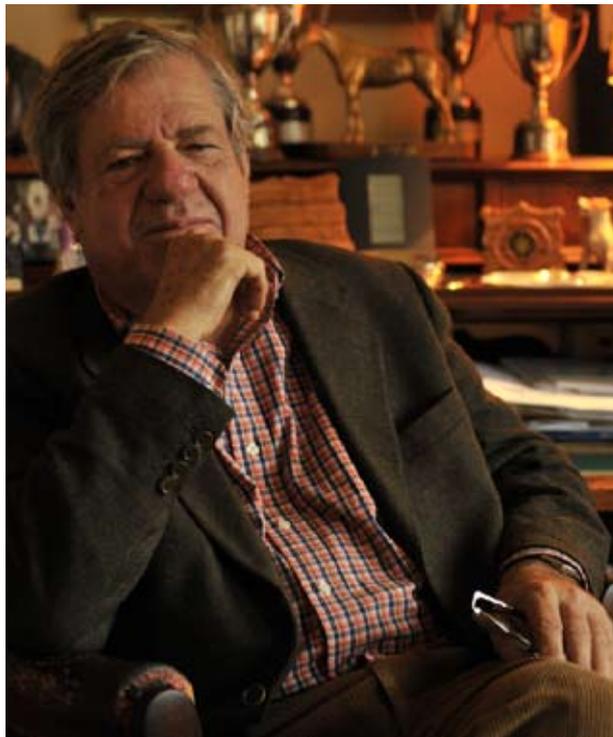
Table mountains

Bolgheri's top wines would paradoxically be labeled as vini da tavola (table wines) for years, because they were made outside of the Bolgheri DOC (*denominazione di origine controllata*), which was originally created in 1984 for the area's often insipid rosés and whites, with no provisions for red-wine production. Finally, in 1994, the embarrassed Italian government changed the rules that governed "quality" winemaking in the area to include what had become some of the most esteemed wines in the country, as well as the most illustrious vini da tavola in the world. Sassicaia was even awarded its own proprietary subzone under the revamped DOC and remains the only estate in Italy with this honor.

Still referred to almost universally as a Super-Tuscan, Sassicaia clearly inspired many winemakers, including Piero Antinori, who began experimenting with French varieties over in Chianti Classico after his uncle's clamorous success. "Back when the Chianti formula was created, red wines were particularly harsh because the whole bunch of grapes was utilized, even the stalks, and no one knew about malolactic fermentation. Therefore, to soften the wines, it was necessary to add a percentage of white grapes, originally Malvasia. But then it became cheaper and easier to consistently add the productive and hardy Trebbiano, so that, over time, Chianti was made with up to 30 percent Trebbiano. This radically altered the nature of Chianti. By the 1960s, the wines were weak, overly acidic, and, worst of all, unsuitable for aging," explains Antinori.

Realizing that great red wine could not be made with a high percentage of white grapes—which were mandatory at the time and for decades to come—Antinori revolted. His rebellion took the name of Tignanello, formerly a Chianti Classico Riserva Vigneto Tignanello that Antinori pulled from the DOC in 1971, when he reduced the

compulsory percentage of white grapes and aged the wine in barriques. By 1975, Tignanello was made with 85 percent Sangiovese, 10 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, and 5 percent Cabernet Franc, and it remains so today. The wine's wide appeal among international palates caused a sensation, and it was praised as being far superior to Chianti Classico. Energized winemakers within the Chianti DOC and in nearby appellations noticed, and over time they began making their own vino da tavola, either from judicious blending with newly planted French grapes, or by experimenting solely with Sangiovese, the notoriously temperamental indigenous variety.



Nicolò Incisa della Rocchetta of Tenuta San Guido

Spit and polish

Although polished enough for modern palates that demanded the balance and structure of world-class wines, the original cult bottlings were, however, quintessentially Tuscan, thanks to their earthy, floral sensations and vibrancy. Many remain so even today, especially a small minority crafted with 100 percent Sangiovese from the heart of the historical center of Chianti. Although these days this may not seem particularly creative, pure Sangiovese was not allowed in Chianti Classico production until 1996, the same year that Chianti Classico broke free from its subzone status within the vast Chianti denomination and became an autonomous

DOCG (*denominazione di origine controllata e garantita*), after 70 years of struggling for independence.

The earliest example of renegade wines made from Sangiovese *in purezza* was San Felice's Vigorello, which was invented with the 1968 vintage, though over the years Cabernet and Merlot have since been added. Other examples include Montevertine's highly celebrated Le Pergole Torte, Fontodi's well-structured Flaccianello della Pieve, and Isole e Olena's commanding Cepparello, all of which have remained 100 percent Sangiovese. Even though they could now be labeled as Chianti Classico, most producers have opted to keep their flagship wines outside of the denomination. "Cepparello has a loyal following and, in effect, has always been my Chianti Classico Riserva, even if for years I couldn't label it as such," affirms Isole e Olena owner Paolo De Marchi, who explains the humble beginnings of his most celebrated wine.

"In 1980 Cepparello was purely an experiment to see if Sangiovese in the Chianti Classico zone could make truly great wines on its own. The first vintages proved promising, but it was a drastic crop reduction caused by hail in 1982 that revealed Sangiovese's real potential to make wines with natural concentration and depth," elaborates De Marchi. "After that, I realized that everything we knew at the time about cultivating Sangiovese was wrong, and that reducing the abundant yields was key to great Sangiovese wines." He admits that he has been toying with the idea of registering Cepparello in the denomination. "It's a different world now, and the conditions that made me create Cepparello as a table wine no longer exist. But at this point, I'll wait to see how the new EU rules are going to affect our denomination before I seriously consider reining the wine into the Chianti Classico appellation," confides De Marchi.

Chianti Classico resurgent

While Super-Tuscans are made within all the region's denominations, including Montalcino, perhaps the most famous hail from the Chianti Classico growing zone, where they have also exerted their biggest effect on a single denomination. Even at the onset of the Super-Tuscan revolution, Chianti Classico was one of Italy's most famous wines and was also the country's first recognized denomination, having initially been delimited back in 1716. But by the time Antinori, with his Tignanello, railed against appellation's enforced mediocrity, Chianti Classico preserved little of its former glory that had been lauded as far back as the 16th century by Italian poet Redi in his dithyramb "Bacco in Toscana." To craft quality wine in the area back in the 1970s and 1980s, estates across the denomination were forced to break the rules and make wines not governed by any regulations. Unsurprisingly, the early Super-Tuscans from the area quickly eclipsed Chianti Classico, and their roaring success garnered masses of loyal fans in both Italy and abroad.

At first labeled as table wine but later corralled into the flexible IGT (*indicazione geografica tipica*) designation set up by the government between 1992 and 1995, these interlopers humiliated the country's efforts to control quality under the DOC and later the DOCG systems. More

importantly, they spurred the government, local producers, and their *consorzio* into making sweeping changes to improve the ailing appellation. The first substantial modifications came in 1984, when the mandatory percentage of white grapes was reduced and up to 10 percent of alternative red varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, were allowed. The most progressive changes came in 1996, when Chianti Classico split from Chianti and fine-tuned its own regulations to include the possibility of using 100 percent Sangiovese, while decreeing that white grapes were no longer mandatory and would finally be banned as of the 2006 vintage. Many believe that the higher quality now offered by Chianti Classico, as well as in Tuscany's other established appellations, provoked the eventual demise of the Super-Tuscans.

"Average quality across the board in Chianti Classico has risen, thanks to significant investments that producers have made over the past ten years, above all in the vineyards. In the past decade, 4,000ha [9,884 acres] have been planted with the best clones of Sangiovese, which were chosen after extensive research that began in the late 1980s with the Chianti Classico 2000 project," explains Silvia Fiorentini, marketing manager at the Chianti Classico *consorzio*. "Until just a few years ago, it was easier for estates to sell their Super-Tuscans,



Marchese Piero Antinori, the creator of Tignanello

but their popularity is clearly diminishing. Bombarded with the myriad labels available, consumers are now looking for wines made with native grapes that have more authenticity, along with an assurance that the wines they drink are deeply connected to a unique terroir," elaborates Fiorentini. It is perhaps this lack of any connection to a particular place, even more than the undisputedly higher quality in the traditional denominations, that has generated a now widely perceived lack of identity in wines that appear to have had the Tuscany vinified right out of them.

Although there is the temptation to stereotype all of the regions' IGTs, according to many producers this lack of identity is more linked to later bottlings. "The original Super-Tuscans—made by experimenting not only with Sangiovese but also with international grapes—still retained a strong local character, be it Chianti or Tuscan. But over the years, the Super-Tuscan family inflated with

ever more offerings, and eventually they lost their initial characteristics,” surmises Pallanti. Francesco Franzinelli of the Socini Guelfi family that has been making wine in Tuscany for more than 12 generations agrees, adding that most IGTs are just imitations and, as such, not particularly stimulating. “Of course, the first pioneers and enologists, like Tachis, who decided to try making wines from a Bordeaux blend and age them in French wood in a very particular microclimate of Tuscany, deserve recognition for their originality. But those who followed are mere copies and have never been as good as the original,” states Franzinelli, who makes elegant and earthy Chianti Classico at the family’s La Casaccia estate. He is one of the few local producers never tempted to dabble with Super-Tuscans. “Overpriced, loud, trendy wines made with fast and easy recipes have nothing to do with the essence of winemaking in any appellation where wine has been cultivated for generations,” asserts the young winemaker.

Part of the so-called de-Tuscanization of the famed IGTs is undoubtedly related to what can perhaps be referred to as the “super palate fatigue” often associated with them. Over time, many wines made under the designation began pushing the limits of innovation in a continuous quest to be original and exciting. The resulting fruitbombs, once adored but now spurned, have proven to be monotonous wines with dense concentration, excessively plush fruit accented by coffee and vanilla flavors, overripe tannins, and less and less acidity. “Probably in reaction to those weak and tired wines of the past, many of the later wines have reached a point of excess, evident in overconcentration and overextraction,” acknowledges Antinori.

Malevolent Merlot

Though invasive cellar techniques, overreliance on new wood, and severe crop reduction are usually regarded as the main culprits behind the uniformity and anonymity that defines the majority of today’s Super-Tuscans, another reason may be the choice of grapes—or rather, grape. While many of the original bottlings blended Sangiovese with Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Franc, Merlot has also become a popular ingredient in the latest of the Super-Tuscan generation, and this could be part of the wines’ current dilemma. According to a growing number of enologists, Merlot transplanted to Tuscany and other meridional regions yields tedious wines and obliterates any vestiges of terroir.

“Merlot is an unfit grape for Tuscany, as are other early-ripening varieties,” says leading enologist Lorenzo Landi, who consults for top estates in central Italy, including Fattoria del Cerro, La Poderina, and Lungarotti. “These grapes cannot adapt to the hotter and drier climates of central and southern Italy,” elaborates the winemaker. His bold statement contradicts the trend of the past 10–15 years of adding Merlot to many of Tuscany’s traditional and non-traditional wines, thanks to the variety’s roundness that soothes Sangiovese’s rough edges and tames its raciness. “In warmer growing zones, Merlot yields cooked-fruit sensations, leading to uninspiring and uniform wines with limited aromas,” continues Landi. “It is nearly impossible to tell the difference between Merlot coming from Tuscany, Australia, or Chile”.

Denis Dubourdieu, professor of enology at the University of Bordeaux and a consulting enologist, concurs. Though research is still under way,

Dubourdieu explains that new technology clearly demonstrates that early-ripening varieties transplanted to warm climates produce discerningly uniform wines because the grapes are not able to reach optimum ripening. “Research into new molecular markers that assess the evolution of aromas in wines in relation to grape ripening are still under way, but we have already reached some general conclusions.

When you grow early-ripening varieties, such as Merlot, Pinot Noir, and Sauvignon Blanc, in hot, sunny climates, ripening is very fast and easy, in regards to reaching high sugar content, and very quickly leads to overripening. So when these grapes are picked at the end of August or beginning of September, as opposed to the end of September or even October, they have high sugar but they haven’t reached the perfect maturation that can be attained only in a longer growing cycle. The resulting wines lack complexity and freshness, and they are not ageworthy,” explains Dubourdieu.

“When perfect ripening occurs in cooler climates, Merlot has fresh, floral sensations, but in hotter climates these aromas and flavors are replaced by cooked black fruit, often described as jammy. Though wines with these characteristics can be pleasant to some people, they are also boring and one-dimensional,” says Dubourdieu. And according to Dubourdieu, science proves what human palates have long suspected: that there are no fundamental differences between Merlot originating from hot, dry regions around the globe. “The molecular markers are

“Probably in reaction to those weak and tired wines of the past, many of the later wines have reached a point of excess, evident in overconcentration and overextraction,” acknowledges Piero Antinori

identical for Merlot from all hot regions, whether they be from central or southern Italy or from the New World," affirms the professor.

While Merlot is often used in Super-Tuscans, it is also legally permitted in many controlled denominations, including *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* and *Chianti Classico*. And judging by the number of inky-black and even flaccid Brunellos in the market, not to mention an ongoing investigation into a highly publicized grape-blending scandal, it also seems to be used illegally in some denominations as well. Though exceptions exist—such as *Tenuta dell'Ornellaia's* rich but complex *Masseto* and *Castello di Ama's* extraordinarily elegant *L'Apparita*, both 100 percent Merlot—the grape is generally thought to have contributed, along with heavy-handed cellar practices, to the dumbing down of many Tuscan and Italian wines. In reaction to this style, a number of producers are following consumers' lead and calling for a return to *tipicità*, or wines that reflect unique and inimitable characteristics that until recently were shunned by producers and many critics alike. Speaking for producers in *Chianti Classico*, Antinori admits it is time to take a step back, saying, "I think producers in *Chianti Classico* can and must gear their wines toward the typicity and traditions that set this beautiful area apart from the rest of the world. Today, we should be able to combine the elegance and structure of *Chianti Classico* with good fruit and drinkability".

Old wine in new bottles

Not everyone is convinced, however, that the Super-Tuscans have had their day. "'Super-Tuscan' may be the most overused and abused term in Italian wine, but in some cases, I think it's still appropriate," remarks Leonardo Raspini, managing director at *Tenuta dell'Ornellaia*. "Obviously the *Bolgheri* DOC is crucial for our wines because it is this great land that allows us to have such excellent results, particularly for our reds. But at the moment, it currently does not allow red wine to be made exclusively with a single variety, so our *Masseto* from 100 percent Merlot is forced to be labeled as an *IGT Toscana*. When I'm describing this wine, it is much easier to define it as a Super-Tuscan rather than having to explain to

customers what an *IGT Toscana* is. Super-Tuscan remains a concept that people understand," says Raspini. He adds that *Bolgheri's* producers have recently voted to change the DOC to allow varietal wines and to permit *cru* names on the labels; they are currently awaiting government approval of these. *Tenuta dell'Ornellaia's* *Masseto*—made only after *André Tchelistcheff* insisted that original owner *Lodovico Antinori* plant Merlot in the *Masseto* vineyard because of its thick clay soils—is one of the best examples of Italian Merlot, proving that *terroir* is undeniably critical in order for a given wine to perform well.

Martino Manetti at the *Monteverdine* estate in *Chianti Classico* remains ambivalent about the Super-Tuscan phenomenon but as passionate about Tuscan wines as was



Marco Pallanti, winemaker at *Castello di Ama* and *consorzio* president

his father, the late *Sergio Manetti*, who created *Le Pergole Torte* with the help of *Giulio Gambelli*, known as the "master taster," back in 1979. "Super-Tuscan unfortunately brings to mind an overblown New World style that cannot describe my wines," says *Manetti*, who adds that it is therefore a mistake to consider *Le Pergole Torte* as such, though he has no intention of bringing the iconic bottling into the *Chianti Classico* fold. "But this style is not exclusive to the Super-Tuscans—look at how many *Chianti Classicos* are just as extravagant. For now, there are too many winemaking approaches and too many international grapes used in *Chianti Classico*, so that the

denomination still lacks a firm identity. This is the original *Chianti* growing zone, and wines here should be made only with Tuscan grapes—above all, *Sangiovese*," states *Manetti*.

He adds that the 80 percent minimum of *Sangiovese* in *Chianti Classico* is impossible to enforce and that it is not improbable that some estates make more use of international grapes than of the local hero. "*Sangiovese* is very sensitive, and its innate characteristics, such as violets and wild cherry, suffer when blended with even a small amount of other grapes," states *Manetti*, who promised his father that he would continue his work of defending their wine. How then does *Manetti* categorize his elegant and subtle *Le Pergole Torte*? "It's a true *Sangiovese chiantigiano*," concludes *Manetti*. With its thoroughly Tuscan pedigree and independent spirit, it is perhaps, above all, the embodiment of all that the Super-Tuscans originally intended. ■