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Article Archive Vintage Profile

In a Tuscan State of Mind

I continue to be amazed at the sheer diversity of wines coming out of Tuscany these days. While the big guns may still command the highest prices, the real attractiveness lies at the other end of the price spectrum. Tuscany's finest wines under \$25 were reviewed in Issue 190, but readers will find plenty of additional wines at friendly prices in these pages, including a number of alternatives to Maremma and Chianti Classico's prestige wines. The sweet spot for fine, cellar worthy bottles in Tuscany is in the \$50-65 price range, where readers will find plenty of wines with significant cellaring potential and the track records to back it up. The vast array of regional designations (DOC, DOCG and IGT) with their confusing and often overlapping regulations, plus Italy's large number of indigenous and international varieties, creates a huge market inefficiency that savvy readers can exploit. Poggio Scalette's Il Carbonaione, Castellare's Sodi di San Niccolò, Monsanto's Chianti Classico Riserva Il Poggio, Felsina's Chianti Classico Riserva Rancia and Fontodi's Chianti Classico Riserva Vigna del Sorbo, all of which can be had for less than \$65 full US retail, are all bottles that would sell for considerably more money if they were made in Bordeaux, Burgundy or Napa Valley, where producers have done a far better job in marketing their wines. This report focuses on the wines of Central Tuscany (Chianti Classico, Montepulciano, Cortona and environs) and Coastal Tuscany. I also included a few wines from Montalcino that I missed earlier in the year.

Overview of Recent Vintages

It isn't easy to get a grasp on Tuscany as a whole. There are just too many sub-regions, microclimates and grape varieties for general comments to be of much use. Still, I hope these broad vintage sketches will serve as a good introduction to the vintages readers are likely to find in the market today. Vintage **2006** remains impressive for the sheer number of superb wines across all of Tuscany's main winemaking regions. As I have noted previously, the vintage is especially strong in Maremma, where a number of producers made wines that are likely to remain reference points for many years. The 2006s are firm, vibrant wines with significant cellaring potential. Not surprisingly, many wines are already headed for a period of dormancy during which they are best left undisturbed.

Italy saw virtually no winter in **2007**. The weather was warm the entire year, but without the heat spikes of 2003 or 2009. These conditions allowed for even ripening of fruit and tannin across most regions. Chianti Classico, where higher altitude vineyards sometimes struggle to ripen, produced many truly stunning wines. I also tasted a number of delicious 2007s from Montepulciano and, to a lesser extent, Cortona. The 2007s are open, lush and very approachable. The major problem readers are likely to have with the 2007s is deciding when to drink them. Most of the wines are incredibly delicious today, but also seem to have the potential to improve in bottle, which is why many of my drinking windows start relatively early. If the vintage has a weakness it is the slightly higher level of alcohol that comes through in some wines. In vintages 2006 and 2007 Tuscany has its best back-to-back vintages in twenty years.

Vintage **2008** presented growers with much more challenging conditions than either 2006 or 2007. A cool, wet spring caused growers to intervene more frequently in the vineyards to avoid rot and other diseases. Conditions improved later in the year, leading to a fairly regular harvest. In general, the 2008s are midweight wines with neither the structure of the 2006s nor the sheer density of the 2007s. Chianti Classico and Montalcino appear to be the most affected regions, but in Bolgheri and in many (but not all) parts of Maremma overall quality is on average higher.

In **2009** the defining moment of the vintage came during mid- August, when all of Northern Italy experienced a massive, wilting heat-wave. I spent a week in Chianti Classico during that time and it was hot, hot, hot, even at night. During the same period in 2008 I needed a light sweater at night, but not in 2009. You could virtually see the leaves dropping off the plants. Old vineyards with good access to water came through fine, but lesser sites clearly struggled. I took a quick detour through the vineyards in Montalcino and saw vines under significant heat

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stress. Interestingly, when I got to Gianfranco Soldera's Case Basse property, virtually all of the flowers and plants in his famous botanical garden were suffering, but the vines looked great. So far I have only tasted the entry-level 2009s, but this will be a fascinating vintage to follow as more wines enter the market over the next few years.

The **2010** harvest was wrapping up as we went to press. The spring and early summer were unusually cool and wet. The weather took a turn for the better later in the summer, with a number of growers reporting long stretches of warm temperatures, sunny days with few clouds, and good alternation between hot (but not excessively hot) daytime temperatures and cooler evenings. Everything was teeing up perfectly for a late, leisurely harvest, but nature threw in a few last wrinkles with periods of rain in September, the effects of which are likely to be highly localized and variable from producer to producer. Most growers picked their Merlot in mid-September, while the later ripening Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon harvests stretched into the

—Antonio Galloni

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