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FEATURES

Tuscany's Triumph

Tuscan winemakers from all corners of the region are fine-tuning their techniques.



Tuscan wine has enjoyed decades of success with U.S. consumers, thanks in part to the legacies of such estates as Frescobaldi (Tenuta Ammiraglia winery pictured).

Tuscan wines have always had long-standing appeal among U.S. consumers, even in the category's early days when they were defined by their straw-covered fiasco, the bottle that was once Chianti's signature. Today, however, Tuscany's success is buoyed by high-end producers with estates not just in Chianti, but across the countryside. And while icon wines from estates like [Sassicaia](#), [Ornellaia](#), and [Biondi-Santi](#) continue to draw eyes to Tuscany, high-quality wines that fall below \$30 a bottle have been cutting a wider swath in the U.S. market.

Though Tuscany's production slipped from historic highs in 2017, owing to difficult conditions throughout that growing season, the past two harvests have lifted the region, and both volume and value are on the rise once more. In a corner of the winemaking world famed for its centuries-old traditions, a growing adherence to sustainable, organic practices and new technologies is also keeping Tuscan vintners relevant in the modern era.

Additionally, the exploration of smaller sub-regions like the coastal areas of Maremma and Bolgheri is proving fruitful.

Maremma has seen great success with Vermentino and rosé in addition to its iconic reds, while in 2019 Bolgheri celebrated its 25th year as an established DOC, and with it a rising tide of popularity that looks primed to continue well into the future. Meanwhile, lesser-known DOCs like Val d'Arno di Sopra, Carmignano, and Pomino are pulling people toward their unique wines, illustrating that Tuscany is at the most diverse it has ever been.



Biondi-Santi (Franco Biondi-Santi pictured) has become especially known for its Brunello di Montalcino red wine over the years. (Photo by Bruno Bruchi)

Chianti Commands

Chianti remains one of the most sought-after imports in the U.S. with some 2 million cases sold, according to Impact Databank. While the Tuscan sub-region was once known for its value-priced, volume-driven jug wines, the creation of the Chianti Classico DOCG in 1984 and, more recently, the advent of a new, ultra-luxury tier—Gran Selezione—have lent even greater credence to the region. “Gran Selezione is the best our appellation has to offer, and it’s done incredibly well in the U.S. thus far,” says Giovanni Manetti, president of the [Chianti Classico Consortium](#) and owner of [Fontodi Winery](#). “The tier’s success is a good sign that the appellation is successfully premiumizing even further.”

Established in 2014, Gran Selezione requires wines to be produced with grapes—at least 80% Sangiovese—from an estate’s best vineyards, and bottled on-site. Manetti notes that Gran Selezione offerings comprise just 6% of the appellation’s volume, but have a larger share of the value at 12%, with the minimum bottle price hovering around \$50.

Alongside this new tier and Tuscany’s overall premiumization, the Chianti Classico Consortium is looking to emphasize the region’s diverse terroir. “Chianti Classico wines should constantly stay

among the top wines from all over the world, given that we have substantial history and a unique combination of microclimate and soil that allows for incredible variation across the territory,” says Manetti. “There’s not homogeneity, as every village is making a different wine.” The Consortium is currently working on a proposal that would require all wineries under its umbrella to list specific village names on their bottles. “It’s the right time to add the name of the village to the main label,” Manetti adds, noting that the move would help consumers who want to know more about the relationship between wines and the specific parcels of land where they’re from.



While Chianti Classico has served as Tuscany’s shining star for decades, smaller DOCs like Carmignano are gaining traction in the U.S. market. Tenuta Capezzana (pictured) is one of the wineries located within Carmignano, and is highlighting the area’s diverse microclimates.

At [Marchesi Antinori](#), establishing a varied terroir within Chianti Classico has been a main marketing focus lately. “We have investments in different areas throughout the region, and there are many differences between them,” says Stefano Leone, executive vice president of global sales at the company. “We’ve seen positive developments from focusing on the specific assets of each sub-zone. Our ultimate aim is to introduce new wines that will showcase the specific character of each estate.” Antinori’s Chianti Classico properties include [Tenuta Tignanello](#), [Badia a Passignano](#), [Pèppoli](#), and the [Solaia Vineyard](#), which is located within the Tignanello estate.

In the medieval town of Volpaia, [Castello di Volpaia](#) has been making wines in Chianti Classico for centuries, and has been experiencing particularly strong interest in its offerings recently. “Demand for Chianti Classico has been quite excellent for some time now,” says third-generation Volpaia family member Federica Mascheroni Stianti. “That’s due in part to more consumers acknowledging the distinct differences among wines that come from throughout the region, and the high-quality products that the region is producing overall.” Mascheroni Stianti points to Chianti

Classico communes, like Radda, that have recently emerged as a result of the creation of a specific village designation in 2018. “As a region, we’re getting more into the sub-areas that are slowly coming out,” she says. “It’s been a year since the recognition of specific villages and since then we’ve been pressing those unique areas more in the market.”

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**STEFANO LEONE, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF GLOBAL SALES AT
MARCHESI ANTINORI**

The Volpaia lineup consists primarily of red wines, driven by the flagship Chianti Classico (\$21 a 750-ml.) and progressing to Chianti Classico Riserva (\$29), the latter of which was named one of [Wine Spectator’s Top 10 Wines of 2018](#). Then there are the single-vineyard expressions Coltassala (\$70), Balifico (\$70), and Il Puro (\$151); Coltassala and Il Puro now both hold the Gran Selezione designation. Across all wines, Volpaia usually produces around 250,000-300,000 bottles annually, 10% of which are IGT rather than DOCG.

At retail, Chianti leads sales for a number of major companies, among them online retailer [Wine.com](#). “In terms of revenue, the 2015 Antinori Tignanello (\$119 a 750-ml.) has been our bestselling wine, while in units, the 2015 [Tenuta di Nozzole](#) Chianti Classico Riserva (\$20) leads sales,” says Wine.com founder and executive vice president Michael Osborn. He adds that the site’s top five Tuscan brands are Antinori, [Tenuta San Guido](#), [Tenuta Guado al Tasso](#), Tenuta di Nozzole, and Ornellaia, all of which hail from the Chianti Classico area. Across the board, Tuscany represents some 53% of Wine.com’s Italian sales, which overall comprise around 12% of the company’s business.

Illinois-based, 41-unit retailer [Binny’s Beverage Depot](#) counts four Chianti wines, all of which fall in the \$16-\$25 price range, in its top ten Tuscan offerings. Binny’s wine buyer Bob Calamia notes that Chianti wines, and Tuscan offerings overall, are among the most popular for the retailer, as consumers are familiar with the region and its signature grape, Sangiovese. “Many of our customers like the familiarity and don’t want to tackle the

complexities of Italy,” he says. “I can understand why they would see it as daunting, given that there’s a lot out there.”



Frescobaldi has increased visibility of its Maremma-based Ammiraglia estate in recent years, lending greater credence to the sub-region (vines pictured).

Smaller Regions On The Rise

While Chianti and Sangiovese may boast the highest regional and varietal recognition among U.S. consumers, vintners in other areas—many of which splintered off from Chianti Classico—are working hard to raise the visibility of their estates and the grapes that grow best within them, which often are not Sangiovese. Volpaia, for example, is also present in the coastal Maremma Toscana DOC through [Prelius](#), a larger-volume label that produces 6,500-8,500 cases annually. “Getting attention isn’t always easy,” says Mascheroni Stianti. “But Maremma is growing. Vermentino, for example, has become a calling card for the region, as have its landscape and seaside attributes.” Prelius launched with a Vermentino (\$16 a 750-ml.) and a Cabernet Sauvignon (\$16) in 2007; more recently, the brand added a higher-end red blend, Prile, comprised of Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese, and Merlot. According to Mascheroni Stianti, Prile represents the evolution of the Prelius label, and, by association, Maremma as a whole. Around 700 cases of the wine were produced in the 2015 vintage, making it much smaller in volume than its Vermentino and Cabernet Sauvignon counterparts.



Castello di Volpaia (estate pictured) is one Tuscan estate that has expanded outside of Chianti Classico to the prominent sub-region Maremma.

Maremma also plays an important role for [Frescobaldi](#), by way of its [Tenuta Ammiraglia Estate](#). “Maremma is a beautiful, unique area, and we’ve specialized in Vermentino there since the late 1990s,” notes Frescobaldi president and 30th-generation family member Lamberto Frescobaldi. “It still needs to be put on the map, but we’ve seen increased visibility in the U.S. over the past few years, and adjusted our availability of the wines accordingly.” In 2016, Ammiraglia debuted [Alie](#), a Syrah- and Vermentino-based Toscana IGT rosé that has thus far garnered positive reception in the U.S. The winery currently exports around 2,000 cases of Ammiraglia—which also includes the Vermentino-based [Massovivo](#), red blends Terre More and Pietraregia, and the recently released, high-end [Aurea Gran Rosé](#)—to the U.S. each year, with distribution set to ramp up in 2020 thanks to the label’s double-digit growth. Frescobaldi is handled in the U.S. by New York-based importer [Vintus](#).

To Maremma’s southern border is Bolgheri, another Tuscan region that’s rapidly grown in prominence. The DOC was established in 1999 and features investments from some of Italy’s premier players in the wine industry. Antinori has had great success with its Guado al Tasso estate, whose flagship wine blends Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc, with Petit Verdot occasionally added as well. In 2018, [Tenuta Sette Cieli](#)—part of the [Wilson Daniels](#) portfolio in the U.S.—purchased seven acres of vineyards in Bolgheri, and 2019 marked the winery’s first harvest as part of the DOC. “We love the Bolgheri DOC, as it’s drawing attention not just from consumers but from other vintners around the world as well,” says Ambrogio Cremona Ratti, owner and brand ambassador of Tenuta Sette Cieli. He notes, however, that the flood of winemakers into Bolgheri has resulted in steep price increases for vineyard plots in the region. Currently, the winery

offers the NOI4 Bolgheri DOC blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Cabernet Franc in the U.S.

While Ratti is newly focused on growing Tenuta Sette Cieli's presence in Bolgheri, the majority of the winery's vineyards are in the nearby Monteverdi Marittimo commune, which shares a border with Bolgheri. "Not many people know about this area, as it's not an established DOC," he says. "We want to better define where we are, so consumers can understand the special qualities of our vineyards and wines. Not having a DOC is a challenge, however, both from a commercial and marketing point of view." Currently, the winery exports around one-third of its production to the U.S., with Indaco—its Toscana IGT blend of Malbec, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon—and Yantra, a Toscana IGT blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, doing especially well.



Located in the Val d'Arno di Sopra DOC, Il Borro (CEO Salvatore Ferragamo pictured) is focused on organic winemaking, tapping into an American market that's keenly aware of sustainability. All 20 estates in Val d'Arno di Sopra are organic by law.

Organic And Sustainable

Elsewhere in Tuscany, the Val d'Arno di Sopra DOC is also seeing an uptick in growth as of late, thanks to more concerted efforts by the likes of such estates as [Il Borro](#) and [Petrolo](#). The DOC was formally established in 2011, and now counts 20 estates under its umbrella. Utterly unique to Val d'Arno di Sopra is its focus on organic winemaking; according to Il Borro CEO Salvatore Ferragamo, the DOC will be the first in the world making all of its wines organically by law. "All the producers in the area have already taken up these practices, and now it's just a matter of waiting for the ministry to actually turn it into law," he says. "There's tremendous interest in the American market for organic wines, so we're tapping into that as well."

Il Borro offers a wide range of certified-organic wines, from the Borrigiano Val D'Arno di Sopra Rosso DOC (\$16 a 750-ml.)—the first expression from the winery with the Val D'Arno di Sopra DOC designation—to the Lamelle IGT Toscana Chardonnay. Production is small, with around 16,700 cases produced annually, and only a fraction of that exported to the U.S. Last year, however, Il Borro purchased a neighboring property, which doubled its vineyard surface area and will eventually enable expanded production.

Aside from organic winemaking, Ferragamo notes that focusing on terroir is also key for Il Borro. “We’re highlighting the French concept of growing, though of course we cannot use the word ‘cru’ in Italy,” he says. “So we’re using the word ‘vigna.’ It’s a new concept of zoning in the DOC, and it’s part of our move to further focus on single vineyards, which is something that Italy needs.” To that end, Il Borro is producing a 100% Sangiovese called Polissena Val D'Arno di Sopra Vigna (\$28 a 750-ml.) that comes from a specific plot within a specific vineyard at the estate.



In 2018, Tenuta Sette Ciele—part of the Wilson Daniels portfolio in the U.S.—purchased seven acres of vineyards in Bolgheri (winery pictured). Last year marked the winery’s first harvest as part of the DOC.

Also in Val d’Arno di Sopra is Petrolo, whose U.S. importer Vintus has likewise been advocating for recognition of the DOC in U.S. markets. “A smaller winery like Petrolo, in a relatively unknown DOC like Val d’Arno, is often overshadowed by estates in Chianti Classico or by wines like Brunello di Montalcino,” says Vintus Italian portfolio director Claire Hennessy. “But it’s an absolute jewel that comes from an incredible sub-region, so we’re trying to get the wine in front of people who can essentially become brand ambassadors, like sommeliers. The fact that it’s organic also adds to its appeal, as more people are turning toward that certification.” Petrolo offers a number of high-end, certified-organic wines, including Galatrona, a 100% Merlot.

Other winemakers in lesser-known regions have also turned to organic certification as a means of reaching more U.S. consumers. “Organic farming is something we’ve done at Capezzana since 2009,” says Countess Beatrice Contini Bonacossi, second-generation family member and international ambassador for [Tenuta di Capezzana](#), located in the Carmignano DOC. “My late brother Vittorio was incredibly into organic winemaking and implemented those practices for us, and we finally received organic certification in 2015. Now, we see more people in both Carmignano and Tuscany overall practicing organic farming.” She adds that Capezzana has also used its own yeast strains—cultivated at the University of Florence—since 2012, which has ensured that all of its wines are the purest expressions of the estate.

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COUNTESS BEATRICE CONTINI BONACOSSÌ, SECOND-GENERATION FAMILY MEMBER AND INTERNATIONAL AMBASSADOR FOR TENUTA DI CAPEZZANA

As more Tuscan winemakers move toward sustainable and organic practices, it's ultimately in an effort to showcase the subtleties of their specific estates. “The microclimate and biodiversity we have in not just Carmignano, but at Capezzana specifically, are best shown when using organic practices,” says Bonacossi. “We have many different kinds of soil, even in the same vineyards, going from clay to limestone to schist to marble. And even the exposure in the vineyards differs greatly. So it's best for us to follow the most natural practices possible, to show consumers these intricacies within the wine.”

Leone from Antinori agrees that ultimately, emphasizing the uniqueness of specific labels is key. “All of our communication is always aimed at emphasizing the identity of our estates,” he says. “Each territory must be able to express itself in the wine that comes from it. That way, consumers can tell whether they like wines from Montalcino more so than those from Chianti Classico, or from Bolgheri, or wherever else in Tuscany.”