

New Vintage releases in Tuscany for 2017 - by Michele Shah

Tuscany evokes a Renaissance landscape, gourmet food and wine as no other region does. Its rolling hills, clad with vines, olives and cypress trees are just a part of the attraction which draws a huge number of discerning travellers and wine connoisseurs to the area. Its history, traditions and culture extend to magnificent cities, medieval hilltop villages and endless hamlets scattered around a timeless countryside, which encompass Italy's heartland. Its picturesque farmhouses, castles and monasteries are very often home to some of the top wine estates.

Toscana is one of Italy's premium wine producing regions. A visit must include the classic areas such as Chianti Calssico docg, Brunello di Montalcino docg, Nobile di Montepulciano docg and San Gimignano docg, all of which lie between the Renaissance towns of Siena and Florence and their scenic country roads. The choice of wineries to visit is infinite and Chianti Classico docg is a good starting point: the area can easily be reached from either Siena or Florence. Its territory encompasses the original Chianti docg villages of Radda, Gaiole, Castellina, Greve and Panzano, favoured for their excellent *terroir*.



Marked by its very diverse terrain and its many microclimates Tuscany offers a range of different styles of wine, even within the same grape variety, the predominant red grape Sangiovese, which is the main variety to be found in the appellation areas listed under the docg (denominazione di origine controllata e garantita) and doc (denominazione di origine

controllata) labelling. The name *Sangiovese* originates from the term *sangue di Giove* – the blood of the ancient god Jove, which gives an idea to the importance allocated to the variety and the wine.

Anteprime Toscane (*en-primeur* tastings) is the scenario of the annual vintage release tastings for the Tuscan appellations, at which time professional tastings are set up for press and trade to draw their conclusions on the new vintages to be released to the market. These tastings, which take place on an annual basis in mid-February, involve a tour of Tuscany's classic appellations, including the Chianti docg area and all the subzones, as well as the more classic areas such as Chianti Classico docg; Nobile di Montepulciano docg and the king of them all Brunello di Montalcino docg. All these wines are dominated by the main Tuscan grape which is the Sangiovese. There is only one appellation in the midst of this sea of reds which is Tuscany's most important white appellation, Vernaccia, grown to the beautiful area of San Gimignano.



Chianti docg remains the nucleus of Tuscan viticulture, still the most voluminous of Italy's classified wines and the most prominent expression of the noble Sangiovese vine that dominates the region's reds. The Chianti docg and doc appellation alone includes some 3.000 vintners and 15.500 ha of vineyards in the provinces of Arezzo, Firenze, Pistoia, Pisa, Prato and Siena.

Regular Chianti docg was showing its vintage 2016 which was to all effects a good vintage, while Chianti Classico docg was showing vintage 2015 which is a super vintage, according to many vintners it is considered one of the best vintages over the last few decades.

Chianti docg is not the only protagonist of Sangiovese. Its stage is shared with the majestic Brunello di Montalcino docg made from 100% Sangiovese and the impressive Vino Nobile di Montepulciano docg made from a blend of 70% (minimum) Sangiovese and a remaining 30% other red grapes of the area which can include native varieties such as Canaiolo and Colorino as well as "international" varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot and at times a small percentage of Syrah.



Chianti Classico docg requires a minimum of 80% (minimum) Sangiovese and the remaining 20% of local and international red varieties grown in the appellation. Chianti Classico docg with 280 producers is divided into different sub-zones amounting to 70,000 hectares and 7.300 ha of registered Chianti Classico vineyards which includes the entire territories of the communes of Castellina in Chianti, Gaiole in Chianti, Greve in Chianti and Radda in Chianti and parts of those of Barberino Val d'Elsa, Castelnuovo Berardenga, Poggibonsi, San Casciano Val di Pesa and Tavarnelle Val di Pesa.

“Vintage 2015 is easily the vintage of the century so far. The weather was perfect – nothing was in excess,” said Filippo Mazzei owner of Castello di Fonterutoli in Chianti Classico. “It was never too hot, we had good humidity in spring and a cooler August, which was good because June and July were hot. The quality of the wines is extraordinary.” Vintners were certainly over the top about this vintage praising it as the best vintage they have seen in the past 50 years and one of age-worthy quality.



Chianti Classico Gran Selezione docg a new category of Chianti Classico introduced with vintage 2014 is a special category for wines made with grapes from a single vineyard or the estate’s best grapes and is aged for 30 months including three in bottle. A wine to show the excellence and potential of the region, generating a lot of curiosity from the press and the trade, yet still to be fully understood by consumers.

Going further south we come to Montepulciano, a prime example of Tuscany’s most beautiful medieval hilltop towns and home to the Nobile di Montepulciano docg which is also based on Sangiovese, here called ‘Prugnolo Gentile’, however similar to Chianti Classico docg, 30% addition of local varietals such as Mammolo, Canaiolo and Colorino are allowed, as well as the option of adding international varietals such as Merlot, Cabernet and others grown to the region. This year’s vintage release is the 2014. A very difficult vintage due to adverse climatic conditions during the growing season, showing harsh and unripe tannins. Not all producers were able to come out with a five-star vintage, in fact it has been declared a three-star vintage, but in some cases obviously, some producers did better and some worse.

Montalcino's beautiful hilltop town lies 564 metres above sea level and offers spectacular views over the Orcia valley. Brunello di Montalcino is Tuscany's most famous docg the region's boldest expression of Sangiovese. Brunello di Montalcino is located 40 kilometres south of Siena with the hilltop town of Montalcino as its epicentre. Its territory includes over 250 producers; 24.000 ha of land naturally delimited by the Orcia, Asso and Ombrone valleys of which 2.100ha of Brunello di Montalcino docg vines and 510ha of the second wine, Rosso di Montalcino doc. Brunello is the local name for the *Sangiovese Grosso* clone from which Brunello di Montalcino should be made *in purezza* (meaning in purity - 100% Sangiovese) and released on the market five years after its vintage.



Brunello di Montalcino docg vintage 2012 is very good vintage, with some notes in common with the legendary vintage 2010 which was praised throughout Italy as one of its top vintages over the last fifty years and difficult to beat. Vintage 2012 was a hot vintage and those vintners who managed best their vines made some impressive wines with beautiful aromas, vibrant fruit, lively acidity, and ultra-fine tannins and a pleasure to drink.

San Gimignano notable for its high towers similar to mediaeval sky-scrapers, dominating the surrounding countryside is home to Tuscany's small, but noteworthy production of white Vernaccia di San Gimignano docg wine. It's 12.500 ha includes some 5.600 had of farming land divided among olive oil production, cereals and vines, the latter planted to 720ha of vines of Vernaccia San Gimignano docg. Over recent years Vernaccia has improved its quality and today emerges as a white wine of distinct character among its bordering red wine territories. It is characterised by a pale straw yellow hue with golden highlights that become more evident with ageing. The aromas are fine and delicate, with fruity and floral scents, especially when the wine is young. As it matures and ages – because Vernaccia can age very well - it develops the characteristic mineral scent of flint, developing into a dry, harmonious and savoury flavoured wine.



This year's vintage release was the Vernaccia di San Gimignano docg 2016, by all esteemed a great vintage, especially for whites where we find healthy grapes, thanks to the dry, ventilated weather that characterized the summer, producing balanced wines, perfectly "in line" with the sensorial characteristics of the variety.

Each year the town of San Gimignano in the middle of June hosts its ever-popular Medieval Festival, which is known locally as the 'Ferie delle Messi', featuring a true taste of medieval Italy, with jousting, juggling and all kinds of acrobatics. June and August San Gimignano's Summer Music Festival features a number of concerts, music events, ballet and theatrical performances.



Similar Medieval festivals are also staged in Montepulciano's *Bravio delle Botti*, a challenging competition in which heavy wooden wine barrels are pushed up the steep cobbled narrow streets as far as the finish line which is right in front of the beautiful Duomo in Piazza Grande. The most famous and historic competition of all is Siena's *Corsa del Palio*, a bareback horse race first recorded in 1283 and today one of Tuscany's most famous events staged in the Campo, in the heart of Siena, held on the 2nd July and 16th August.



Whether it be fashion, art, music, wine or good food, Tuscany is simply a must destination!

My pick of new releases – listed are the names of the wineries:

Vernaccia di San Gimignano docg 2016

Cesani
Fattoria Poggio Alloro
La Lastra
Il Palagione
Montenidoli
Tenute Le Calcinaie

Chianti Classico docg 2015

Castello di Fonterutoli

Castello di Monsanto
Barone Ricasoli
Badia a Coltibuono Fattoria San Giusto a Rentennano
Fontodlsola e Olena

Nobile di Montepulciano docg 2014

Romeo
Villa Sant'Anna
Avignonesi
Boscarelli
Contucci

Brunello di Montalcino docg 2012

Col'D'Orcia
Cupano
Fuligni
Le Chiuse
Poggio Antico
Gianni Brunelli – Le Chiuse di Sotto
Lisini
Mastrojanni
Poggio di Sotto
Salvioni
Sesti
Altesino
Argiano

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