

WINES OF TUSCANY

Cecchi Family Passion & Progress

Imported to India by Fratelli Wines, Famiglia Cecchi represents one of Tuscany's top family wineries blending innovation with tradition, writes **Michèle Shah**

The Cecchi (pronounced chekki), Family Group was founded in 1893 by Luigi Cecchi, a man of vision who understood the potential and quality of Tuscany wines, in particular that of the character of its indigenous Chianti Classico, made from the noble Sangiovese grape. Today Cecchi represents one of Tuscany's top family wineries thanks to Luigi Cecchi's farsightedness and philosophy, defined as a perfect blend between innovation and tradition.

From generation to generation the family has always taken care to respect tradition, yet at the same time acknowledging that growth and progress is achieved by experimentation, followed by patience and passion. Most importantly agronomic and vineyard decisions taken over the past decades have

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always aimed at focusing on safeguarding the ecological future of the land through minimal environmental impact.

Tuscany's breathtaking landscape is much admired by all, for its undulating hills lined with waves of silvery olive trees and horizons of vineyards, with terracotta coloured farmhouses and emblematic cypress trees, a sight that takes one back to its Renaissance origins, where time seems to have stopped. The Tuscan wine industry has steadily sailed forward through centuries of grape growing and winemaking, rewarding those who have a clear vision of quality production without sacrificing authenticity.

The charming Chianti Classico village of Castellina in Chianti in the heart of Tuscany is home to Cecchi's headquarters and production centre which today manages some 130 staff; 299 hectares of family-owned vines and an additional 71 hectares of rented vines producing some eight million bottles which are exported to over 50 countries. The story of Cecchi has been quite a journey from its modest farming origins to the 1930s when the Cecchi family name became known far and wide outside its Chianti borders.

Cecchi's real expansion began in the 1980s when they decided to invest in vineyards outside Chianti Classico, yet still within Tuscany. They ventured into neighbouring San Gimignano, known for its white vernaccia wines from the eponymous grape, Vernaccia di San Gimignano DOCG which is unique to San Gimignano, and considered one of Italy's finest white wines since Renaissance times. Cecchi's next investment was made in the Tuscan coast for producing Morellino di Scansano DOC. Morellino is the local name for the sangiovese grape variety in Scansano. Its name originates from the morello cherry, a dark red, tart cherry with great acidity.

Cecchi chose not to invest outside Tuscany until year 2000 when they looked to neighbouring Umbria to purchase vineyards in Montefalco in order to produce the unique Sagrantino di Montefalco DOCG wine. Made

Aerial view of Cecchi's Villa Cerna in the Chianti Classico region

Photos: Courtesy Famiglia



from 100% sagrantino, it is a vibrant red with powerful structure and plenty of tannins. The wine has great ageing potential and is a perfect match for aged cheeses and gamey dishes, such as wild boar.

As with most families the Cecchis have had their ups and downs. Without looking too far back, 2003 and 2004 were difficult years. Vintage 2003 was a particularly difficult vintage with temperatures soaring high into the 30 degrees celsius and a summer marked by drought. "It was one of the worst vintages I can remember and required a lot of hard work to produce a few decent bottles," says Andrea Cecchi, who runs the family business with his brother Cesare today.

"It was shortly after this that our father, Luigi, passed away in 2004. He was the pillar of the family business, central to all the important decisions. Like all changes, whether it is planting a new vineyard, investing in the business or planning new company strategies, the results take time to kick in."

2004 was also a difficult year, but one of important decisions. Andrea and Cesare, now the fourth-generation winemakers, took over



Top: A worker plucks grapes at Cecchi's Val delle Rose winery near Grosseto, Tuscany. Above: The brothers Cesare and Andrea Cecchi

the family business with the aim of reviewing their company strategy. "That same year we decided to focus on investing in the business and expanding into selected areas. This is when we bought one of our top sites, Villa Rosa in Chianti Classico," says Andrea. "Fortunately, it turned out to be the right decision. It was an investment in creating a special wine and label signed by Cecchi. A high quality wine that would express a different character from our other Chianti Classico wines, showing the diversity of the soils in Chianti Classico.



Above: Castello Montaùto in San Gimignano which was acquired by the Cecchi company in 1988. Left: A barrel tasting in the cellar at Val delle Rose winery

both for holidays and for work," says Raspini. "It is a fascinating country, fast moving like many other Asian countries, and historically one of the important gateways to Asia. India's enthusiasm for wine, makes it a very stimulating country to work with."

What brought Cecchi and the Fratelli Wines together was not just the quality of Cecchi's wines, but also the strong influence of the "brothers" theme, which in Italian is "fratelli". According to Alessio Secci this is particularly relevant, as their Indo-Italian adventure is all about partnerships between brothers. The brothers, Kapil and Gaurav Sekhri and Alessio and Andrea Secci, together with Ranjitsinh and Arjunsinh Mohite-Patil form the Fratelli Wines Pvt Ltd team. It seemed only natural, therefore, to look for Italian brothers producing premium, quality wines with whom they could partner.

Fratelli Wines' decision of a joint venture with Cecchi's winery was also driven by the Tuscan and Sangiovese connection. Fratelli have planted 58,000 plants of sangiovese in India which produce four sangiovese labels: Sangiovese Red; Vitae Sangiovese (barrel

The soils can vary enormously in character depending on their terroir."

The umbrella brand Famiglia Cecchi is fairly recent. It was decided on by the brothers when their mother, Anita Sardelli (Cecchi), who succeeded Luigi as president of the family business, passed away. After Anita, the title was handed down to Andrea's elder brother Cesare, while Andrea became CEO.

Both brothers work closely with Leonardo Raspini, Cecchi's managing director, who joined the company a couple of years ago. It was Raspini who was instrumental in introducing the Cecchi brand to the Indian market by partnering with Fratelli Wines, a partnership which was consolidated in 2016. Cecchi exports some 10,000 bottles per year which they aim to increase to 80,000 over the next five years.

"I have visited India three times now,

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Restaurant Foresteria Alzatura in the historic centre of Montefalco, Umbria

fermented); Sette (sangiovese 60%, cabernet sauvignon 40%) and a Sangiovese Bianco.

The aim of the Tuscan sangiovese connection was to create three different ranges, focusing on entry level Chianti and moving up to a more niche market. Thus, they selected from Cecchi's production, Storia di Famiglia Chianti Classico; Riserva di Famiglia Chianti Classico Riserva and two top labels - the Gran Selezione collection of Chianti Classico Valore di Famiglia and a 100% sangiovese, Brunello di Montalcino Amici. All of which can be found in five-star hotels as well as selected retail shops.

"Fratelli is like a dream that my brother Andrea and I always dreamt about," says Alessio. "Working together, pooling together our resources to create a successful company in India that we can be proud of and that will hopefully survive us.

"What's more, I admire the Cecchi Brothers, both Andrea and Cesare, for what they have achieved with Cecchi in terms of their marketing and selling strategy. It is never easy to inherit a family company like Cecchi and scale it up the way they have done. Above

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all, we share the same vision with our Indian partners who are also brothers, so Cecchi was the natural and perfect choice for us. Cecchi is an inspiring brand and we hope we can do the same in India with Fratelli."

In the coming months, that is in the latter part of 2017, Fratelli Wines and Cecchi will be organizing a 10-day tour of the Hyatt Regency hotels in New Delhi and Mumbai, featuring Cecchi's wines paired and matched to dishes prepared by Chef Luca Tinti of Cecchi's Foresteria Villa Cerna, their hospitality centre in Castellina in Chianti.

Cecchi owns two hospitality centres with restaurants. The first is Foresteria Villa Cerna in Tuscany, where the wine experience includes tastings and a winery visit. At Villa Cerna's restaurant, which is open for lunch and dinner and managed by Marco Bini, you can enjoy a genuine Tuscan menu. The second Foresteria hospitality centre is a very recent project which took off only a couple of months ago and is based in Montefalco at their Tenuta Alzatura Foresteria. Here, too, the ongoing project houses a restaurant and wine tasting centre. ♦