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THE WINE MAGAZINE

TUSCANY'S COASTAL WINES

FROM BOLGHERI TO ELBA
IN SEARCH OF FINE WINE

page 40

OBEROI LAPIS

ON TOP OF THE FINE
DINING GAME

page 76

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

A GOURMET SEASONING
WITH MANY AVATARS

page 68

THE UK WINE TRADE

1964 TO 2020

page 14

SULA

— EVER ONWARDS

page 20



WINETRAVELLER

Discovering TUSCANY'S coastal wines

Michèle Shah travels to the Italian coast from Bolgheri to the island of Elba and finds superb Tuscan wines influenced by the sea

No other Italian wine-producing region in Tuscany has evolved as dynamically as Bolgheri, known especially for its elegant Super Tuscan blends. Situated on Tuscany's coastline, just south of Livorno, Bolgheri has seen unprecedented levels of interest in recent years, not only for its wines but also for its beauty and wealth of tourism.

Bolgheri is about a two-hour (100 km) scenic drive just northwest of Siena. If you are driving from Siena you can break your journey to visit the historic towns of San Gimignano and Volterra before heading for the coast. If you are driving from Florence it is 130 km southwest, and slightly less than two hours if you drive direct.

Vineyards stretch down to the sea at Tenuta delle Ripalte, the top resort to stay in or visit while in Elba





Perched on a hill in the midst of vineyards, Bolgheri Castle has been in the same noble family since the 1200s

Once at Bolgheri I suggest you stay at Relais Poggio ai Santi, a beautiful villa set back some eight kilometres from the coastline, offering an amphitheatre of wonderful views. Its excellent hospitality and accommodation with stylish guest lodges is set in a scenic park with a pool, dominated by magnificent Mediterranean pine trees. The Relais has its own restaurant with an in-house chef who offers seasonal dishes sourced from local ingredients, many home grown. It is an ideal base for exploring Bolgheri's world-acclaimed wine estates Ornellaia, Tenuta San Guido (Sassicaia), Le Macchiole, Grattamacco, Poggio al Tesoro, Azienda Chiappini, Ca'Marcanda and many others you will find in my selection of wineries to visit listed in the sidebar at the end.

Bolgheri is part of the Tuscan Maremma coastline, which was once a swampland and was only completely drained in the 1930s. Nobody really expected that its fertile, alluvial soils would be so conducive to grapevine cultivation – and not just any vines, but such French varieties as Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, which have been planted in the area since the 1700s. Napoleon's exile to the nearby island of Elba in the early 19th century further encouraged the planting of French cuttings, which adapted magnificently to the soils. Quite ironic when you consider the rivalry between the French and the Italians, especially when it comes to wines.

The recent breakaway from tradition was inspired by the Marquis Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, owner of the estate Tenuta San Guido in Bolgheri, which produced the Bordeaux blend wine, Sassicaia, that broke every rule. Cabernet Sauvignon vines were imported directly from Bordeaux and the wine was aged in French barriques, although every other wine in Tuscany was at the time aged in large Slovenian oak casks. Sassicaia became the model for Piero Antinori's

Tuscany's coastline has seen unprecedented levels of interest in recent years, not only for its wines but also for its beauty and wealth of tourism

Tignanello, the first of its kind in 1971, which was based almost entirely on Sangiovese and was aged in barriques (later on the Cabernet Sauvignon was added). These wines gave rise to the Bolgheri DOC, which lies in the municipal territory of Castagneto Carducci.

Sassicaia's name ('stony field') alludes to the banks of gravel in the area, reminiscent of vineyards in the Graves and the Haut-Médoc, which inspired the French wine-loving marchese to plant Bordeaux varieties – particularly Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc – rather than Sangiovese. In the 1980s, Lodovico Antinori began planting on his neighboring Ornellaia estate. An area of clay within this estate was planted with Merlot and became the separate Masseto property. The sunny, dry and breezy climate of Bolgheri and the stony soils with clay patches have attracted further vineyard expansion, mostly focusing on red Bordeaux varieties.

Bolgheri wines are famous for expressing terroir, reflecting the land they come from. The sea is one of the defining characteristics of the place. The land basks in ample light from the sun and its brilliant reflections off the ocean. It enjoys fabulous coastal weather including the sea breeze that ventilates the vines and mitigates the high temperatures. Vineyards are wedged in between wooded hillsides and ancient olive groves, and soils are alluvial and rich in minerals, sand, limestone, clay, pebbles, and volcanic rock in the east. The sunshine and maritime influence is reflected in the intense, red wines of the area.

The town of Bolgheri is a charming medieval village with a red brick castle that has been owned by the noble Gherardesca family since the 1200s. The first thing that strikes any visitor driving up to the ancient gates of Bolgheri is its



Aleatico is a sweet red wine from Elba

famous Viale dei Cipressi, or Cypress Avenue, a straight five kilometre long road from the coast, lined with tall, majestic cypresses that leads straight to the Castle of Bolgheri.

Beyond its ancient town walls is an angle of Tuscany that feels like a step back in time, an idyllic area dotted with shops, wine bars (enotecas) and trattorias, that is entirely pedestrianised. You might want to stop by one of the many enotecas for a bottle or glass of wine to taste.

The surrounding hills are not particularly high, but feature dense Mediterranean shrubland and woods, ideal land for the *cinghiale* – wild boar – which is cooked to perfection and constitutes a favourite in the local Bolgheri cuisine, along with the famous Bistecca Toscana (T-bone steak weighing a minimum of 1.5 kg each), both dishes well suited to the structured red wines of the area. For eating options, see my listed suggestions below.

When it comes to winery visits, be sure to

book ahead. Unfortunately, it is not possible to visit Tenuta San Guido (Sassicaia), but it is well worth visiting the Osteria San Guido where you can eat hearty Tuscan food and sample Tenuta San Guido and Bolgheri wines as well as buy vintage bottles of Sassicaia. Other estates worth visiting are Ornellaia, as well as some of the smaller estates, such as Chiappini Vineyards, next door to Ornellaia, and Le Macchiole and Michele Satta, all in the municipality of Castagneto Carducci.

If you feel like venturing further and have the time to do so, drive 50 km south of Bolgheri down the coast to Piombino, which is not worth stopping in or exploring, but from here you can take the ferry over to Elba, the island to which Napoleon was exiled in the 19th century. The ferry departs several times a day and Elba is an hour's cruise away.

The sheer unspoilt beauty and ruggedness of the island with its winemaking tradition that goes back to the Etruscans is so alluring

Beyond its ancient town walls is an angle of Tuscany that feels like a step back in time, an idyllic area dotted with shops, wine bars and trattorias

that it makes Elba worth a wine-lover's visit. The Napoleonic trail is an added historic attraction, and it's possible to book a visit to his country town houses. Two Elban wineries to visit are the traditional producer, Antonio Arrighi, native of Elba, and the more modern Tenuta delle Ripalte, the project of a masterful winemaker Piermario Meletti Cavallari, who used to be the owner of Grattamacco in Bolgheri. The estates differ greatly but produce perfect examples of the potential of Elban wines.

Arrighi, a fourth-generation vintner on the outskirts of the quaint coastal town of Porto Azzurro is focused on sustainability and produces an almost 'natural' wine, some of which is fermented and aged in terracotta amphorae and bottled under the labels **Hermia IGT Toscano Bianco** and **Tresse IGT Toscano Rosso**. Here the vines don't traditionally speak French – though having said that, Arrighi has planted some vines to Syrah and Viognier, which he blends with local varieties such as white Ansonica (Inzolia) and Procanico (Trebbiano) and red Sangiovese (same as Sangiovese) and Aleatico. The latter is used to make a concentrated traditional red Passito which is excellent with local cheeses or enjoyed as a 'meditation wine'.

Arrighi's unique project includes submerging freshly harvested white Ansonica grapes, which are characterised by thick skins, some five to 12 metres in the sea for a period of three to five days. This process, thought to have originated with the ancient Greeks some 2500 years ago, is said to add to the longevity of the wine, as the sea-salt acts as an antioxidant. A very limited production is sold under the label Nesos.

Tenuta delle Ripalte, about eight kilometres from the hilltop town of Capoliveri, is the top resort to stay while in Elba, and even if you don't stay there, it is a must to visit. The estate comprises some 450 hectares stretching down

Vineyards planted with Merlot at Ornellaia, an estate that is worth visiting



IF YOU GO

Traveller's Directory

Wineries to visit and where to stay

BOLGHERI

Wineries

Ornellaia

<https://www.ornellaia.com/it/vini/>

Le Macchiole

<https://www.lemacchiole.it/en/home.html>

Michele Satta

<http://www.michelesatta.com/>

Poggio al Tesoro

<https://www.poggioaltesoro.it/en/index.php>

Giovanni Chiappini Vineyards

www.giovannichiappini.it

Le Crocine Winery

www.lecrocine.it

Fornacelle Winery

www.fornacelle.it

Restaurants

Osteria Enoteca San Guido - Bolgheri

<https://www.enotecasanguido.com>

Michelin starred La Pineta (fish) Restaurant – Marina di Bibbona (by the sea)

www.lapinetadizazzeri.it/LaPineta/Home.html

La Perla del Mare - San Vincenzo (fish restaurant by the sea)

<https://laperladelmare.it>

La Cesarina – Castagneto Carducci

www.lacesarina.com

La Tana del Pirata - Marina di Castagneto (fish restaurant by the sea)

<http://www.latanadelpirata.com/it>

Accommodation

Poggio ai Santi – San Vincenzo

<https://poggioaisanti.com>

Relais dei Molini – Castagneto Carducci

<https://www.relaisdeimolini.it>

ELBA

Wineries

Antonio Arrighi

<http://www.arrighivigneolivi.it>

Fattoria delle Ripalte

www.fattoriadelleripalte.it

Restaurants

Taverna dei Poeti in Capoliveri

<https://www.latavernadeipoeti.com>

Ristorante Publius in Poggio

<http://www.ristorantepublius.it/site/>

Ristorante Caponord (fish) at Marina Manciana

<https://www.ristorantecaponord.it>

Accommodation

Fattoria delle Ripalte near Capoliveri

www.fattoriadelleripalte.it

Rosa dei Venti – Loc. Morcone near Capoliveri

Appartments & Cottages – beautiful views

www.rosadeiventisoladelba.com/

EXCEPTIONAL WINE TOURS

Your Personal Wine Guides for small groups

Filippo Magnani (www.filippomagnani.it) and

Michèle Shah (www.micheleshastravel.com) are two professional wine guides based in Tuscany specialising in customized tours for wine professionals and wine enthusiasts



Viale dei Cipressi or Cypress Avenue of tall, majestic cypresses that line a 5 km road from the coast straight to the Castle of Bolgheri

to the sea, and is dotted with a variety of villas to rent and glamping (luxury camping in tents with all amenities).

The wines of Ripalte offer true insight into well-crafted indigenous examples of Elban viticulture. The entire range is worth mentioning, from the sparkling **Brut Rosé** made from the red Aleatico to the **Bianco delle Ripalte** made from Vermentino with 10% of Petit Manseng and the **Rosso Mediterraneo** made from 100% red Aleatico and the Passito also made from 100% Aleatico. They represent an authentic expression of Elban fine wines that play on elegance, but with body and soul in abundance.

Elba is a discovery that you can visit in most seasons, the best being spring, summer and early autumn. It's important to have a car to visit all the small coastal and hilltop villages and be able to stop and savour some of the tastiest seafood you'll ever taste. Fresh sea fish, octopus, prawns, mussels, tuna and swordfish are superbly combined – and don't miss the area's special fish soup 'cacciucco'. It's a blast of flavours straight from the sea.

Buon appetito and buon viaggio! ♦