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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 Belais Poggio al Montico, a beautiful villa set back some eight kilometres from the coastline, offering panoramic views of wonderful views. Its excellent hospitality and accommodations with stylish guest lodges is set in a scenic park with a pool, dominated by magnificent Mediterranean pine trees. The Belais has its own restaurant with an in-house chef who offers seasonal dishes sourced from local ingredients, main home grown. It is an ideal base for exploring Bolgheri's world-renowned wine estates Oranello, Tenuta San Guido (Szaszkia), Le Marchese, Giramma, Poggio al Tesoro, Asinella Chiappina, Ca'Marcanda and many others you will find in my selection of wineries to visit listed at 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 1790s. 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 breakdown from tradition was inspired by the Marchese 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 wines 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 Tignanello, the first of its kind in 1971, which was based almost entirely on Sangiovese and was aged in barrels 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 (contrary to popular belief) 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 Oranello estate. An area of clay within this estate was planted with Merlot and became the separate Masseto property. The warm, dry and breezy climate of Bolgheri and the clayey 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. He set 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. Vinesyards 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 sunbake 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 Giberti family since the 1200s. The fortification that strikes any visitor driving up to the ancient gates of Bolgheri is its...
famous Viale dei Cipressi, or Cypress Avenue, a straight five-kilometre long road from the coast, lined with tall, majestic cypress that leads straight to the Castle of Bolgheri.

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

The surrounding hills are not particularly hilly, but feature dense Mediterranean scrubland and woods, ideal land for the original - wild - bush, which is cooked to perfection and constitutes a favourite in the local Bolgheri cuisine, along with the famous Ribolla Toscana (Grape) whose weight is a minimum of 1.5 kg each, both dishes well suited to the structured reds of the area. For eating options, see our 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 O述tia San Guido where you can eat hearty Tuscan food and sample Tenuta San Guido and Bolgheri wines as well as the new vintage of the Sassicaia. Other estate worth visiting are Ornellaia, as well as some of the smaller estates, such as Sixtus Vineyards, next door to Ornellaia, and Le Macchiole and Michele Satta, all in the municipality of Castagneto Carducci.

If you feel like continuing farther and have the time to do so, drive 50 km north of Bolgheri down the coast to Pescanino, 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 rugged beauty and ruggedness of the island with its winemaking tradition that goes back to the Etruscans is so alluring that it makes Elba worth a wine-lover’s visit. The Bolgheri trail is a sort of history, art and culture tour, and it’s possible to book a visit to his country town houses. Two Elba wineries to visit are the traditional producers Arrighi, native of Elba, and the more modern Tenuta delle Ripide, the project of a masterful winemaker Pietrocorio Maserati, who used to be the owner of Grassmann in Bolgheri. The estates differ greatly but produce perfect examples of the potential of Elba wines.

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A ngelica, a fourth-generation winemaker 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 terra cotta amphorae and bottled under the label Hera SGT Tuscan Bianco and Trebb SGT Tuscan Rosso. Her wines don’t traditionally speak French - though having said that, Arrighi has planted some vines to Syrah and Vermentino, which he blends with local varieties such as white Ansonica (hool and Piancione (Grebelton) and red Sangiovese (once known as Sangioveto) and Alvezia. 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 submerged, freshly harvested white Ansonica grapes, which are characterised by thick skin, some five to 12 meters 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, and the sea acts as an antioxidant. A very limited production is sold under the label Neris.

Tenuta delle Ripide, about eight kilometres from the tiny 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
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 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 sav our 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!