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The Birth of a Wine Region

Bolgheri is a relatively young, yet prestigious appellation on the coastal region of Tuscany and is home to some of Italy’s quintessential, iconic wines. Its agricultural past is historically linked to Guidalberto della Gherardesca, one of the feudal noble families of the 19th century, whose home was Castello di Bolgheri, which is situated at the entrance of the walled village of Bolgheri, from which the appellation takes its name. Today the appellation encompasses a much larger area stretching some 20km along the pine clad maritime coast from Marina di Bibbona to San Vincenzo and inland to large dense areas of forests and scrubland.

Agriculture and viticulture were of great importance to Guidalberto who owned vast extensions of land along the Tuscan coast where he made a significant contribution to the territory’s viticultural history by replanting its vineyards. He was also responsible for planting the magnificent cypress avenue, a straight 5 km long stretch that leads almost from the sea, inland to the Castle of Bolgheri.

It was along this impressive 5 km Viale dei Cipressi, now a protected historic landmark of Bolgheri with its 2,540 cypress trees, that the consortium of Bolgheri and Bolgheri Suavecita DOC recently (4 September 2021) hosted an international soirée to mark the first edition of ‘Bolgheri Di Vino’, dedicated to its 65 producers and their wines. It was a magical evening, with some 1000 guests from the world of wine, invited to a sumptuous dinner served under the stars on an exquisitely adorned table that stretched out for one kilometre along the avenue. A festive occasion, during which 7,500 bottles were opened by 136 sommeliers, and poured into 3,500 glasses. A celebration of the growing prestige of Bolgheri’s future, in a unique setting.

Tenuta Argentiera – A magnificent patch of land in the Maremma that blends countryside and sea, between woods and Mediterranean scrub
Bolgheri’s history is tightly connected and bound to San Guido, home to both Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta and to Sassicaia, Italy’s most renowned red wine. A wine produced from 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, that was originally crafted by Giacomo Tachis, the legendary winemaker. Tachis at the time was at the beginning of his career, in the employment of Marchesi Antinori, a notable Tuscan family that formed an alliance through marriage with the Della Corte della Rocchetta family. Tachis later went on to create the famous Super Tuscans, Tignanello and Sassicaia, produced under the Antinori label in Chianti Classico. 

Up until the 1970s, the history of Bolgheri’s red wine production was associated exclusively with Fontealba’s Grappolli Associate. Towards the end of the 70s however, other producers from outside the area followed in the footsteps of Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta.

In 1977, Bernardo Molenti Cavallari moved from Borgo a Castagneto and founded Podere Giannetto. Shortly after, Michele Satta moved from Vannina to Bolgheri and established his own winery, the Telicivico property developed into two distinct estates: Marchese Lodovico Antinori founded Ornellaia, now the property of Marchesi de' Frescobaldi (who separated part of the property to establish the Masseto property, producing another of Italy’s iconic wines); while his elder brother Piero Antinori founded Grappolli at Castiglion. The only producer at the time who was native to Bolgheri was Ennio Campionini, who established Le Maciste.

Le Maciste was one of the first to adopt Bolgheri’s viticultural model, producing an initial four hectares of vineyards in 1983. Today the estate’s 27 hectares and its 140,000 bottle production is managed by a large professional team, headed by Grazio Merli and his two sons, Ennio Campionini passed away in 2002, but he left an important legacy to the producers of Bolgheri, one of the first to bottle single varietals of Syrah and Cabernet Franc, showing a new path in its prestigious potential. Today the winery exports over 70% of production and in addition to the Bolgheri Rosso, Le Maciste produces three top labels, each 100% mono-varietals: Sorbo 100% Syrah, Messorio 100% Merlot and the flagship label Polo 100% Cabernet Franc.

“Bolgheri’s appelation has developed rapidly from seven producers in 1983 to 60 producers in 2021,” says Cristina Merli. “The aim of Bolgheri is increased, but to maintain a high level of quality, sustainable wines. Le Maciste has produced organic wines since 2002 but only now will we start to formally certify them as such.”

The “Consorzio per la tutela dei Vini DOC Bolgheri e Bolgheri Rosso” was founded in 1995 by Marchese Niccolò Incisa della Rocchetta, the consortium’s first president. Since 2019, Albiera Antinori (president of Marchesi Antinori) has historically owned land and vineyards in Bolgheri with the Grappolli di Castiglion estate and has been president of the consortium, which has grown rapidly both in members and vineyard plantings which have increased from 198 ha to 1,170 ha within DOC status.

According to Albiera Antinori, Bolgheri has the advantage of being a fairly new territory and one that has allowed producers the freedom to express themselves in a more liberal manner than many other historical regions. It’s a small area where producers need to work together.

“Bolgheri’s main challenge for the future is to preserve and safeguard the extraordinary efforts and results that our producers have achieved, while keeping alive the spirit of unity, cooperation, love and respect for the territory that has inspired and encouraged us from the very beginning,” says Antinori.

The DOC vineyards encompass some 1,389 hectares, situated at altitudes between 10m and 380m above sea level. The Mediterranean scrub known as “Macho Mediterraneo” stretches all along the coast and up into the hills that are clad by dense, dark green forest, offering extensive biodiversity.

Wines of Bolgheri

The production of Bolgheri DOC wines is regulated by a set of rules approved in 1983 which initially permitted the production of white and rosé wines. Over the following years various revisions were made as production grew. Bolgheri Rosso and Castiglion were one of the first wine-producing areas in Italy to cultivate Bordeaux blended wines made from not only Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, but also from Cabernet Franc, with recent additions of Syrah and Petit Verdot, although with small percentages of Sangiovese.

In 1994 some of the most important revisions were made to officially include the production of Bolgheri’s red wines made with grape varieties typically grown in the area, which created the appellations Bolgheri Rosso DOC and Bolgheri Superiore DOC. At the same time, Sassicaia was awarded its own salience, Bolgheri Sassicaia DOC. Later, in 2011, a revision was made to give producers more freedom to use the three main grape varieties of Bolgheri, namely Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc, which allowed the production of monovarietal wines.

In 2013 a further step was taken to “promote” Bolgheri Sassicaia DOC from a subzone of Bolgheri DOC to an appellation in its own
Producers are increasingly crafting some of their top labels as mono-varietal wines using one of the three main grape varieties—Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot.

Many of Bolgheri's vineyards are only just reaching their peak of productive maturity as the average age of the vines is about 15 years here.

Bolgheri Wine Producers

Bolgheri’s historical wineries have most certainly played a fundamental role in securing international acclaim, as well as attracting a new set of winemakers capable of making important investments in and around the area. Italian winemaker Umberto Foradori, of Bolgheri's Foss Marai, and the Marchesi Antinori and the Conti Guidi Rosso Bolgheri winery.

Bolgheri Superiore and Bolgheri Sassicaia DOC labels represent some of the highest quality of productions, followed by Bolgheri Rosso. On the whole the wines are extremely pleasant, fruity and drinkable. Their soft, elegant character is defined by shorter periods of aging in wood or in some cases no contact with wood.

It’s also important to note that many of Bolgheri’s wines are only just reaching their peak of productive maturity as the average age of the wines is about 15 years. "This means that the quality standards of wines produced here can only get better. In fact, 500 ha, i.e. more than a third, out of the total vineyard expansion is certified organic," says Riccardo Guerra, director of the Bolgheri & Bolgheri Sassicaia consortium.

Many estate owners, such as Buoncristiani and Giannone’s 11-hectare estate, planted next door to Ombrone, as well as Enrico Scali’s 12-hectare estate—all of them exemplary estates having made names for themselves for quality production and aware of the importance of organic production—have always been organic.

White and Rose Wines

The most noteworthy white varieties to be planted are Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier which traditionally are not aged in wood, in order to obtain a fresh, fruity character in line with market trends. Regarding rose wines, while traditional production still remains largely on Sauvignon, today rose wines are derived from the same international varieties that are used for red wines.

Bolgheri Rosso Classico

"Up until the 90s this area was highly agricultural, but it was obvious that wine production was the future. Year 2000 was a turning point in Bolgheri," says Stefano Grasso. "We learned a lot from producers from other regions, such as Gaja who brought with them different soundings and philosophies of sharing information and experiences which allowed us to grow. If we grow the region grows."