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The Birth of a Wine Region

Bolgheri provides an exemplary lesson on how to convert agricultural and scrub land into a DOC appellation acclaimed for its wines. *Michèle Shah* reports

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 scrub-land.

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 Sassicaia 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 cult 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 noble Tuscan family that formed an alliance through marriage with the Della Gerardesca family. Tachis later went on to create the famous

Bolgheri Di Vino Dinner at the magnificent 5 km 'Viale dei Cipressi' avenue, a protected historic landmark



Super Tuscans, Tignanello and Solaia, produced under the Antinori label in Chianti Classico. Up until the 1970s the history of Bolgheri's red wine production was associated exclusively with Tenuta San Guido's Sassicaia. 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 Piermario Meletti Cavallari moved from Bergamo to Castagneto and founded Podere Grattamacco. Shortly after, Michele Satta moved from Varese to Bolgheri and established his own winery. The Belvedere property was 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 older brother Piero Antinori founded Guado al Tasso. The only producer at the time who was native to Bolgheri was Eugenio Campolmi who established Le Macchiole.

Le Macchiole was one of the first to adopt Bolgheri's viticultural model, purchasing an initial four hectares of vineyards in 1983. Today the estate's 27 ha vineyard and its 190,000-bottle production is managed by a large professional team, headed by Cinzia Merli and her two sons. Eugenio Campolmi 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 to its prestigious potential. Today the winery exports some 70% of production and in addition to the Bolgheri Rosso, Le Macchiole produces three top labels, each 100% mono-varietals: Scio 100% Syrah; Messorio 100% Merlot and the flagship label Paleo 100% Cabernet Franc.

"Bolgheri's appellaton has developed rapidly from seven producers in 1985 to 65 producers in 2021," says Cinzia Merli. "The aim of Bolgheri is to expand, but to maintain a high level of quality, sustainable wines. Le Macchiole 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 Sassicaia" was founded in 1995 by Marchese Nicolò Incisa della Rocchetta, the consortium's first president. Since 2019, Albiera Antinori (president of Marchesi Antinori which historically owned land and vineyards in Bolgheri with the Guado al Tasso estate) has been president of the consortium, which has grown rapidly both in members and vineyard plantings which have increased from 190 ha to 1,110 ha with 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 1,359 hectares, situated at altitudes between 10m and 380m above sea level. The Mediterranean scrub known as "Macchia Mediterranea" stretches all along the coast and up into the hills that are clad by a dense, dark green forest, offering extensive biodiversity.

WINES OF BOLGHERI

The production of Bolgheri DOC wines was first 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 and Castagneto Carducci were one of the first wine producing areas in Italy to cultivate Bordeaux blended wines, made from not only Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon,



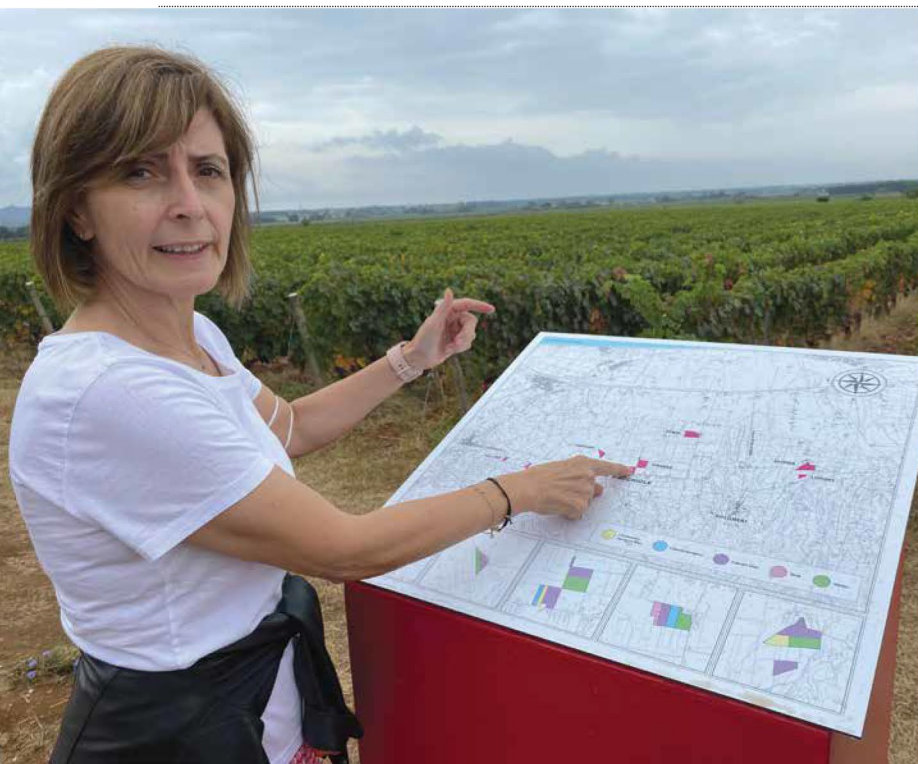
Albiera Antinori, president of Marchesi Antinori and also president of the Bolgheri consortium, since 2019

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

but also from Cabernet Franc, with recent additions of Syrah and Petit Verdot, along 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 subzone, **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 mono-varietal 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



Cinzia Merli, head of the large professional team that manages Le Macchiole estate's 27 ha vineyard and 190,000-bottle production of wine

right, in order to protect the estate's production, giving it complete autonomy.

BOLGHERI RED BLENDS

Bolgheri's red wines are generally a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Franc and Merlot, often with additions of Syrah, Petit Verdot and, on rare occasions, Sangiovese. Over recent years 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, Merlot. The wine production is of high quality and the best reds show great intensity and great aging potential. Bolgheri's production, distinguished by aromas of sweet, ripe dark fruit with balsamic notes of Mediterranean scrub, is characteristic of Bolgheri's terroir. On the palate the wines are round and supple, showing a sweetness of fruit which is perceived in the mid-palate. The wines are vibrant with fresh acidity showing a silky, dense, tannic texture and a generous, long finish, often marked by savoury notes that evoke the saltiness of the nearby sea. Despite a relatively firm structure, the wines are mostly

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

characterized by balance and harmony.

"The proximity to the sea is extremely important as it assures warmer temperatures in the winter and cool breezes in the summer. This also ensures more balanced vintages, better stylistic consistency and well-balanced, quality wines," explains Renzo Cotarella, CEO and headwinemaker of Marchesi Antinori and the Guado al Tasso Bolgheri winery.

Bolgheri Superiore and Bolgheri Sassicaia DOC labels represent some of the highest quality of production, 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 vineyards are only just reaching their peak of productive maturity as the average age of the vines is about 15 years. "This means that the quality standards of wines produced here can only get better. In fact, 500 ha, ie, more than a third, out of the total vineyard expansion is certified organic," says Riccardo Binda, director of the Bolgheri & Bolgheri Sassicaia consortium. Many estates, such as Le Macchiole and Chiappini's 11-hectare estate, planted next door to Ornellaia, as well as Enrico Santini'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 ROSÉ WINE

The two 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 requests. Regarding rosé wines, while traditional production relied mainly on Sangiovese, today rosé wines are derived from the same international varieties that are used for red wines.

BOLGHERI WINE PRODUCERS

Bolgheri's historical wineries have most certainly played a fundamental role in securing international acclaim, as well as attracting a newer set of wineries capable of making important investments in an area where 80% of vineyards are owned by 10 large wine estates.

More recently, since the late 90s new investments have been made by producers from other Italian winemaking regions. Notable names such as **Banfi from Montalcino** founding Le Bozze estate west of the Via Bolgherese, **Marilisa Allegrini from Veneto** founding the Poggio al Tesoro estate in Bolgheri, **Angelo Gaia from Piemonte** founding the larger 120-ha estate Ca'Marcanda, which extends from Bolgheri to Bibbona.

Some producers, such as **Guido Folonari**, decided to take over historic properties such as Donna Olimpia 1898, a 45-ha estate which used to belong to the Granducato Della Gheradesca. Tenuta Argentiera is another such example. It is a larger estate that already existed in the

The Donne Fittipaldi family-run estate is owned and managed by Maria Fittipaldi Menarini (third from left) and her four daughters



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

Grand Ducal cadaster and was purchased in the 90s by an Austrian investor who fell in love with the area.

An important share of production originates from a segment of family-run estates such as Donne Fittipaldi owned by **Maria Fittipaldi Menarini**, part of the Gruppo Menarini Farmaceutics, who fell in love with Bolgheri in the 90s. The estate is managed by herself and her four daughters, while production is overseen by winemaker, Emiliano Falsini. Whether it be foreign investments such as Campo alla Sughera, purchased by the **Knauf family**, or producers from northern Italy such as **Franco Ziliani** owner of Berlucchi from Franciacorta, who founded Caccia Al Piano, the beauty of the area and the potential of its wines has attracted many from far and near.

Stefano Granata and **Paola De Fusco's** I Luoghi, a 5.5-ha estate with a 15,000-bottle production is among the smaller producers, a rising star of the area, not to be missed. Paola, a lawyer and Stefano an engineer, set aside their careers to take over a family property and produce wines that sing from the heart. Concrete egg tanks and wood tanks are used for fermenting the must separately and only after blending are the wines aged for 18 months in barrique. In addition to the Bolgheri Rosso, I Luoghi produces two blended wines, both with 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, which according to Paola and Stefano is the most representative varietal of Bolgheri. These are bottled under the labels Podere Ritorti and Campo al Fico.

"Up until the 50s 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 Granata. "We learnt a lot from producers from other regions, such as Gaja who brought with them different knowhow, and the philosophy of sharing information and experiences is what allowed and allows us to grow. If we grow the region grows." ♦