

ITALIAN WINE MERCHANTS

ITALIAN WINE MERCHANTS ♦ WEEKLY E-LETTER ♦ JULY 12, 2007

JULY'S CULT WINE ARRIVALS

A NOTE FROM SERGIO

There is an endless amount of adjectives that I could use to describe different wines. They're like people in that way, in their variety: Some are quirky, some are easygoing, some are complex, and some are angry; there are elegant wines and crude wines, visionary wines and simple wines, witty wines, powerful wines, ambitious wines, lazy wines, wines that make you laugh, wines that make you melancholy, wines that make you feel a little unsettled, and wines that teach you something new. And in a year, many of us try a wide range of these characters. But out of the multitudes, there are only a handful that make you sit back and ask with wonder, What is that? It's a mystery quality, the thing that pulls you back to the glass to smell the liquid, again and again, always finding something fresh and inexplicable.

I just spent a week in Toscana, and I gathered vintages from four Tuscan producers who, working with the Sangiovese grape, have managed to imbue their wines with that indefinable attribute. There's the prolific expression of *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*—the debut 2003 offering is awesome in its fruit package and concentration, while the leaner takes from 1999 and 2001 offer unrivalled structure and longevity. I'm also offering the exciting *Poggio di Sotto* and the reliable *Tenuta Carpaço*, as well as two wines made by extraordinary cult producers in Abruzzo and Friuli.

These wines are a departure from the laid-back summer bottles I've offered in the last month. They're all difficult-to-obtain, limited-production, high-demand wines, well-suited for the cellar or for special guests who can appreciate their depth. Drink them in good health, with friends who are willing to explore their intricacies, who are willing to go back to the glass again and again.

My Best,
Sergio

VINO NOBILE'S BEST

Il Macchione

[il mahk-kyo-neh]

Being in the company of the almost famous can deliver many privileges, particularly if you're

drinking *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*. Though Montalcino serves as Sangiovese's mainstage, with *Vino Nobile* dwelling in the wings, Il Macchione's performance puts *Nobile's* tremendous value in the spotlight, delivering a landmark expression of Montepulciano. As Sergio indicated, the 2003 Il Macchione is drinking brilliantly at this very moment, offering concentrated fruit that makes for a very engaging character. It is one of IWM's premier values at present, rivaled only by its '01 counterpart, which delivers a slightly more restrained, though impeccably balanced character. The '99 Riserva is only in the early stages of its maturation, possessing a structure that equals or rivals that of most Brunellos. Il Macchione will have you straying from Montalcino into Montepulciano, thinking only *Nobile* thoughts.

Il Macchione is one of a few small estates that have been realizing Montepulciano's inherent potential through its native Prugnolo clone. It enjoys foremost positioning among this contingent, with founder Robert Kengelbacher producing textbook expressions representing a mere four hectares of vineyards in the subzone of Le Caggiolo. The high altitude (400 meters) in this area works in concert with a mildly argillous soil to produce wines of elegance. The 2001 bottling is of particular note in this respect, as it exhibits impeccable balance and class, possessing an impressive structure that signifies the wine's ability to age. Its modest price point renders it one of IWM's premier values at present, rivaled in this respect only by its '03 expression, which is drinking brilliantly at this very moment, staging a most impressive performance. Both deliver awesome expressions of their region and producer. The '99 Riserva is only in the early stages of its maturation, with a concentration that lends it the consummate approachability of its normale relations.

Il Macchione 2003 *Vino Nobile* \$35.75

Il Macchione 2001 *Vino Nobile* \$44.69

Il Macchione 1999 *Vino Nobile Ris* \$49.50

“THINKING” WHITES

La Castellada

[lah kahs-tehl-lah-dah]

The wines of the eminent Josko Gravner—one of Friuli and the world's most iconoclastic producers—have presented several challenges in

their complexity of expression and the nature of their production. For producers like the Bensa brothers, Giorgio and Nicolò, however, they have served as inspiration—the driving catalyst behind their portfolio that presents its own challenges to our concept of familiar wines and delivers rare interpretations of the esoteric. These wines of both tradition and innovation will have you returning to the glass again and again and repeating the question, What is that?

The Bensas entered the cult ranks with the release of *Bianco della Castellada*, a blend of Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc (Tocai Friulano may also be a constituent) that became one of the defining wines of Friuli's Super-Whites category (comprising complex, full-bodied blends of both indigenous and international varietals that may be treated exclusively in stainless steel or fermented and aged in wood). As students of the "middle period" of the neighboring Josko Gravner, the Bensas privilege generous oak treatment, preceded by an extended maceration averaging between 20 and 25 days. However, it is important to note that varietal character is honored across the estate's portfolio, with the oak providing an incisive supporting role. All wines are held back from release until each reaches the viability stage for drinking.

La Castellada 2002 *Bianco* \$52.97

La Castellada 2001 *Bianco* \$129.77 (1.5L)

While they still produce their highly lauded Sauvignon and Chardonnay, like the neighboring Gravner, they intend to reserve monovarietal production exclusively for *Ribolla Gialla*—the favored varietal of Friuli's iconoclasts—in future vintages, as they believe that a blend offers the prospect for greater creative latitude than a single varietal bottling. Nevertheless, their efforts in the latter category are still highly sought after on the collector's market. The Sauvignon is of particular note, as it declines to take a contemporary and familiar reference point (i.e., New Zealand, Sancerre, or California), offering a lush, full-bodied interpretation with a mild tropical character and savory dimension.

La Castellada 2001 *Chardonnay* \$52.97

La Castellada 2002 *Ribolla Gialla* \$52.97

La Castellada 2001 *Ribolla Gialla* \$52.97

La Castellada 2002 *Sauvignon* \$52.97

VALUED 2001 BRUNELLO

Tenuta Caparzo

[teh-noo-tah kah(l)r-pah-dzo]

Single vineyard: it's a revered concept and one that accounts for many of the most sought-after bottlings in regions such as Barolo and Burgundy. Several names come to mind where the latter are concerned, but in Montalcino, there are only a few, with Caparzo's La Casa ranking at the top, along with Altesino's Montsoli cru. Caparzo's flagship effort, the renowned La Casa, represents a classically structured wine that possesses the potential to age for two decades effortlessly. In the case of the stellar '01 vintage, however, this period will extend to three with ease. La Casa is the tangible evocation of the cru ideal—a stunning translation of terroir that delivers unsurpassed value in its '01 performance.

Established in the late 1960s, Tenuta Caparzo is recognized as one of Montalcino's eminent pioneering producers, and its distinguished career has been marked by the acquisition of quality-driven sites representing distinctive terroirs. Foremost among these nuanced expressions are Caparzo's holdings in the northeastern area of Montsoli, the source of its single-vineyard La Casa bottling. This cru rendering not only constitutes the estate flagship, but serves as one of the region's most historic productions. Sourced from merely five hectares of land (comprised predominantly of schist, sandstone, and loose deposits of shale), La Casa's tannic structure provides for an extensive aging period—one that will exceed three decades effortlessly and may, given vintage conditions, realize a prodigious evolution of 50 years. La Casa's current aging regimen (instituted in 1995) comprises 12 months in French barriques and 18 months in French oak barrels.

As with its younger Montalcino counterparts featured today, La Casa maintains a very low profile in the States, with only 100 cases of the 2000 vintage having been imported. The 2001 represents one of the best values from the vintage—a year that has already been deemed of historic significance.

Caparzo 2001 Brunello 'La Casa' \$69.95*

**Indicates prearrival sale.*

“THE LORD OF THE VINES”

Edoardo Valentini

[eh-do-ah(l)r-do vah-lehn-tee-nee]

The late Edoardo Valentini is often described as the quintessential cult wine producer who gave reason to look at the wines of Abruzzo. His Montepulciano d'Abruzzo bottling is one of the

most difficult to obtain in the wine realm and is unrivaled in the artisanal realm. The other two wines inhabiting this rarified sphere—the Trebbiano and Cerasuolo—enjoy a similar status. This is a particularly compelling feat with respect to the former, given the Trebbiano grape's rather undistinguished character. Under this Lord of the Vines' regal care—a treatment based on closely guarded artisanal methods and a strict process of selection—it realizes compelling form. Our offering represents the final productions of this distinguished genius, who passed away in April of 2006.

Valentini's Trebbiano is something of an anomalous character, therefore, delivering a complex profile that takes years to fully emerge and bears virtually no relation to its vinous source. Valentini, however, believed that Trebbiano actually proffered the most profound elucidation of Abruzzo's terroir and character. Few, however, experience this “story of a place,” as a limited amount of the production reaches the US. IWM is one of very few retailers to receive allocations of these rare wines.

Valentini 2002 Trebbiano d'Abruzzo \$79.95

Valentini also raised Montepulciano—Abruzzo's sole red—to sublime heights. The closest you might come to his legendary efforts with Montepulciano (one of the most difficult bottlings to attain), however, may be through his Cerasuolo, a rosé version of Abruzzo's Montepulciano.

A rosé by any other name just wouldn't belong in this offering of limited productions. To begin with, Abruzzo's Cerasuolo (meaning cherry red) is a rosé of a different color. So even if you say that pink isn't your color in wine, Cerasuolo will have you seeing things in a different shade. Although the wine is only in brief contact with the skins, the concentrated pigment of the source grape—Montepulciano—produces an uncommonly deep shade of pink. Moreover, its flavors are far more demonstrative than those of most rosés. The Valentini bottling, of course, takes this cherry red into another spectrum altogether....

Valentini 2005 Cerasuolo Rosato \$79.95

LTD. PRODUCTION BRUNELLO

Poggio di Sotto

[pohj-jo dee sot-to]

Some producers you just keep coming back to, and Poggio di Sotto's sell-out record places it at the top of IWM clientele's most wanted list. The '99 Brunello is currently on its third installment

and we've just begun our second round with the remarkable '03 Rosso—an as-good-as-it-gets molto version of Montalcino's in-the-meantime wine. At IWM events, this label always emerges as a favorite—no matter what it happens to be up against in the tasting lineup.

Poggio di Sotto's founder, Piero Palumucci, thinks about numbers in a different way.... Indeed, the production from his 12 hectares (planted to vines) is extremely limited (with the '99 Riserva totaling a mere 150 cases), as Palumucci rejects over half the fruit cultivated, maximizing his intense and demanding viticultural practices (entailing a highly studied approach to clonal selection, planting systems, and vine density) through rigorous pruning and an intense grape selection process. Though ably assisted by renowned consultant Giulio Gambelli (the eminent name behind the most desired of Montalcino's majestic stars—Soldara), Palumucci's perfectionist streak keeps him at the helm of the cellar, a strikingly modern setting that delivers a well-bred Brunello of traditional character, achieved through extended maceration in wooden oak and aging in Slavonian oak barrels.

This is a modern classic that doesn't redefine Brunello, but rather, endeavors to capture its historic spirit through passionate artisanal labor rather than branded formulas of success.

Poggio di Sotto 2000 Brunello \$87.50

Poggio di Sotto 1999 Brunello \$94.95

Poggio di Sotto's 2003 Rosso di Montalcino may very well be Toscana's best value of the moment—quite a claim to make, to be sure, although the rate at which our first offering of this Rosso sold out provides some pretty convincing stats. While most producers are releasing their 2004 Rossos, the muscle, fruit, and tannins of this particular '03 make for a character that surpasses not only nearly all of the 2004 Rossos, but some of the 2001 Brunellos as well.

Poggio di Sotto 2003 Rosso \$43.32

Poggio di Sotto 2002 Rosso \$39.96

GET THE WEEKLY E-LETTER

To receive a complete copy of the most extensive newsletter on Italian wine, sign-up:

www.italianwinermerchant.com