



MONICA LARNER

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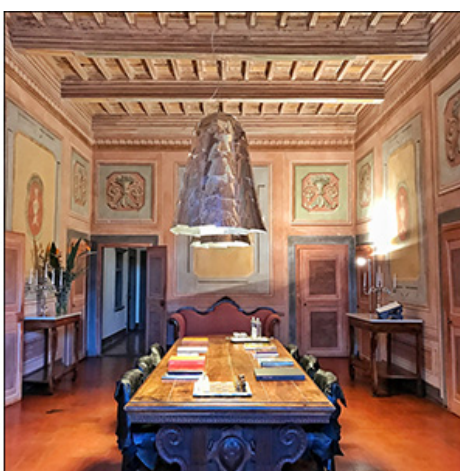
Destination Ama is not near, and it's not far once you turn off the little country road from Radda in Chianti at the heart of Italy's Chianti Classico wine appellation. The eight kilometers of road between the two geographic points makes for a perfect leisurely drive that lasts about 15 minutes and takes you through breathtaking Tuscan scenery, with wide vineyard panoramas framed by the iconic lone cypress tree or the sun-drenched farmhouse. Once you have ascended to *località Ama*, there's no other place to turn but to Castello di Ama.

This spotlight is part of my series called the Tuscan Ten, which focuses on benchmark estates from this central region of Italy.

Run by Lorenza Sebasti and Marco Pallanti, Castello di Ama is a wine estate and a hospitality center with a beautiful restaurant and suites for overnight stays. It's also an exhibition area for important contemporary artists with their works cleverly embedded into the very fiber and soul of the eighteenth-century Villa Pianigiani and Villa Ricucci.



A wall of mirrors creates optical reflections near the villa wall, and other curious artworks occupy the empty spaces in the ancient chapel, the wine cellar and the little stone-paved lanes that connect the various buildings in this little hamlet. The agricultural identity of Castello di Ama is in wine and olive oil.



The estate makes 11 wines, but the bottle that really brought it to the world stage is L'Apparita, an IGT Toscana expression of Merlot in production since 1985. Fruit comes from two small parcels at the higher end of a bigger parcel called Bellavista. L'Apparita would later become a protagonist in a little rat pack of Merlots—including Masseto, La Ricolma by San Giusto a Rentennano and Messorio by Le Macchiole—that would firmly put Italy on equal footing with the greatest wine regions in the world.



L'Apparita aside, Castello di Ama's most interesting work in recent years focuses on the local Sangiovese grape. Marco Pallanti served as head of the local growers' association, and under his direction, the Chianti Classico appellation began to study new ways to redraw the quality pyramid of the celebrated "Black Rooster" appellation. Those new ideas would eventually become the Chianti Classico Gran Selezione designation that we've had since 2014.

An enthusiastic proponent of the revamped quality pyramid, Castello di Ama makes three Gran Selezione wines: the Chianti Classico Gran Selezione Vigneto Bellavista, the Chianti Classico Gran Selezione San Lorenzo and the Chianti

Classico Gran Selezione Vigneto La Casuccia. Unfortunately, none of these three exiting wines are reviewed here because the release of 2017 San Lorenzo has been postponed to next year, and the other two expressions were not produced at all in this difficult vintage.

up to the property entrance. It sees an ideal mix of Alberese limestone soils that are typical of this area. The vineyard is planted to Sangiovese and Malvasia Nera, with the latter grape rendering delicate floral intensity in the wine. The Vigneto La Casuccia is located at the back of the main villa and is recognized by a funny little house located in the middle of the vines. The Casuccia area has three parcels with Sangiovese and Merlot. Lastly, we have the Chianti Classico Gran Selezione San Lorenzo that gets its name from the San Lorenzo valley that can be seen from the villa. This wine represents a selection of fruit from various vineyards including Bellavista, Casuccia, San Lorenzo and Montebuoni. The wine itself is Sangiovese touched with very smaller percentages of Merlot and Malvasia Nera.



Fruit in the Bellavista vineyard absorbs the last days of sun before harvest



Here are the characteristic Alberese limestone soils of the Bellavista vineyard.



One of Italy's benchmark wine estates, Castello di Ama offers hospitality and open-air art exhibits.



Pici al ragù served at the Castello di Ama restaurant makes a perfect pairing to the accessible 2018 Chianti Classico Ama.

Lorenza Sebasti and Marco Pallanti decided to postpone the release of their 2017 Chianti Classic Gran Selezione San Lorenzo to next year, giving that wine six months more in the bottle before it hits the market. Sadly, due to decreased yields in 2017, its two sibling wines—the Chianti Classico Gran Selezioni Vigneto Bellavista and Vigneto La Casuccia—were not produced at all. Lorenza describes the vintage in this manner: "The vintage 2017 was unique, it was hot but with a very small crop, an extreme lightness of the grapes and very little must inside. We made wines that are very concentrated. We achieved the elegance of Castello di Ama, but the wines have less roundness and silky tannins than usual. These are majestic expressions that will appeal to those who love powerful wines. For this reason, we believe that it is best to enjoy the Castello di Ama 2017 Chianti Classico Gran Selezione San Lorenzo after a longer aging period." The blended red Haiku and the Merlot-based L'Apparita better managed the heat of the vintage, offering muscle and grace. Castello di Ama is famous for its hospitality, and both the Villa and the restaurant remain closed until the end of May due to the coronavirus pandemic. The old tasting room was demolished, and a new structure called L'Arca is being built. The new building will consist of two floors, with the main floor dedicated to welcoming guests, tasting and lecture rooms and a projection room for art installations. The bottom floor, located underground at the same level of the barrel room, will be used to house a library selection of wines. Castello di Ama plans to put aside at least 50,000 bottles (of various formats) for aging and release 10 years after the harvest. A two-hectare plot of vines in the San Lorenzo Valley is being replanted, and a 20-year lease was renewed

Purple Rose 2019

Rating **89**

Opening to a bright pink color with raspberry highlights, the Castello di Ama 2019 Purple Rose is a tonic and snappy Tuscan rosé made with Sangiovese and a smaller part of Merlot. Some wine juice that has had minimum contact with the skins is bled off into its own tank and becomes this wine. You'll notice the darker color saturation that is typical of the saignée method of making rosé. The bouquet offers bright tones of cherry, cassis and even some darker plum-like fruit. This vintage is beautifully fresh and fruit-forward. Production is 37,000 bottles strong. Drink this wine within the next 18 months.

Al Poggio 2018

Rating **92**

The Castello di Ama 2018 Chardonnay di Toscana Al Poggio benefits from high-altitude vineyards (at about 500 meters above sea level) and the cool limestone soils of the Chianti Classico region to create this fresh, crisp and delightfully approachable white wine. There are Chardonnays from Tuscany that taste like Chardonnays from any other part of the world, and then there are Chardonnays that taste like they come from Tuscany. This wine is firmly in that second group. The distinctively territory-specific elements you get here resemble apricot and peach, with light dustings of Italian herbs such as fresh oregano and rosemary sprig. I also noted the pristine mineral notes that frame this vintage. There is a fun blast of citrus that reminds me of those sun-kissed lemon trees grown in red clay pots that you see all over this part of Tuscany. Some 11,000 bottles were made.

Il Chiuso 2018

Rating 91

The Castello di Ama 2018 Pinot Nero di Toscana Il Chiuso is a dark and sultry expression of the Burgundian grape that shows lots of sunshine and Tuscan flare. The bouquet offers blue and purple fruits with pretty rose and violet woven carefully into the fruit. The wine is rigorously mid-weight, but this Italian interpretation ultimately delivers more heft, power and flavor concentration. That extra textural support gives this wine the ability to pair with the robust pasta dishes of Tuscany, maybe with a shaving or two of black truffle applied on top. Warm-climate Tuscany and the cool 2018 vintage work in lockstep to create this harmonious and balanced wine. Some 7,500 bottles were made.

Ama 2018

Rating 92+

This is the quintessential happy wine from Tuscany that will easily pair with wintery pici al ragù or summery pasta al pomodoro. There is enormous versatility in the all-season Castello di Ama 2018 Chianti Classico Ama. The wine is round, plump and approachable. It offers enormous freshness and the bright berry intensity of the Sangiovese grape. Red cherry and cassis are backed by red rose petal and softly fragrant potting soil. I tasted this wine immediately after Castello di Ama's Pinot Nero di Toscana Il Chiuso, and I was struck by the similarities of the two wines in terms of silkiness and those pretty rose aromas. An ample 105,000 bottles were made.

Haiku 2017

Rating 94

The Castello di Ama 2017 Haiku (a blend of Sangiovese with Cabernet Franc and Merlot in supporting roles) shows a rich and powerful center of gravity, all framed by lovely freshness and lots of rich fruit fiber. It sticks firmly to the palate with big fruit intensity, plum, blackberry, spice and cured tobacco. Haiku is a very unique wine within the context of Tuscany, and I'm not just referring to the unusual blend of grapes used here. This vintage offers darkness and a level of power that we don't usually associate with Tuscany. Yet, good context is given because the Sangiovese grape adds an authentic Tuscan touch and gives the wine a sense of place. A mere 6,000 bottles were made.

L'Apparita 2017

Rating 96

I am immediately struck by the power and concentration of the Castello di Ama 2017 L'Apparita. This is an exuberant and gregarious expression of Merlot that has absorbed every last sunbeam of the hot summer season. On the nose, the wine shows beautiful fullness and generosity that spills richly across the senses. Blackberry syrup and cherry liqueur are followed by smoke, tar, toast and sweet chewing tobacco. You taste that extra density in a similar manner, and the rich concentration of the fruit has consequently shaped a more apparent tannin and a little snap of astringency on the close. My sample bottle does not show a reading of the wine's alcoholic content, but you feel some heat as well. This edition of L'Apparita is extra dark, succulent and firm. When the wine has been given another five to ten years of cellar age, then I'd suggest guinea fowl or one of those delicious roasted pigeon dishes you find in Tuscany. Some 7,300 bottles were made.



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