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The Fantastic Four of Tuscan Merlot

By Tom Hyland | Posted Monday, 15-Nov-2021



© Masseto | *One of Italy's great wines, Masseto is easily the most recognizable of the four Merlots.*

In Tuscany, Merlot is taking centre stage as the following four wines go to show.

It may surprise you, but in Italy, where indigenous varietals such as Nebbiolo, Sangiovese and Aglianico are the source of some of the country's greatest red wines, Merlot carries a reputation that is arguably as impressive as these other selections.

Excellent versions such as the Brandolini Vistorta in Friuli or Pàtrimo from Feudi di San Gregorio in Campania display notable complexity and breeding. But the most remarkable examples of Italian Merlot, wines that offer power and impeccable structure, originate from one region, Tuscany, where a handful of producers have fashioned some of the country's most iconic and in-demand wines.

For this article, we will examine four of these wines: Masseto from Ornellaia, Messorio from Le Macchiole, L'Apparita from Castello di Ama and Volta from Bertinga. The first two wines are from vineyards near the sea in Bolgheri, while the latter two are from inland plantings in the Chianti Classico zone. While each wine displays certain winemaking philosophies, they all have in common a remarkable intensity and complexity along with outstanding cellar potential.

Masseto

The most famous of this quartet of wines is Masseto, arguably the most sought-after wine in all of Italy. The wine is a product of Ornellaia, one of Bolgheri's most famous estates; for years the wine was made there, but in 2019, a separate winery was built specifically for the production of Masseto, as well as Massetino, a more approachable, but no less accomplished version of Merlot.

Masseto is sourced from a single vineyard at Ornellaia; Axel Heinz, estate director who supervises the entire production of Ornellaia and Masseto, recalls the unusual beginnings of this wine. "It was not planned from the beginning to make a wine called Masseto. The idea was to introduce Merlot as a partner variety to Cabernet Sauvignon in the initial project of Ornellaia. And so there was no other intention beside finding a potentially good site for Merlot, with remarkably little science behind it, but a lot of intuition. There was this hill that had been a clay cave back years past ... it was blue clay, so it was a very simple idea to say, OK blue clay, that rings a bell. They say that this plot with blue clay should be a good site for Merlot, so let's plant Merlot."

The first production of Masseto was in 1986; Heinz notes that as the wine left a "strong impression" on the proprietors and him, they bottled a trial version, with the first commercial example made from the 1987

vintage. The vineyard is currently 11 hectares, with the oldest vines planted 35 years ago, making this vineyard "fairly old vineyard by Bolgheri standards," as Heinz comments.

I asked Heinz how the seaside location of this vineyard affects the character of Merlot. "It has pretty much the same effect as it has everywhere in Bolgheri," he remarks. "It's those winds that come in, and most of the vineyard of Masseto is, for Bolgheri, relatively high elevation, around 100, 130 meters above sea level. So they fully benefit from those breezes coming from the sea that always keep the microclimate less heat loaded and always give a little bit of freshness."

What does Heinz think about the aging potential of Masseto? "In terms of life span I would quite safely say in almost every vintage, 20, 25, 30 years without any problem. The question is do you want to keep any vintage for so long? Some vintages give you are a very early satisfying drinking pleasure, so sometimes it's great to drink a Masseto when it's only five years old. Then there are these vintages that require 8, 10, 15 years in the cellar before they really develop."

Finally, did the original proprietors of Ornellaia believe that Masseto would become such an iconic wine? "My guess is that they clearly sensed that the wine coming from that vineyard had the potential to become an icon. Whether they would succeed or not, or whether we would succeed, nobody knows. But at least I think there was a clear understanding that the vineyard site had the potential to become something really iconic because it was capable of producing a truly distinctive wine, that's for sure."



© Castello di Ama | *L'Apparita holds the honor of being the first single-varietal Merlot to be made in Tuscany.*

Messorio

At Le Macchiole in Bolgheri, proprietor Cinzia Merli has been producing Messorio since the 1994 vintage; 100 percent Merlot, this is in keeping with her winemaking philosophy at the estate. "We decided that our top wines would be monovarietal wines, so we use Cabernet Franc 100 percent (Paleo), Syrah 100 percent (Scrio) and Merlot 100 percent. We did that to try and represent the area through a single variety. It's like taking a picture – a variety in a specific vintage in the Bolgheri area.

"It's not easy because usually you don't have many chances to change the final result in every vintage using different varieties to adjust the final results. But the wines are more precise, the wines have more focus. We love this kind of style."

Merli currently produces Messorio from two vineyards at two separate locations in Bolgheri; with the older vines being planted in 1994. The soils are clay, but as she notes "it's not compact, but loose, as the water reaches deep in the soil. These are the perfect conditions to produce a Merlot with great complexity."

Merli comments that typical aging potential for Messorio is "20 years minimum. It's much better than when we first started. We tasted some old vintages a few months ago ... I am always surprised at how this wine could age so well." The original Merlot vineyards planted in 1983 do not exist anymore, and now with the current plantings, Merli believes the wine "will change in the final result, as there will be more finesse."

Commenting on the excellence of Merlot in Bolgheri, Merli has this to say; "Here Merlot is really spectacular because it's easy to understand and you can have a great complexity, and you can age the wine for a long time without a problem; so I think this is great."

L'Apparita

While Masseto and Messorio are from Bolgheri, L'Apparita is from the inland commune of Gaiole in Chianti, situated in the southern sector of the Chianti Classico zone. The first vintage was 1985, which predates Masseto and Messorio, a fact that Castello di Ama CEO Lorenza Sebasti proudly points out. "The first purebred Tuscan Merlot," she proclaims.

Sebasti recalls the immediate critical praise for her initial release. "We were the very first ones to introduce Merlot in Tuscany and when the very first wine was released, there was really a big boom when Robert Parker tasted the wine, because nobody knew about this little estate in Chianti. But when he discovered this wine, it was really a big story around us. L'Apparita became an important cult wine in 1985, its debut year."

The grapes are sourced from a vineyard at 500 meters elevation, among the highest points in the Chianti Classico zone. The soils are a mix of clay and rock, the latter being quite common in this area. The vines are trained using the lyre system rather than the more typical Guyot system used in Tuscany; Sebasti notes that there is greater sun exposure with this practice.

But is this a good thing these days with the changing climate? Sebasti points out that this has not been a problem to date. "Ama has not really been affected until now because of the higher altitude. You know in the 1980s with our wines, we were struggling to get the perfect ripeness; we had to wait more, generally speaking."

She loves every vintage, especially the 1987, which was ranked first in an international tasting of more than 100 examples of Merlot in Zurich in 1991; the fact the Château Petrus ranked second made her extremely proud. This followed the spectacular 1986 version, which was the first Castello di Ama wine to receive a 100-point rating. Sebasti recalls this was "a very ripe harvest that is aging so well." When I asked her when this wine would peak, she replied, "I can tell you honestly, after tasting the 1986, I can bet 50 years."

Regarding the upcoming 2018 and 2019 vintages of L'Apparita, Sebasti is bullish on these wines. "We need another 20 years to understand these vintages. I love them all because they have everything; they have finesse, they have sensuality, they have length, they have purity, but we need time."

Volta

While the first three Merlots mentioned in this article have been produced for more than two decades, Volta (or more formally Volta di Bertinga) is a newcomer; only two vintages have been produced to date – 2015 and 2016 – with only the 2016 being released in the market so far.

Yet given the character of this first offering – *Gambero Rosso*, the unofficial Bible of Italian wines, labeled the 2016 Volta as the Best Italian Merlot they tasted for their 2021 Italian Wine Guide – the wine may indeed be identified as the next great Italian Merlot.

The Bertinga winery, located in Gaiole in Chianti, is owned by two Russian wine importers, who had the opportunity to purchase the Bertinga vineyard from Castello di Ama when it was on the market a few years ago. As they imported wines from this area for many years, and loved the style of the local wines, they jumped at the chance and bought this property, which has an average elevation of 500 meters above sea level.

General Director Luca Vitiello notes that Volta will only be produced in the finest vintages, with 2019 being the next release, while the grapes from the 2017 and 2018 vintages will be used in another estate wine. As for the two vintages produced so far, the decision was made almost immediately that the 2015 would be released after the 2016. For Vitiello, "the 2015 is very tight, it really needs a lot of time." The 2016, however, is a remarkable wine that is quite harmonious, even with its deep concentration. "Vintages like 2016 are more elegant, there's more elegance, there's more complexity at an earlier stage," notes Vitiello.

How does Vitiello describe the style of Volta? "In Italian we would say this is a "Gaiolese" Merlot; it captures the essence of Gaiole in a very strong sense. It has a very strong sense of place, but it is very different from the greatest Merlots of the coast, of course. It is much closer to L'Apparita in terms of style, but even then, the winemaking approach is different, so there are differences between the two wines."

"But the sense of place, that severe elegance, that austerity, those are things I appreciate very much."