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Great Reds of Toscana – Bolgheri

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Winter morning - Tenuta dell'Ornellaia vineyard, Bolgheri (Photo ©Tom Hyland)

Located in the province of Livorno along Tuscany's western border, the Bolgheri wine zone is one of the region's most important and distinctive. While the other famous wine districts of Tuscany such as Chianti, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano and Brunello di Montalcino are based on wines made from Sangiovese, Bolgheri is focused on other varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, as Sangiovese is a supporting player.

GEOGRAPHY / CLIMATE

Bolgheri is physically quite different from central Tuscany, where vineyards are planted inland amidst rolling hills. Bolgheri is situated near the sea, as many vineyards are located less than three

miles from the Tyrrhenian. While a few of the vineyards are planted at elevations of 500-600 feet above sea level, most are planted no higher than the 300-foot elevation.

This is a warm climate, although the hot temperatures during the summer are moderated by the sea. During the critical period of flowering in the spring as well as during autumn when harvest is approaching, the reflection of the sunshine off the sea helps warm temperatures as well.

GRAPE VARIETIES

The favored grape varieties in Bolgheri are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot along with Sangiovese and Syrah to a lesser degree. The DOC regulations for a Bolgheri Rosso are quite unique, with a minimum requirement of 10% Cabernet Sauvignon; there can be as much as 80%. The amount of Merlot and Sangiovese is up to 70%, while other red varieties can be as much as 30% of the blend. Needless to say with regulations such as these, the red wines of Bolgheri differ as to the style and blend preferred by each producer.

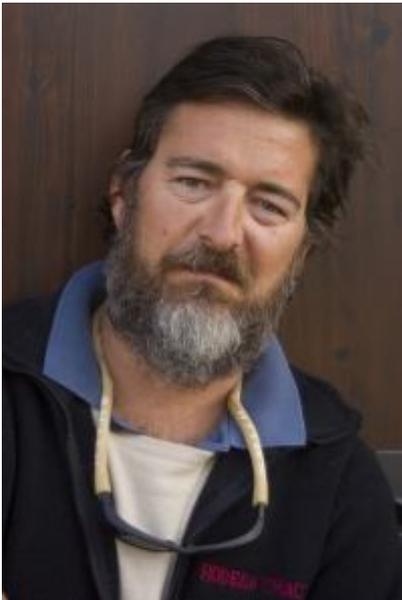
Note that a Bolgheri Rosso has until now always been required to be a blend. The DOC regulations are now changing so that a monovarietal wine made from grapes grown in the Bolgheri DOC zone can be labeled as such. This means that wines such as Scorio, a 100% Syrah or Paleo, a 100% Cabernet Franc, both produced by Le Macchiole in the heart of the district, will now be able to be labeled as Bolgheri DOC instead of Toscana IGT. (Several of the best estates of Bolgheri also produce a white wine, often made from Vermentino and/or Sauvignon.)

Leading estates of Bolgheri include the following:

- Tenuta San Guido (Sassicaia)
- Tenuta dell'Ornellaia
- Grattamacco
- Le Macchiole
- Guado al Tasso
- Guado al Melo
- Campo alla Sughera
- Tenuta dei Piniali (Tenuta di Biserno/Coronato)
- Poggio al Tesoro
- Enrico Santini
- Campo al Mare

The most famous wines of Bolgheri are the Bolgheri Superiore such as Grattamacco, Ornellaia and Sassicaia. These wines have shown the ability to age for 20-25 years and as vine age increases in this area, the wines will only improve.

While these wines have become world renowned and thus costly (more than \$150 per bottle), there are many fine examples of Bolgheri Rosso in the \$18-\$25 range; these include wines from estates such as Guado al Melo and Campo Alla Sughera.



Sebastiano Rosa, winemaker,
Tenuta San Guido (Photo ©Tom
Hyland)

The quality of the red wines from Bolgheri is unquestioned. The debate continues on whether these wines are Tuscan in nature or not. Some believe they are not, as Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, two historically non-Tuscan varieties, are the focus. This has led to a comparison between Bolgheri and Bordeaux. “The wines have similarities,” says Lodovico Antinori, former owner of Tenuta dell’Ornellaia and currently owner of Tenuta di Biserno, located in Bibbona, only a few miles from Bolgheri. “But they have different personalities. The terroir here is not found in Bordeaux.”

The wines of Bolgheri have only been DOC-designated since 1994; the first commercial vintage of Sassicaia was the 1968. In just a few decades, the wines of Bolgheri have joined the ranks of Italy’s finest. They will only improve in the coming years.

BUYING GUIDE TO TUSCAN WINES

I have just put together a collection of my reviews of the latest wines from Tuscany. These reviews can be found in a special Tuscan issue of my newsletter, *Guide to Italian Wines*; this is a 30-page pdf document. This issue contains reviews of 50 different Brunellos from the 2004 vintage, as well as reviews of wines from six different estates in Bolgheri (including three vintages of Sassicaia), as well as 40 new bottlings of Chianti Classico, a dozen examples of Vino Nobile di Montepulciano and even a couple newly released bottlings of Vin Santo.

The price for this special issue is only \$10 US. I will email the issue to you upon payment (either check or Paypal), so if you are interested, please [email](#) me and I will reply with payment instructions. This is a must for a Tuscan wine lover!

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