

# Wine & Spirits

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# The Italian Job

by Baroness Sberi de Borcgrave

A CONNECTICUT COUPLE'S PASSION FOR ITALY LEADS TO WINE IMPORTING SUCCESS

It's hard to resist the wonderful story of the Westport couple who turned their favorite hobby—traveling to Italy to visit friends and seek out fine wines—into a full-time profession. It was barely two years ago that Jodi and Garrett Stonehouse, who share a passion for all things Italian, first took the plunge and began importing their first small production estate grown wines from Italy.

Under the name Aventine Hill, a reference to the seven ancient hills upon which Rome was built, they currently distribute 33 wines from 11 producers. Already, they've picked some real winners. Two of their Sicilian wines, from Lanzara, are currently served in the Vatican. And one of their Tuscan wines, Colombaio Di Cencio, just won a Tre Bicchieri, an Italian award for wine excellence.

Working with partners in Rome, the Stonehouses traversed Italy looking for small wine producers not yet represented in the United States. As Jodi says, not only did they find themselves with a portfolio of family-owned, organically minded, high quality wineries, but also a collection of wonderful characters—including two Counts, a few salts-of-the-earth types and a Tuscan bon vivant living in a 15th century Florentine villa.

As a fellow Italianophile, I was instantly taken by the wine—and the men—the Stonehouses uncovered. There's Count Filippo Gaslini, a heartthrob with movie star looks in Piedmont who produces a fantastic Barbera D'Asi. In Tuscany, meanwhile, there's Renaissance man Jacopo Morganti, the winemaker at Colombaio Di Cencio who is also an amateur artist, bike racer,



**Wine Win** | Two years ago, Westport-based couple Jodi and Garrett Stonehouse began importing wines from Italy. Although well received there, this is the first time they are distributed in the U.S. See Resources.

harpoon fisherman and scuba diver. "Jacopo puts all his personality into his wine," says Jodi Stonehouse, holding up the bottle of I Massi Chianti Classico Riserva that won the 2007 Tre Bicchieri.

She pours me a taste. It's ruby red with floral aromas, brilliant berry flavors and nuanced spice. Also from Tuscany is Andrea Sommaruga of Panzanello, who is as robust and earthy as the wine that he makes. "Andrea uses only completely indigenous varieties, Sangiovese mostly," says Jodi. His Chianti Classico has intense ripe dark fruit in the nose and tastes of espresso and orange.

We move on—for more men and more

distinct wines—to the dark and handsome Filippo Rocchi, the Italian fashion plate and winemaker who runs Castelvechio out of a 15th-century villa near Florence. "Filippo has a flair for fashion and for risk," says Jodi. "He like to experiment with blends. His wines have a real edge." Aventine Hill distributes five of his wines, including the 1990 vintage of Il Brecciolino that scored 90 plus points in *Wine Spectator*.

"I like experimental, daring winemakers," says Jodi. Many of their wines stand apart from their regional competitors. Their pinot grigio from Villa Angoris in Friuli is delightfully grassy with floral aromas and notes of lime and tart apple.

The Stonehouse's search for winemakers who dare led them to il Pollenza in the Marche region near Rome. Set between mountains and the sea, the breathtaking estate is owned by the distinguished Count Barnchetti Peretti. This winemaker uses international varietals to produce big, bold cabernet sauvignon blends.

No portfolio would be complete without a Super Tuscan, and the Stonehouses found one in Bolgheri, a hotbed of Super Tuscan winemaking on the coast. "Our hidden gem is Podere Guado al Melo," they say. "This family winery is on the famous road of legends, five miles from the Marchese Incisa della Rocchetta estate where they created Sassicaia, and on the same road as the wine estates of Ornellaia and Gaja." How's that for insider cachet? In only two years the Stonehouses have found their way to both the Pope's table and the Sassicaia neighborhood. ●