

the world's best wine magazine

US \$6.95 • £3.50

August 2005

Decanter

www.decanter.com

AOL Keyword: Decanter



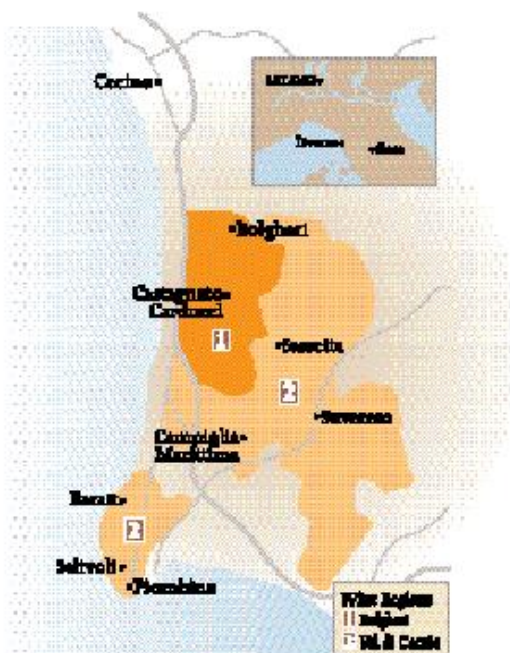
BURGUNDY'S STAR BUYS:

- Best value reds
& whites under £15
- 2002 Chassagne-
and Puligny-Montrachet

TUSCAN GREATS

**SENSATIONAL BRUNELLOS
& NEW-WAVE BOLGHERI**

PLUS: Champagne | Australian Shiraz | Napa Valley



SEA CHANGE

With the deluge of 2002 and the heatwave of 2003, for once, the mellifluous effect of the sea could not iron out the differences. RICHARD BAUDAINS reports on atypical times

THE BLUE CHIP image of the Alta (in the sense of 'northern') Maremma has a lot to do with Sassicaia – arguably Italy's one true icon wine – but its reputation also rests on solid foundations of quality growing conditions and top-class winemaking. It is here in the province of Livorno that the Tuscan coast's two prestige DOCs, Bolgheri and Val di Cornia, are located.

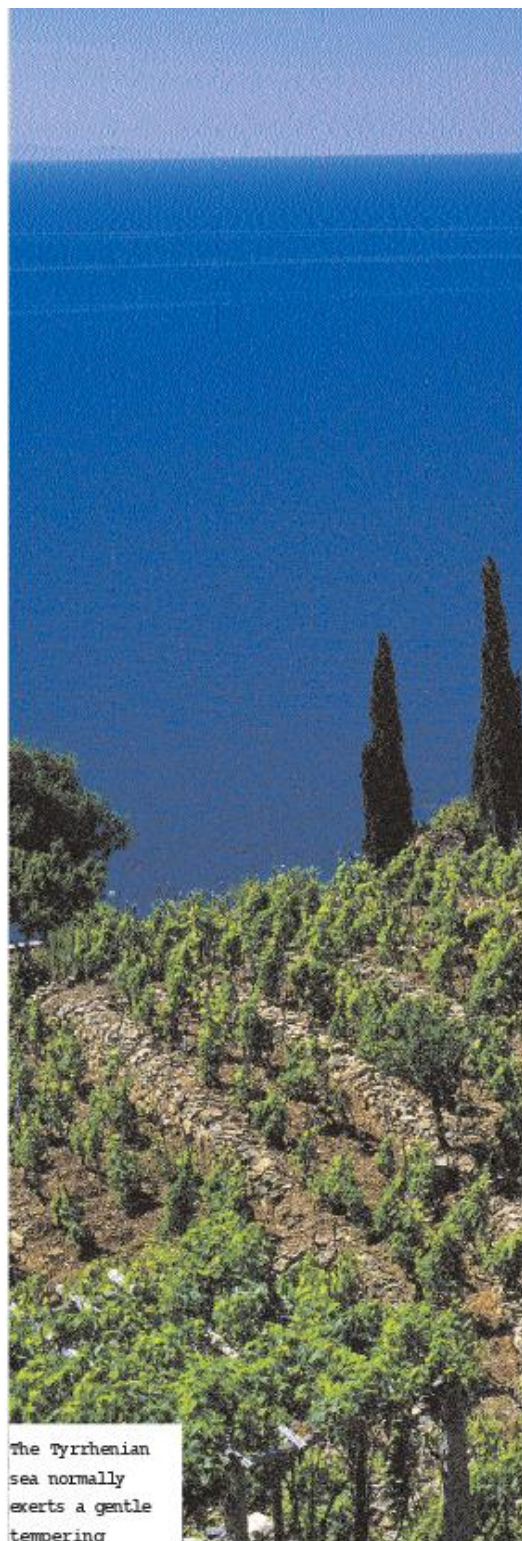
Bolgheri has witnessed exponential growth in recent years. Up to the early-1990s the big three, San Guido, Ornellaia and Belvedere, shared a virtual monopoly, with smaller producers like Grattamacco, Michele Satta and Le Macchiole making quality wines in the wings. Today the DOC counts over 30 estates, a significant number of which were founded in the second half of the 1990s. New high-powered names include Angelo Gaja's Cà Marcanda, Caccia al Piano, Folonari's

Campo Al Mare, Campo Alla Sughera and Castello di Bolgheri.

Vineyards are concentrated in a strip of mixed sandy terrain a stone's throw from the coast, which stretches between the villages of Bolgheri and Castagneto Carducci. There are also important vineyards on very different, stony clay soils in the hills which rise steeply from the coastal plain.

The coastal plain is planted almost exclusively with Cabernet and Merlot, while the higher vineyards also have Sangiovese. The climate is hot and dry and characterised by notable day-night temperature differences. Concentration of fruit aromas and a firmly elegant acid/tannin profile are the true Bolgheri hallmarks.

The Val di Cornia DOC covers an extensive area in the south of the province which runs from the coast to



The Tyrrhenian sea normally exerts a gentle tempering

the lower slopes of the Colline Metallifere.

The majority of the top wines come from a limited zone around the hillside village of Suvereto. It was here that a tiny, retirement hobby estate called Tua Rita launched the Val di Cornia renaissance in the early 1990s, with Cabernet and Merlot of stunning power and intensity. If the feature of Bolgheri is elegance, that of Suvereto is depth and structure. The combination of a coastal climate with stony marl soils similar to



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROCHÉ PAVÉ. HAIR: MAXIME HEATH

those of Chianti and Montalcino produces wines with massive body sustained by solid acidity. With the exception of the grandiose Petra estate created by the Moretti family (owners of Bellavista at Franciacorta), wineries are typically small-to-medium scale, locally owned operations which have upgraded themselves – with the support of the region's top consultant winemakers – in the wake of the current boutique winery boom. The upside of this development is

an array of top quality, handmade wines. The downside is limited availability of the best bottles. Names to conjure with include Gualdo del Re, Russo, Muratori, Montepeloso and Il Falcone.

2002 & 2003

All eyes are on the release of the first batches of reds from 2003 and the top selections from 2002. Vintage variation along the coast is much less pronounced than in other parts of Tuscany, but there

is no doubt that the weather left its mark on these vintages. In the heatwave of 2003, the hottest vintage for 150 years, no rain fell along the coast between May and August. The scorching temperatures took a heavy toll on aromas, producing alcoholic wines with often dry, vegetal tannins. As Antinori's head winemaker Renzo Cotarella succinctly puts it, 'It was hard to make wines with fruit as a main feature in 2003.'

2002 posed exactly the opposite →



Cabernet Sauvignon grapes destined for Sassicaia (left), the creation of Marchese Niccolò Incisa della Rocchetta (right), and a

problems for growers. The spring was late, cool and wet, with record rainfall in the month of May. June was very hot, but the period from July through to October had temperatures well below average and rainfall that brought back memories of the Noah's Ark vintage of 1992. Yet despite the problems of uneven ripening, most producers tend to agree that 2002 was less difficult overall than 2003.

The 2002 wines are not especially complex or structured, and again they are generally not big on fruit or aroma, but the best are balanced and far from unattractive. And some turned out exceptionally well. One can understand Fabio Chiarello's chagrin when he complains that '2002 was unfairly written off before most of the wines even appeared.' He made a stunningly good vintage at his Montepeloso estate at Suvereto.

Thus 2002 in the Maremma fared much better than the rest of Tuscany. The jury is still out on the 2003s, since many top wines will not be available until next year, but the first signs are of a vintage which is unrepresentative of the elegant style which has become the trademark of the Alta Maremma. **D**

CURRENT RELEASES

VINTAGE 2003

■ Tenuta Ornellaia, Le Volte, IGT Toscana 2003 ★★★★★

Unusual in the Bolgheri context for the high percentage of Sangiovese in the cuvée, this has a rich, warm nose with sweet tobacco and plums to the fore. Round and glossy on the palate with lots of fine ripe tannin and very good definition in the finish. 2005-2007. £10.95; Arm, BIB, Pip

■ San Guido, Guidalberto, IGT Toscana 2003 ★★★★★

San Guido's new label is much more convincing on its second outing. Slightly low-key, herby nose but a powerful concentrated palate with a big broad, dry finish. Earthy and austere, but full of personality and very representative of the vintage. 2006-2008. £26; Arm

■ Jacopo Banti, Traful, Val di Cornia Ciliegiole 2003 ★★★★★

From a traditional grape largely edged out of the scene by international varieties, this stands out for its fresh aromas in a hot vintage. Sweet cherry on the nose with a touch of floral character and chocolatey oak in the background. Big, soft, round and fruity on the palate. Not over-complicated but individual and

deliciously drinkable. 2005-2006. N/A UK; +39 056 583 8802

VINTAGE 2002

■ Guado Al Tasso, Il Bruciato, Bolgheri Rosso 2002 ★★★★★

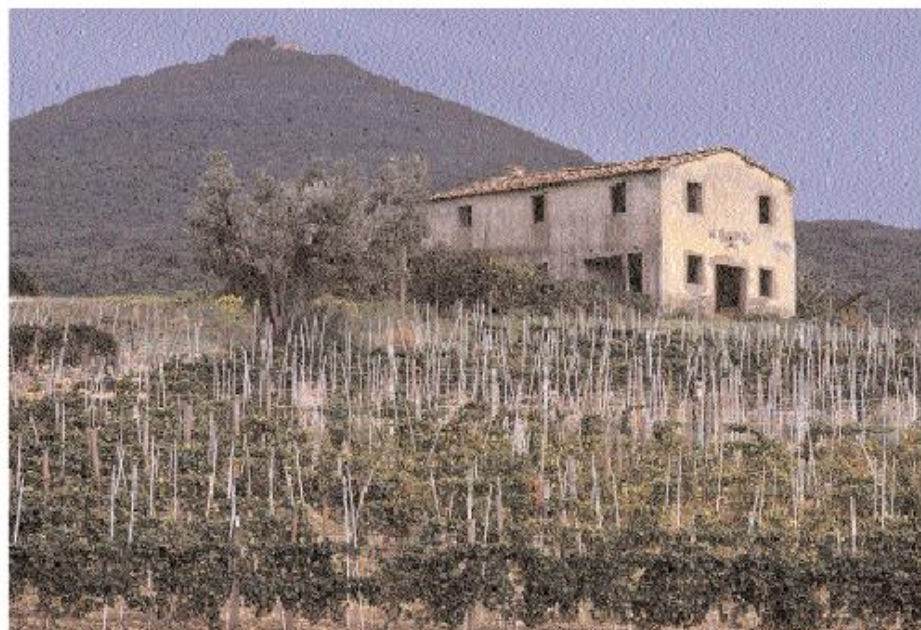
The first release of the new second label from Antinori's Belvedere estate benefits from an injection of fruit normally destined for the top label, which is not due to appear in this vintage. Spicy plum nose, with hints of cherry brandy in the background. Nicely balanced middle weight palate with a touch of toasty oak coming through at the end. 2006-2008. £14.99; BWC

■ San Guido, Sassicaia, Bolgheri Rosso Superiore 2002 ★★★★★

The Sassicaia hallmarks shine through even in this difficult vintage: elegant, slightly closed on the nose, silky-smooth entry on the palate and compact tannins in the finish. Less berry fruit, more savoury mineral character but still lovely balance and good prospects for the mid-term. 2006-2010. £62.70; Arm

■ Collemassari-Grattamacco, Bolgheri Rosso Superiore 2002 ★★★★★

Deep ruby with purple edges and a meaty, ripe Cabernet nose with lots of gusto. Good development on the palate



The Merlot vineyards of Ornellaia (above) seemed unperturbed by the deluges

with plenty of body and a fine finish with intriguing complexity (berries, peat, rosemary?). The tannins need to smooth out a bit, but the future looks good. 2006-2010. N/A UK; +39 056 499 0496

■ **Tenuta Ornellaia, Masseto, IGT Toscana 2002 ★★★★★**

Ornellaia's blockbuster Merlot comes almost unscathed through the difficult vintage. Big, deep, glass-staining, purple-ruby colour and powerful but still very young nose. Twenty-four months of new oak ageing leaves its mark on the palate, but there is also lots of quality grape tannin and an already intriguing Mediterranean

complexity in the finish. Needs time. 2007-2012. £98.42 (2001); C&B

■ **Montepeloso, Gabbro, IGT Toscana 2002 ★★★★★**

Young but fresh and classy Cabernet Sauvignon nose with sweet mountain berries and hints of cappuccino in the background. Great impact, but also great elegance with firm structure and super-fine tannins. The finish is still a little unknit, but the length and mouthwatering concentration of fruit and spice is outstanding. The star of the vintage. 2007-2015. £60; BoC

For UK stockists, see p114.



GUIDE TO PAST VINTAGES

2001 ★★★★★ Superb structure, fruit and balance. Keep

2000 ★★★★★ Fleshy, alcoholic wines from very hot vintage. Drink

1999 ★★★★★ Classic vintage with good ageing potential. Drink/keep

1998 ★★★★★ Underrated. Mid-weight wines with character. Drink

1997 ★★★★★ Small vintage of highly concentrated wines. Drink/keep

1996 ★★★★★ Tuscany's best wines in the vintage. Drink/keep

1995 ★★★★★ Late picked vintage. Serious full-bodied wines. Drink/keep

1994 ★★★★★ Better than average for the region, but light. Drink/skip

1993 ★★★★★ Good mid-weight vintage, but probably winding down. Drink

1992 ★★★★★ Wet, but Sassicaia still made a very good wine. Drink/skip

1991 ★★★★★ Again better than average for the region, but not for keeping. Skip

1990 ★★★★★ Historic vintage. Showing well, but time to drink up.

Earlier five-star vintages: 1988; 1985; 1982

NAMES TO WATCH

■ **Podere San Luigi, Piombino**

Annamaria Toni's father used to supply the family trattoria at Piombino, but Annamaria had other plans. From a vineyard in a natural amphitheatre overlooking the Gulf of Follonica she has created a wine called Fidenzio which is writing a new chapter in the history of Tuscan Cabernet.

■ **Podere Guado al Melo, Bolgheri**

Trial planting of more than 40 different European varieties, it is easy to see the hand of Italy's top ampelographical researcher, the charismatic Attilio Scienza, in the creation of this new estate run by his capable winemaker son Michele. Look out for the release of a Bolgheri Rosso 2003 which captures the quintessential combination of power and elegance of the denomination.

■ **Azienda Agricola Russo, Suvereto**

One of many local families at Suvereto who switched to premium winemaking in the second half of the 1990s, Russo has remained faithful to the traditional varieties for its top wine, the Barbicone Riserva. With the aid of consultant Alberto Antonini, Russo shows the Val di Cornia's previously unsuspected potential for full-bodied, Sangiovese-based terroir wines with bags of fruit and aroma.

■ **Az. Ag. Ambrosini, Suvereto**

The only producers in the area to use Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, which makes the splendid flagship wine Riflesso Antico. Newly appointed consultant winemaker Lorenzo Landi, has cut yields back to 75 grammes of fruit per vine to create a dense, blockbuster style of wine which nevertheless maintains the delicious drinkability of the variety.

■ **Campo Alla Sughera, Bolgheri**

At the heart of the Bolgheri DOC zone, the impressive debut of this winery includes the challenge of making a serious white on the coastal plain. More conventionally, the top of the range is an international-style red called Arnione. Young vines mean the current vintages lack a certain amount of depth, but the fruit and volume on the palate are outstanding.