



# *brave new* Bolgheri

By TOM HYLAND

**T**hough Bolgheri officially symbolizes one of the principal jewels in Tuscany's viticultural crown, geographically and spiritually, it doesn't seem very Tuscan at all. Tucked along the region's central western coast, near the Tyrrhenian Sea, the flat landscape, punctuated by imposing pine trees, hardly resembles the undulating hills of Toscana's center, where the triumvirate of Brunello di Montalcino, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano and Chianti rule supreme. Nor do Bolgheri's wines taste very "Tuscan," at least when compared to the sangiovese-based wines of the aforementioned trio. Historically, sangiovese is the region's signature grape, yet cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and petit verdot reign in Bolgheri's finest reds, while sangiovese plays a more modest role.

Piero Antinori, founder of the zone's renowned Guado al Tasso estate, observes, "Although Bolgheri is in Tuscany, wines produced in this small appellation have a very distinctive character which cannot be defined as typical Tuscan. They represent their own category not repeatable in any other part of Tuscany, not even in the nearby Maremma."

Compared to a more expansive zone, such as Chianti, the Bolgheri DOC is quite small — approximately six miles long and five miles wide. Bolgheri itself is a hamlet located at the northern end of the zone, while the main city, Castagneto Carducci (population 8,500) is situated near the central-western part of the zone. Most of the estates are located in the northern and western reaches, with only two estates (Argentiera and Campo al Sasso) operating near the DOC's southern border.

For many enophiles, Bolgheri is embodied by Tenuta dell'Ornellaia and Tenuta San Guido, two world-famous estates responsible, respectively, for the iconic Ornellaia and Sassicaia bottlings; both reds are produced primarily from cabernet sauvignon and merlot. (Tenuta dell'Ornellaia has also made a bold statement with Masseto, its brilliantly realized, massively concentrated, 100 percent merlot effort.) Yet other notable estates, namely Grattamacco, Le Macchiole and the aforementioned Guado al Tasso, are also among the pillars of Bolgheri. Lately, compelled by the quality and notoriety of the area's wines, several distinguished vintners from other regions have established estates here, most notably Angelo Gaja from Piemonte (Ca' Marcanda) and Marilisa Allegrini from Veneto (Poggio al Tesoro, co-owned by American wine importer Leonardo LoCascio). >





Bolgheri's modern wine history dates to 1944 when Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta decided to produce a novel wine at his northern Maremma Tenuta San Guido estate, which sits at an elevation of 1,300 feet one mile from the Tyrrhenian Sea. At the time, most viticultural experts believed it was too difficult to ripen grapes so close to the sea, yet the marchese sensed that his high elevation would mean more sunshine, which is critical to fruit maturation.

He had previously worked with pinot nero in northern Italy, but decided cabernet sauvignon was better suited to central Italy, particularly because the area's gravelly soil closely resembled that of Bordeaux's.

The marchese called his wine Sassicaia, "the place of many stones." Yet cabernet sauvignon was so foreign to Tuscany then that the early vintages were looked upon with skepticism by his neighbors and

Italian wine critics. The wine therefore remained a private pleasure shared only with family and friends for the next 25 years.

As one vintage after another quietly aged in the marchese's cellar, however, each rounded out nicely, showing great complexity and elegance after a decade or more in the bottle. Finally, in 1968, with the encouragement of his winemaker Giacomo Tachis, della Rocchetta released Sassicaia to the public. Changes that ensued over the following few years — such as fermentation in stainless steel versus wood, as well as the addition of 15 percent cabernet franc to the blend for added spice and acidity — improved the wine dramatically.

Sassicaia became a collector's item in short order, not only for its quality, but also because it represented a radical departure from the high-acid, gently tannic sangiovese-based bottlings for which Tuscany was known. The passage of time and the subsequent debut of countless Super Tuscans has not dimmed Sassicaia's luster. For example, two years ago, Sassicaia was anointed No. 1 when *Gambero Rosso*, the Italian wine guide, published its list of "50 Italian Bottles that Changed Our World."

While della Rocchetta disproved the naysayers decades ago, Bolgheri's proximity to the sea remains central to the "What makes Bolgheri such a distinctive wine zone" discussion. The other critical factor is soil composition.

Michele Scienza, winemaker/proprietor of Guado al Melo, explains, "We have soils that are primarily sand and stone with only 15 percent being clay. [Because] clay soils mean heavier tannins, we can produce balanced wines." Scienza adds that sangiovese is not a primary focus here. "It needs soils with a high amount of clay, such as in Montalcino."

And as della Rocchetta perceived, the moderate seaside climate also argues against sangiovese, which instead "needs a continental climate with very hot summers and cold winters," Scienza notes.

At Grattamacco, located in an isolated band of hills in eastern Bolgheri, winemaker Luca Marrone asserts that the estate's calcaire and marl (easily broken up clay) soils produce wines of outstanding character. "This *terroir* offers intense mineral and earthy notes, and a strong acidity that contrasts with the wild and natural tannins." He further notes that the protective shoulders of the Metallifere Hills that lie directly east of the zone "help against the frozen wind in the winter and offer protection from hail storms during the summer."

Tenuta dell'Ornellaia winemaker Axel Heinz adds, "The climate is sunny, but never excessively hot, allowing the grapes to have a very slow and progressive ripening without losing vibrancy or freshness." A mixture of limestone and clay soils drives wine style for Heinz, whose résumé includes stints at Château la Dominique in Saint-Émilion and Château la Commanderie de Mazeyres in Pomerol. He says Ornellaia — a Bordeaux blend dominated by cabernet sauvignon — exudes "Mediterranean opulence with cool climate aromatics."





TOM HYLAND



Above left: Winemaker Sebastiano Rosa and Tenuta San Guido owner Nicolò Incisa della Rocchetta solely produce cabernet-based Sassicaia — the only Italian wine to earn its own DOC, which it was awarded in 1994. Above right: Winemaker Alex Heinz describes Tenuta dell'Ornellaia's signature wine, Ornellaia, as "Mediterranean opulence with cool climate aromatics" — a delicate union he attributes to Bolgheri's moderate weather, and limestone and clay soil. Opposite page: Marchese Piero Antinori, proprietor of Guado al Tasso, one of the region's most renowned estates, says wines from Bolgheri "have their own distinctive character" and "are not repeatable in any other part of Tuscany."

Winemaker Sebastiano Rosa, who considers himself the "caretaker" of Sassicaia, attributes the success and style of Tenuta San Guido's storied red to the three distinct estate parcels that comprise it. Rosa says the site-specific microclimates impart incredible complexity and "tend to provide the body of Sassicaia." Each parcel is located approximately 1.5 miles from the sea, with two sitting at elevations of 150 to 200 feet. "The highest vineyards (900-foot elevation) are four to five degrees colder than the lower sites. These are the original vineyards, which impart finesse and elegance to the wine. In any given year, they are all used and provide important dimensions to Sassicaia."

Veneto veteran Marilisa Allegrini viewed Bolgheri as an exciting, new viticultural horizon when she sank roots here in 2001 and established Poggio al Tesoro. "[It was] a place where everything was possible, a place outside of my family's traditional

wine production zone and a place where some of the most exceptional wines of Italy are born today. In a way, this appellation represents Italy's 'New World,' where some of the industry's most important and innovative producers are creating world-class wines."

Gaia Gaja, co-owner of Ca' Marcanda with her famous father, Angelo, calls the emergence of Bolgheri as an important wine zone "a singular, amazing story. Forty years ago, Bolgheri was not even on the map." She says that when her father invested here in 1996, things were a bit uncertain. "There were no consultants to let [him] know which rootstocks to use or how to plant. This is very different from Barbaresco where everyone knows which slopes produce the best wines."

Along with climate, soil and topography, the wide-open, local DOC regulations make describing a typical Bolgheri rosso next to impossible. To date, there have been only two requirements to label a red

wine as Bolgheri DOC: it must contain at least 10 percent cabernet sauvignon and must be a blend. Otherwise, producers have *carte blanche*. Artistic interpretation shows in the amount of cabernet sauvignon employed in various premium releases, from 45 percent in Coronato from Campo al Sasso, to 50 percent in Amione from Campo Alla Sughera, to 65 percent in Grattamacco. Sometimes merlot is the dominant variety, as in Ca' Marcanda, while cabernet franc and petit verdot are included in amounts from 3 to 15 percent in many bottlings. Sassicaia, which was awarded its own DOC in 1994 (the only Italian wine to be so honored), is traditionally 85 percent cabernet sauvignon and 15 percent cabernet franc.

A milestone change in the local DOC regulations is taking place in the current 2009 vintage: Monovarietal wines can now be labeled as Bolgheri DOC instead of Toscana IGT. Cinzia Merli, proprietor

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of Le Macchiole in the heart of the zone, views this as a very positive development because her most prized bottlings are monovarietals: Scio (syrah), Messorio (merlot) and the cabernet franc-based Paleo. The latter wine, displaying exotic bittersweet chocolate and pink pepper aromas with generous concentration, silky tannins and the structure to age for 20 years, is arguably her greatest success. Merli believes cabernet franc is successful as a stand-alone variety in Bolgheri because temperatures are generally warmer than in Bordeaux. "The French believe that cabernet franc is a blending variety. That's because it is usually a bit green [there]."

Allegrini is also an ardent proponent of cabernet franc; her top Poggio al Tesoro bottling, named W in honor of her late brother Walter, who helped her establish the property, is produced solely from the variety. "Cabernet Franc is something that revealed itself to me during our first blending process a few years ago," she notes. "It just jumped out as the most elegant and most balanced wine that we had in our

cellars." Allegrini's cabernet franc vineyard lies along the old main road known as the Via Bolgherese. She says it is a special site that "is producing some outstanding results: wines with incredible aromatics, while remaining supple and round in the mouth."

Bolgheri now boasts more than 40 commercial producers, many of whom offer approachable, affordable reds. For example, Guado al Melo's Scienza crafts two Bolgheri rossos that, he says, are not priced "like Armani and Gucci." Each offers fresh red cherry and currant fruit; they are intended to drink well for three to seven years; and they retail for less than \$20. That Bolgheri can produce everyday reds is further borne out by Le Volte (\$28) by Tenuta dell'Ornellaia and Le Difese (\$25) by Tenuta San Guido. Bolgheri's wines are presently popular at every price point. And it doesn't hurt that Bolgheri is sometimes described in the same company as Bordeaux.

Giovanno Bailo, the winemaker at Campo Alla Sughera, sums up the broad similarities: "The vines are positioned in flat areas; a tight planting density is the norm; and the climate is moderated by the sea." In contrast to the long-established French region, however, Bolgheri's vintners are not hemmed in by tradition. "In Bolgheri, you feel much more the need of experimentation," Gaja says. "There's not really a style of Bolgheri that's been defined."

The complex physical nature of the land means a variety of winemaking approaches are tenable. "Nowadays, the Bolgheri style is very difficult to understand," says Tenuta San Guido's Rosa. "It can vary tremendously from one producer to another. It tends to be more international [though], focusing on bigger, bolder wines." He notes that elegance and finesse drive the Sassicaia style, while preserving *terroir* "in keeping with the estate's history and quality."

Highlighting *terroir* is the guiding principal among most Bolgheri vintners. Luca Marrone says, "In spite of the different vintages, year by year Grattamacco preserves its own character as proof of an irreplaceable expression of its *terroir*."

Because Bolgheri is still in its enologic infancy, defining its *terroir* — a quality that inherently defies precise description — is not easily accomplished. But what is certain is that the zone remains ripe with possibility. "The appellation is evolving at an exhilarating pace," Allegrini observes. "This is a very exciting place to be in Italy right now and enthusiasm is high, both among the producers and in the marketplace."

For Gaja, her faith in the area's promise is absolutely unshakable. "If you work well in Bolgheri, you make wines that reflect the best of Tuscany and Italy." ☛

Chicago-based Tom Hyland is a freelance wine writer, educator and photographer who specializes in the wines of Italy.

## Ribeira Sacra

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chocolate and generous minerality balanced by bright acids and moderate tannins. Exceptional value. Score: 92

**Thémara, 2005 Summum** — \$25: (mencia; 13% alcohol) Complex nose of light oak, ripe red fruit, dark chocolate and mineral. Delicious, deep flavors of rich cherry, cranberry, pomegranate and dark chocolate; superb balance of acid, fruit, light oak and mineral. Outstanding value. Score: 94

**D. Ventura, Losada Fernández, Ferreira de Pantón (Lugo), Ribeiras do Minho (Gerardo Méndez, consultant)**

**Viña do Burato, 2008 Summum** — \$20: (80-year-old mencia vines; 12% alcohol) Pleasant nose of pomegranate, red currant and mineral. Flavors of pomegranate and red currant fruit with a core of bracing minerality. An exemplary, delicious and eminently drinkable young Ribeira Sacra with loads of flavor, no oak and low alcohol. Score: 92

**Pena do Lobo, 2007 Summum** — \$23: (mencia; 13% alcohol) Enticing nose of ripe red currant and pomegranate

tinged with graphite. Superbly balanced, perfectly ripe red currant and pomegranate flavors with a compelling minerality reminiscent of Graves or Chinon. Score: 94

**Viña Caneiro, 2007 Summum** — \$26: (mencia; 13% alcohol) Lovely nose of red fruit and mineral. Rich, complex flavors of red fruit, including pie cherry, red currant and pomegranate. Long, lingering, mineral finish. A stunning, steal-of-a-wine. Score: 96

**Dominio do Bibei, Manzaneda (Ourense), Quiroga-Bibei (Sara Pérez and René Barbier, Jr., consultants)**

**La Pola, 2008 Godello Summum** — \$30: (some dona blanca grapes; 12.8% alcohol) Subtly tropical nose. Spicy and rich with sweet white peach flavors and bright acidity. Score: 93

**La Lama, 2004 Summum** — \$36: (mencia, garnacha, moratón; 13% alcohol) Nose of exotic fruits and mineral. Impressively balanced palate of raspberry/black cherry fruit, fresh acidity and moderate alcohol. Score: 91

**Finca Millara, Bodegas y Viñedos, Pantón (Lugo), Ribeiras do Minho**

**Finca Millara, 2007 Mencia** — \$45: (13% alcohol) Nose of graphite, ripe

fruit and oak. Soft and upfront, but rustic with some ripe red fruit and oak in the finish. Score: 87

**Guímaro, Pedro M. Rodríguez Pérez, Sober (Lugo), Amandi (Raúl Pérez, consultant)**

**Guímaro, 2008 Mencia Summum** — \$15: (some caño tinto; 13.5% alcohol) Lightly toasty nose of red fruits and mineral. Gutsy, rich and fruity with black currant, cherry and slate minerality shored up by tannins and light oak. A delicious crowd pleaser and a terrific value. Score: 90

**Guímaro, 2007 B2M Summum** — \$29: (mencia field-blend with small amounts of caño tinto; 13.5% alcohol) Nose of deep, ripe pomegranate, oak and mineral. Brassy, gutsy, big, sweet cola and pomegranate flavors; oaky and mineral. Delicious, but a bit too much of a good thing. More like a Bierzo than a Ribeira Sacra. Score: 91

**Guímaro, 2007 B1P Summum** — \$50: Similar in character to the aforementioned El Pecado, but less pricey. Very extracted, exotic, black currant and mineral flavors. A big, stylized mouthful-of-a-wine that some will love, yet it lacks the *alegría* of many Ribeira Sacra wines. Score: 93

**Pena das Donas, Pombeiro, Pantón (Lugo), Ribeiras do Minho**

**Almalarga, 2008 Godello Summum** — \$21: (13% alcohol) Beautiful nose of lime, white peach and mineral. Soft, silky and well balanced with sweet white peach fruit and a lingering, bitter almond and mineral finish. Score: 93

**Verdes Matas, 2007 Mencia Summum** — \$21: (100% mencia; 12.5% alcohol) Pretty nose of pomegranate, red currant and mineral. Balanced and perfectly ripe with plenty of juicy cranberry, pomegranate and red currant fruit accented by dark chocolate. Long, mineral-laced finish. Score: 93

**Peza do Rei, César Enríquez Diéguez, A Teixeira (Ourense), Ribeiras do Sil**

**Peza do Rei, 2008 Blanco** — \$23: (70% godello, 20% treixadura and 10% albariño; 13% alcohol) Nose of white peach and mineral. Delicious, sweet white peach fruit with notes of lime, honeysuckle and mineral. Long, acid-laced finish. Score: 89

**Peza do Rei, 2007 Colheita** — \$40: (mencia; 13.5% alcohol) Oak and ripe fruit nose. A big mouthful of rich black currant fruit and tarry licorice; shy on acid. Minerality vies with oak. Lacks Ribeira Sacra typicity. Score: 88 — GD