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A Buyer's Guide to Bolgheri Wine



© Discover Tuscany | The Mediterranean has a strong influence on Bolgheri, promoting riper flavors.

Look beyond the usual suspects and there is some real value to be found, **Tom Hyland** discovers.
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Things are quite different in Bolgheri as compared to the rest of Tuscany; even one whiff of the air will tell you that.

Aromas of pine, salt and sea breezes drift through this coastal zone along the region's western border with the Tyrrhenian Sea. Many vineyards here are low lying, no more than 30 or 40 meters above sea level, unlike the sheer hillside plantings one regularly finds in zones such as Chianti or Montalcino. Most important, Bordeaux varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc dominate here, unlike the Sangiovese found throughout the remainder of the region. Yes, [Bolgheri](#), from its most renowned offerings to its value reds is a world unto itself.

The history of Bolgheri is brief in viticultural terms, as the first commercial release of a red wine from here was in 1968; the wine was Sassicaia. Interestingly, the territory itself has only been suitable for planting vines for a short time, as this had been swampland. Bolgheri, in the province of Livorno, is part of the Upper [Maremma](#) (maremma means "swamp" in Italian); Franco Batzella, proprietor of the eponymous area estate, explains that "for centuries this had been a marshy, malaria-ridden land good only for wild-boar hunting and some cattle raising, until the marshes were drained in the 1930s".

Batzella notes that when the Maremma was reclaimed, the land proved very fertile, "as it consisted of a blend of alluvial deposits brought down from the hills". This included soil that was rich in minerals, clay, sand and pebbles, which he points out is "very similar to the geology of Bordeaux".

Not surprisingly then, Bordeaux varieties were the preferred plantings, as Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, owner of Tenuta San Guido, in the northwest corner of Bolgheri, opted for their inclusion when he first introduced vineyards here in the 1940s (while Sassicaia was first commercially released in 1968, della Rocchetta initially produced this wine in the 1940s, keeping bottles in his cellar for his family and friends).

The international acclaim for Sassicaia ensured that Bordeaux varieties would be the model for Bolgheri reds. Today, according to statistics provided by the local consorzio, Cabernet Sauvignon is the most planted variety with 42 percent of the total acreage, with Merlot at 25 percent, Cabernet Franc at 9 percent, Syrah at 7 percent and Petit Verdot at 6 percent; Sangiovese accounts for less than 2 percent of total Bolgheri plantings. (A small amount of white wine is also produced in Bolgheri; less than 7 percent of total acreage is dedicated to white varieties, including Vermentino, Viognier and Sauvignon Blanc.)

Despite using similar varieties, Bolgheri's producers are adamant in their opinion that their wines are very different from those in Bordeaux. "Bolgheri has Mediterranean weather, meaning that the grapes ripen better than in Bordeaux," remarks Michele Satta, winemaker-proprietor of Guado al Tasso, one of the area's finest producers.



© Antinori/Michele Satta | Marco Ferrarese (L) and Michele Satta are two of the heavyweights in the region.

Giacomo Satta, winemaker at the Michele Satta estate, also notes the importance of the land's proximity to the sea. "The sea reflects the sunlight, which allows for a quality of light that allows for complete photosynthesis of the plant. The sea also acts as a thermal flywheel, meaning that the summers are not too hot during the day or cold at night."

While there are monovarietal wines produced in Bolgheri – [Masseto](#), a Merlot from Ornellaia, and [Scριο](#), a Cabernet Franc *in purezza* from Le Macchiole, are two prominent examples – most wines are blends of three or four varieties. While Sassicaia, with its 85 percent Cabernet Sauvignon-15 percent Cabernet Franc *mélange* each year, is an exception, most winemakers vary their blend according to the vintage conditions. For Ornellaia, the percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon has varied between 45 percent and 55 percent from the 2007 to the 2013 offerings, while that of Merlot has been between 22 percent to 38 percent over these same vintages (the remainder of the blend is Cabernet Franc and Merlot).

At Guado al Tasso, the splendid Antinori estate, winemaker Marco Ferrarese explains what each variety he uses in his top offering – simply named Guado al Tasso – brings to the wine. "From the Cabernet Sauvignon we seek structure; this is the backbone of the wine as well as its profound taste and persistence. From the Merlot, we seek a creaminess, a sweetness, power and aromatic notes. Then, with the Cabernet Franc, we seek harmony and balance, stretching the highest tannic concentration of the preceding two varieties, improving the pleasure of drinking. Finally the Petit Verdot confers, when present, a light touch of spice that completes the bouquet." The 2011 Guado

al Tasso, is a typical blend, being 57 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 25 percent Merlot, 15 percent Cabernet Franc and 3 percent Petit Verdot.



© Discover Tuscany | Prior to the 1930s, Bolgheri was a malaria-ridden swamp, good only for pig hunting.

The best wines to look for are labeled as Bolgheri Superiore; these must be aged for a minimum of two years prior to release, with at least one year in oak barrels. These are the calling cards for Bolgheri, with the most famous examples, such as Sassicaia (interestingly enough with its own DOC designation), Ornellaia, Grattamacco and Guado al Tasso, being world famous. Other excellent versions of Bolgheri Superiore include Sapaio from Tenuta Sapaio, I Castagni from Michele Satta, and **Atis from Guado al Melo**.

Given the prominence of this territory and its best wines, be prepared to pay a dear price for the most famous examples, although the *superiore* offerings from Satta, **Guado al Melo** and the Tâm from Batzella are less costly. For value, look for wines simply labeled as Bolgheri Rosso; recommended versions include Il Bruciato from Guado al Tasso, Piastraia from Satta and Le Serre Nuove from Ornellaia.

One other superb property in the area that deserves your attention is Tenuta di Biserno, which is technically located just outside the Bolgheri zone, in the neighboring commune of Bibbona. Owned by Lodovico Antinori, the former proprietor of Ornellaia, the top offering, Biserno, is one of the most stunning of all Tuscan wines. Sebastiano Rosa, a former winemaker at Tenuta San Guido, and currently a member of the winemaking team at Biserno, labels the exposition of this property's vineyards as "spectacular".

Returning to the principle that Bolgheri is very different than the rest of [Tuscany](#), do the producers of this territory **consider themselves Tuscan or not? "We consider ourselves Tuscan because of the Etruscan roots, the dialect, the food and the culture in general," says Scienza. "We are completely Tuscany and Italy, reflecting the wonderful variation of a country than has differences every five kilometers,"** remarks Satta. "Bolgheri is the ultimate expression of the new term, 'Tuscan coast' – 100 percent Tuscany, 100 percent Italy."

Recommended releases:

2012 Guado al Melo Atis Bolgheri Superiore Delicious black currant and black cherry fruit, supple tannins, exquisite balance.

2009 [Batzella Tâm Bolgheri Superiore](#) Beautiful balance, medium-weight tannins; impressive complexity. Drinking beautifully now.

2010 [Tenuta di Biserno Biserno Toscana IGT](#) A blend of four varieties, primarily Cabernet Franc. Black raspberry, licorice and cacao flavors, velvety tannins, very good acidity, ideal ripeness, marvelous complexity. A superb wine, peak drinking in 12-15 years.

2014 [Guado al Tasso Il Bruciato Bolgheri Rosso](#) Big, gutsy wine with polished tannins, enjoy over the next 5-7 years; excellent value.

2011 [Michele Satta Piastraia Bolgheri Rosso](#) This contains 25 percent Syrah; black clove and tar aromas; beautiful harmony; best in 5-7 years.

2012 [Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia Bolgheri Rosso](#) The second wine of this estate; powerful mid-palate and finish; best in a decade or more. Outstanding value.

2012 [Tenuta San Guido Guidalberto Toscana IGT](#) Sassicaia style at a fraction of the price; outstanding ripeness with juicy fruit; a real crowd-pleaser.