

TASTING REPORTS

The Power of Tuscany

Italy's premier region delivers a wealth of great wines, with the 2017 vintage capping a run of excellent harvests



Some of the top-scoring Tuscan wines of recent vintages (Molchenphoto)



By Bruce Sanderson

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As in many wine regions around the globe, Tuscany has witnessed extreme weather over the past two decades. Blistering heat,

combined with severe storms, frost and drought, is the new normal for this famed region of central Italy.

The 2017 growing season was hot, but it was the drought that left its mark, along with frost in some areas. "The 2017 vintage was quite unique," says Antinori CEO Renzo Cotarella. "With the drought and frost, I haven't seen any vintage like it in the past 20 years."

At Bolgheri estates **Ornellaia** and **Masseto**, director Axel Heinz describes 2017 as a winemaker's vintage. "If you got it wrong, it's going to show."

Based on my tastings over the past year, the best wines from the 2017 harvest are concentrated, maintaining freshness and well-integrated tannins for balance and harmony. At worst, the tannins are unripe, dry and astringent. The good news for fans of Tuscan reds—and of Sangiovese in particular—is the multitude of top labels available from the superb 2016 and 2015 harvests.

At the high end, a mix of super Tuscan, Chianti Classico, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano and Brunello di Montalcino riservas deliver plenty of excitement, while dozens of terrific wines on the value side round out the year's offerings. (For an in-depth look at the 2015 Brunellos, see "[Strapping Sangioveses](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/strapping-sangioveses) [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/strapping-sangioveses>]," in the June 30, 2020, issue.)

Overall, I have reviewed more than 675 Tuscan wines in blind tastings at our New York office since my previous report ("[Tuscan Harmony](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/tuscan-harmony) [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/tuscan-harmony>]," Oct. 31, 2019). Tuscany typically offers a cornucopia of vintages at any one time, and this year is no different, with my reviews ranging from 2019 to 2007. The majority of the wines, however, hail from recent

harvests, led by the 2017s and 2016s, along with a number of newly released 2018s. Though not quite at the same level as its two predecessors, the 2017 vintage is an outstanding year overall, earning a rating of 93 points.

This report's top-scoring wine comes from the 2016 vintage: Antinori's expressive Toscana Solaia (98 points, \$340), a wine of purity and finesse, with a vibrant structure that fits harmoniously with the cedar, iron, tobacco and fruit flavors. "The vintage was great, but we were obliged to do a strong selection in order to stress the quality of the wine," explains Cotarella, adding that the final selection was 25% less than usual.

Since the 2015 vintage, Cotarella and his team have also started the blending process earlier. "Starting with the 2015," he says, "we modified the blending approach as we now make a master blend—including the Sangiovese portion—in January, after the malolactic, keeping aside some lots that require a different barrel management due to their specific characteristics," a reference to lots that are lighter or more structured. "These lots have been blended together with the master blend during the aging period according to their evolution and to the style of the final wine we want to achieve."

The Solaia is followed by a trio of 97-pointers from different areas of Tuscany. Carnasciale's Toscana Il Caberlot 2016 (97, \$275/1.5L) is a project of the Rogosky family, whose tiny production comes from a cross between Cabernet Franc and Merlot planted in four parcels totaling 8.5 acres in Val d'Arno di Sopra, just east of Chianti Classico. Il Caberlot's alluring aromas of black currant, cedar, lead pencil and iron are matched by its polished texture.

The Le Chiuse Brunello di Montalcino Diecianni Riserva 2010 (97, \$180) is the debut release of Lorenzo Magnelli's new concept of riserva. He thinks riservas represent a different expression of a vintage, needing time to show their higher concentration and complexity, thus his wine's 10 years of aging, four of those in large Slavonian oak casks. "Aging it longer is the character of a riserva in a better way," Magnelli says. "Sangiovese needs time to express the terroir, and releasing the wine later helps people to understand this." This complex wine is ready to enjoy now, featuring savory and spicy cherry, plum, leather, iron and wild herb flavors.

Castello di Volpaia's Chianti Classico Riserva 2016 (97, \$40), offering exceptional value, caps a brilliant trio of wines made by this producer in the stellar back-to-back 2015 and 2016 harvests, alongside the Chianti Classico Il Puro Gran Selezione 2015 (96, \$215) and Chianti Classico Coltassala Gran Selezione 2016 (95, \$80).

Among the other impressive wines at 96 points is one of the three Chianti Classico gran selezione from Castello di Ama, its Vigneto Bellavista 2016 (96, \$230). Ama's Vigneto La Casuccia 2016 (95, \$230) and San Lorenzo 2016 (95, \$60) are close rivals, the latter a great value. Querciabella's Toscana Camartina 2015 (96, \$137), a blend of 70% Cabernet Sauvignon and 30% Sangiovese, is a superb late release.

Another standout is the debut vintage of the Mazzei family's new project, the Ipsus Chianti Classico Gran Selezione 2015 (96, \$395). As export manager Giovanni Mazzei explains, the story of this wine dates to 2006, when the family purchased the property adjacent to its Fonterutoli estate, Il Caggio, notable for its 16-acre clos. After vinifying the fruit from the site for a decade, the family decided that 2015 was the vintage to unveil Ipsus. "For some years, it has been a personal

ambition to develop a wine from the exceptional Sangiovese vines of this new plot, and to pursue the Mazzei family's winemaking traditions in my own image," explains Giovanni, who represents the 25th generation of this historic clan of vintners. "Within Il Caggio, the 'clos' in particular, quickly surpassed our expectations, and the wine it gave us revealed a spectacular character of its own from the first vintage we tasted." (For more on Ipsus, see "[The Creation of a Brand \[http://winespectator.com/articles/ipsus-the-creation-of-a-brand\]](http://winespectator.com/articles/ipsus-the-creation-of-a-brand)".")

Six wines lead the pack from 2017. Antinori's Toscana Solaia 2017 (95, \$340) is a worthy successor to the brilliant '16. "We were lucky because a light frost at the end of April reduced the crop, and the vines were better able to deal with the drought," notes Cotarella. The small crop (70% of a normal yield), with its small berries, made it difficult to manage the tannins. No pump-overs were performed by the Antinori team, just punch-downs to soften the extraction, with the goal of smoother tannins.

The Fontodi Colli della Toscana Centrale Flaccianello (95, \$149), Masseto Toscana (95, \$814), Podere Poggio Scalette Alta Valle della Greve Il Carbonaione (95, \$67), Tenuta di Trinoro Toscana Campo di Tenaglia (95, \$110) and Tenuta San Guido Bolgheri-Sassicaia Sassicaia (\$245) are the other classic-rated reds from 2017.

Masseto's Heinz describes the 2017 season as hot and dry in the spring and summer, with cool nights that saved the vintage, unlike 2009 and 2003. "The average temperatures during the harvest were identical in '17, '18 and '19," he says. "But what happened before was different." The drought resulted in small berries with thick skins—"the lowest berry weights I have seen in my entire career."

It was necessary to achieve ripe tannins, which meant not picking too early. Many had finished the harvest in Bolgheri by mid-September, but the second half of the month was cooler. Heinz and his team finished picking at the end of September. "It was a vintage you had to read properly," he adds. "You couldn't make any mistakes, because it was not a forgiving vintage." The **Ornellaia** Bolgheri Superiore 2017 (94, \$170) is another success for the vintage.

At Tenuta San Guido, estate director Carlo Paoli upped the percentage of Cabernet Franc slightly, from 10% to 17%–18%, due to its "fabulous ripening." Only the oldest Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc vines (32- to 48-years-old) were designated to Sassicaia. Fermentation was cooler, the maceration time shorter by about three to five days and the maturation in barrels was 19 months instead of 24. These decisions preserved the freshness and avoided the dry tannins that are the downside of the 2017 harvest.

Despite many top wines costing upward of \$100, Tuscany also shines when it comes to value. One of the best places to look for affordability is Chianti Classico, a denomination that offers terrific quality, yet whose prices have not caught up with those of its neighbors in Montalcino and Bolgheri.

Colle Bereto's Chianti Classico Riserva 2015 (95, \$45) and Il Molino's Chianti Classico Riserva 2016 (95, \$33) offer great quality for the price. Mazzei's Chianti Classico Ser Lapo Riserva 2016 (94, \$28) is vibrant and intense, Istine's Chianti Classico 2016 (93, \$25) is rich and smooth, and Villa a Sesta's Chianti Classico Riserva 2015 (93, \$20) shows floral elements allied with purity of fruit.

From the coastal areas north and south of Bolgheri comes the Caiarossa Toscana Pergolaia 2016 (94, \$28), Val delle Rose Maremma

Toscana Aurelio 2016 (93, \$29) and Querciabella Maremma Toscana Mongrana 2018 (92, \$22). Montepulciano continues to be the source of reasonably priced Tuscan reds, such as the Bindella Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Tenuta Vallocaia 2016 (92, \$26) and Dei Vino Nobile di Montepulciano 2017 (92, \$26). The vineyards of La Braccasca straddle Montepulciano and Cortona, and it's the latter that fields the Cortona Achelo 2018 (92, \$22), a blend of Merlot and Syrah.

Of the 55 Tuscan whites under review, nearly 20% rated outstanding. Two of the best values are also among the top-scorers: the Giovanni Panizzi Vernaccia di San Gimignano 2019 (92, \$18), a fresh, steely white, offering apple and white peach flavors, and the intense, vibrant and salty Terenzuola Vermentino Colli di Luni-Tuscany Fosso di Corsano 2018 (91, \$20).

Petrolo's Toscana White Bòggina B 2017 (92, \$75) ups the ante, offering opulent peach, melon, lemon and wild herb flavors wrapped in a cloak of vanilla-accented oak. **Ornellaia's** rare Toscana White 2017 (91, \$260) is the most expensive white in this report, but also one of the best, with complex peach, passion fruit and elderflower aromas and flavors ending in a saline note.

In contrast to the powerful 2017s, the early 2018s available in the U.S. are less impressive, lacking the density and concentration of the earlier campaign. The best are fresh and fruity, with fleshy textures and vibrant structures.

In these trying times of the pandemic, wine lovers have frequently relied on familiar producers, generally lowering their price points as well. The breadth and depth of Tuscany's wines can fulfill these parameters, delivering consistent quality and great value. At the same

time, many of the high-end reds are capable of aging and improving over a decade or more, promising better days ahead.

Senior editor Bruce Sanderson is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Tuscany.

BRUCE SANDERSON'S RECOMMENDED WINES FROM TUSCANY

More than 675 wines were reviewed for this report. A [free alphabetical list](#) [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-tuscany-103120>] is available. **WineSpectator.com** members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

Wine	Score	Price
ANTINORI		
Toscana Solaia 2016	98	\$340
CARNASCIALE		
Toscana Il Caberlot 2016 (1.5L)	97	\$275
CASTELLO DI VOLPAIA		
Chianti Classico Riserva 2016	97	\$40
LE CHIUSE		
Brunello di Montalcino Diecianni Riserva 2010	97	\$180
CASTELLO DEI RAMPOLLA		
Toscana d'Alceo 2015	96	\$225
CASTELLO DI AMA		
Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista Gran Selezione	96	\$230