Seeing Tenuta Luce in a Different Light

How an unlikely marriage of Sangiovese and Merlot found its identity in Montalcino's Mediterranean hills.

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Next week I'm heading to one of my favorite Tuscan towns: Montalcino. You've heard me write about it before. It's a place work (and play) has called me to many times in the past few years, and this time will be no different. I'll be checking out the soon-to-release vintages of Brunello, Brunello Riserva, and Rosso (all "di Montalcino"). So this week, I recount a recent visit to a famed Montalcino estate, though not one that has put Brunello di Montalcino at the forefront of its identity, though it does make great versions of this. Instead, Tenuta Luce has made a name for itself by letting Merlot have a prominent spot in the story.



The views of the Southwest quadrant of Montalcino from Tenuta Luce. (Photos from Tenuta Luce)

My first encounter with Tenuta Luce wasn't among the rolling hills of Tuscany. It was in Texas, at a wine dinner with my friend Craig Collins, who was working with the brand's importer at the time. I remember being intrigued by the story behind the wines, a collaboration between two formidable wine families, the Frescobaldis of Tuscany and the Mondavis of Napa Valley, whose shared ambition had produced an unusual marriage of Sangiovese and Merlot in the heart of Brunello country. I was also a little skeptical.

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At the time, I suppose you could have considered me something of a Tuscan purist. I loved the unmistakable character of Sangiovese in Brunello di Montalcino, Chianti Classico, and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. I still do, for that matter. The whole Super Tuscan movement had always struck me as clever marketing, and I wasn't particularly enamored with Bordeaux blends in general. (Sorry, Bolgheri. I eventually came around, but it took me a while.)

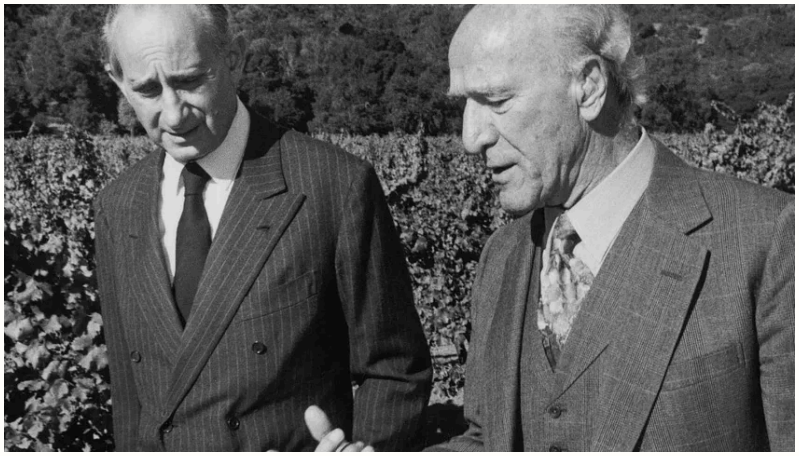
Craig walked me through Luce, the estate's flagship 50/50 blend of Sangiovese and Merlot, followed by Lucente, its more Merlot-dominant sibling. Both were beautiful

on the singular character of Sangiovese need Merlot to make something greater?

That was nearly five years ago, before I spent the better part of three years roaming Italy's backroads and autostrade to write a book about the culture of Italian wine. Somewhere along the way, my understanding of international varieties in Italy began to change. I've since come to appreciate just how thoroughly Italian those once-foreign grapes have become, particularly along the Tuscan coast, where Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot have developed personalities that bear increasingly little resemblance to their Bordeaux ancestors. Even 40 kilometers inland, the Mediterranean seems to exert a peculiar influence. It's a mystical sea, after all, and I suppose it has been rearranging the identities of things that arrive on its shores for a few thousand years.

This fall, I finally visited Tenuta Luce, spending a day walking its vineyards and exploring its cellar with winemaker Alessandro Marini, followed by a conversation with Lamberto Frescobaldi, president of Marchesi Frescobaldi. Somewhere between the fractured galestro soils of its highest vineyards, the heavy clays supporting its Merlot, and a tasting of the estate's wines, I found myself reconsidering the question I'd asked at that dinner in Texas.

What if I'd been looking at the relationship between Sangiovese and Merlot entirely backward?



Tenuta Luce was originally conceived by Vittorio Frescobaldi and Robert Mondavi.
(Photo from Tenuta Luce)

An Italian-American experiment

The origins of Tenuta Luce stretch back to a partnership between Vittorio Frescobaldi and Robert Mondavi, whose families had built considerable reputations on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The project took shape in the 1990s, with their sons, Lamberto Frescobaldi and Tim Mondavi, actively developing the wines.

For Lamberto, who studied at UC Davis and worked in California, the collaboration offered a chance to take responsibility for a wine from vineyard to bottle. It also meant working closely with a family whose experience and resources opened doors to new approaches and expertise.

"Mondavi was 100 times bigger than us, 200 times. It was incredibly bigger, but they were family, so we never felt they were Mondavi and we were something together," Frescobaldi recalls.

The choice of Montalcino was rooted in an existing understanding of Merlot's potential in this particular corner of Tuscany. During the 1970s, a French company that previously owned Castelgiocondo had planted several international varieties

affinity for the area's clay soils.

When the Mondavi partnership emerged, the Frescobaldis proposed using some of that Merlot to create a wine with Sangiovese. The first Luce vintage was produced in 1993, and the blend became the cornerstone of the new venture.

Following Constellation Brands' acquisition of Robert Mondavi Corp. in 2004, the Frescobaldis assumed full ownership of Luce. The families remain close, however, and Lamberto speaks fondly of their years together. He recalls Robert Mondavi arriving unexpectedly during a blending session on a miserable, rainy day in Montalcino. The late Mondavi sampled their work, praised the wine, and then offered a gentle challenge.

"He said, 'I know you can do better,'" Frescobaldi remembers. "And I said, 'How beautiful a way of encouraging people. It was kind, but it was brutally honest."

It's a lesson that has stayed with him. Quality, he explains, requires constant reassessment, a willingness to reconsider practices, and an acceptance that even good wines can be better.



The vineyards of Tenuta Luce are done with organic practices. (Photo from Tenuta Luce.)

A landscape of considerable differences

Standing among the vines at Tenuta Luce, it's difficult to imagine why anyone would want to plant the same grape variety across the entire property. The estate occupies a broad sweep of southwestern Montalcino, where vineyard elevations range from roughly 200 to 420 meters above sea level. Soil compositions change dramatically across that distance, creating distinctly different growing environments.

At the upper elevations, Marini led me into Madonnino, a vineyard of approximately 7.5 hectares that supplies most of the fruit for Luce's Brunello di Montalcino. Here, at around 400 meters, the ground is strewn with fractured galestro, the friable, clay-rich rock that characterizes some of Tuscany's prized Sangiovese vineyards. Marini picked up a piece and broke it apart in his hands.

"This is the key for our Brunello, the soil," he explains. "Thanks to this particular soil, the galestro, we have this tight structure on the palate of our Brunello. Freshness is always very sharp, and the acidity here is always higher compared to the other plots of Sangiovese that we have at the estate."

Madonnino was planted in 2003 with a selected Sangiovese clone from Vivai Cooperativi Rauscedo that produces relatively small berries and clusters. Marini considers the smaller berry size important because it increases the proportion of skin

As we move downhill, the geology changes. Around 300 meters, lighter soils with more sandstone support Sangiovese and Merlot destined primarily for Lucente. Lower still, at 200 to 250 meters, heavier, denser clays provide the foundation for Luce's best Merlot. A narrow strip of sandy soil interrupts those clay deposits, offering a distinctly different home for three hectares of Cabernet Sauvignon used to produce Lux Vitis.

The arrangement illustrates how differently grape varieties can respond to conditions within a single estate.

"Merlot is a variety that is very well suited to clay because it slows down its ability to mature very quickly," Frescobaldi explains. "I think the more we have to do is to listen to the soil."

The surrounding landscape adds another dimension. Tenuta Luce is enclosed by Mediterranean woodland, where holm oaks, strawberry trees, myrtle, and juniper grow alongside umbrella pines. Beyond the vineyards, the hills open toward the Tyrrhenian Sea, whose afternoon breezes travel inland through the broad valley.

Marini considers this maritime influence one of the estate's defining assets. Even during the hottest months, moving air helps dry the canopy and reduce humidity, limiting disease pressure. Frescobaldi notes that the wind warms as it crosses the land, arriving sufficiently dry to help remove moisture following rainfall.

"We are in a blessed spot," Marini tells me as we look across the valley. The landscape certainly makes a persuasive case.



Tenuta Luce's Estate is under the watchful eyes of Winemaker and Technical Director, Alessandro Marini. (Photos from Tenuta Luce)

Adapting to the Mediterranean's changing moods

Of course, a favorable location offers limited protection against the increasingly complicated realities of climate change. The 2026 growing season was particularly warm and dry, and when I visited in mid-September, the estate was harvesting about a week ahead of its usual schedule.

Marini and his team had already made an initial pass through Madonnino, removing excess or less desirable clusters before returning for the final Brunello harvest. He was encouraged by the condition of the remaining fruit, particularly after approximately 50 millimeters of rain arrived in early September following a prolonged dry spell. The rain had fallen over an extended period, allowing water to penetrate the soil rather than immediately running off.

That resilience is partly due to deliberate vineyard management. In selected Sangiovese plots, Marini has abandoned conventional shoot trimming in favor of rolling the growing shoots along the upper trellis wire. The practice maintains additional foliage for shading and avoids stimulating the lateral growth that often follows hedging.

"When you trim the vines, the vine has a response, and it lets grow the secondary shoots," Marini explains. "The secondary shoots need more water. So if you need more

His approach to cover crops is similarly responsive. Following harvest, the team sows mixtures of legumes and cereals between vineyard rows, incorporating the resulting vegetation into the soil as green manure or rolling it into a protective layer of mulch, depending on anticipated growing conditions. This pragmatism led the estate to relinquish its organic certification in 2024, after more than a decade under the organic system. Marini says increasingly difficult mildew conditions required repeated copper applications, adding tractor passes, fuel consumption, and soil compaction. The estate continues its cover-cropping and other established vineyard practices, while retaining greater flexibility in managing disease pressure.





Finding balance in the cellar

Inside Tenuta Luce's winery, acquired in 2016 and subsequently renovated, the attention to individual vineyard parcels continues through fermentation. Luce is fermented in concrete vats, while Lucente is fermented in stainless steel.

Marini favors concrete for its thermal inertia, which allows him to manage temperature changes gradually. Fermentations typically begin around 20 degrees Celsius, rising toward 25 or 26 degrees as they progress. Once alcoholic fermentation is complete, he may increase temperatures during maceration to encourage further extraction, although his decisions vary considerably from one tank to another.

As we move through the cellar, he points to a tank he's deliberately holding at a lower temperature because its tannins are already becoming prominent. Another has been allowed to warm slightly because he believes the wine needs additional structure.

His explanations are refreshingly specific, and tasting the individual lots brings those decisions into focus. One Merlot is still tight and reluctant to reveal its fruit, while another offers a generous impression of dark berries and an almost syrupy richness. Marini is continually assessing how each lot is developing and whether further extraction will benefit its eventual role in the blend.

"My philosophy is really to be very gentle," he explains. "When alcoholic fermentation is finished, we touch the tank very seldom."

The estate's approach to Brunello has also evolved. Beginning with the 2016 vintage, it moved away from barriques toward larger Slavonian oak casks, where the wine now spends approximately three years. Picking decisions have shifted toward preserving acidity and aromatic freshness.

These adjustments reflect the challenge of producing wines from vineyards naturally capable of considerable concentration. The fruit rarely needs assistance achieving richness. The more difficult task is ensuring that richness remains in proportion to everything else.



The vineyards of Tenuta Luce receive significant breezes from the Mediterranean Sea. (Photo from Tenuta Luce)

What Sangiovese gives to Merlot

By the time we return to the tasting table, the distinction between Tenuta Luce's vineyards has become considerably clearer. What remains is to understand how those differences come together in the glass.

We begin with the 2024 Lucente, a Merlot-dominant blend with Sangiovese. The vintage was unusually cool and wet, resulting in a longer growing season and relatively modest alcohol levels. At 13.5%, the wine has a freshness that makes its generous fruit particularly appealing.

Marini describes Lucente as a wine intended to offer an immediate expression of the estate's Mediterranean character.

"This wine must really boom once you pull out the cork," he tells me. "It must deliver its fruitiness and juiciness."

Then comes the 2023 Luce, the estate's flagship equal blend of Sangiovese and Merlot. Here, the relationship between the two varieties becomes even more fascinating.

The Merlot, drawn from the lower clay-rich vineyards, provides a rounded, almost velvety fruit character. Sangiovese, grown on the higher galestro soils, contributes a distinctly different structure. Its acidity provides lift, while its firmer tannin profile gives the wine a sense of tension beneath the richness.

As we taste, I find myself thinking about the relationship between flesh and bone. Merlot supplies the supple flesh of the wine, its rounded fruit filling out the palate. Sangiovese provides the skeleton, a sinewy core that holds the wine together with remarkable strength.

Marini agrees with the analogy, adding that Sangiovese's role extends beyond immediate structure.

"Sangiovese helps the blend to age better with time because it lifts the Merlot and it keeps the wine alive for many, many years," he explains. "Sangiovese is very important in this blend."

And there it is, the answer to a question I hadn't thought to ask at that dinner in Texas years ago.

For years, I'd approached the Super Tuscan phenomenon with the assumption that international varieties were introduced to improve upon Sangiovese, lending additional body and richness to a grape whose virtues were already well established. The implicit question was always what Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot might contribute to make Sangiovese greater.

Sangiovese brings is structural precision that gives Merlot's generosity greater definition.

The estate's 2021 Brunello provides another perspective. Made entirely from Sangiovese grown in Madonnino, it has a fragrant, red-fruited profile, with notes of rose and blood orange that complement the variety's characteristic brightness. Its tannins are fine-grained and persistent, giving the wine an almost silken texture while retaining considerable tension.

Tasting it alongside Luce makes Sangiovese's contribution all the more apparent.

A different understanding of Italian wine

When I spoke with Lamberto Frescobaldi about the estate, our conversation eventually turned to the place of international varieties within Italian wine. He argued that Italy's history has always involved exchanging agricultural ideas and grape varieties, particularly through the Mediterranean, where cultures have influenced one another for centuries. He sees little reason to approach grape varieties with a rigid sense of national ownership when their suitability to a particular site offers a more useful way of understanding quality.

"What does it mean, international?" he asks. "I think that all of us have to be always very humble about what we have and curious about what we don't have, and see if we can find something better."

There's something appealing about that philosophy, especially coming from the president of a family wine company whose roots stretch back centuries by about 30 generations. It also helps explain how Luce, conceived through an Italian-American partnership, has developed an identity that feels thoroughly at home in Montalcino.

I still love the singular expression of Sangiovese in a great Brunello or Chianti Classico, and I'm unlikely to surrender that affection anytime soon. But five years and several thousand kilometers of Italian backroads have made me considerably more receptive to the possibilities of grapes that arrived from elsewhere.

The wines of Tenuta Luce have given me a persuasive reason to reconsider my old assumptions. The relationship between Sangiovese and Merlot makes sense here because the land accommodates both so convincingly, and because each contributes something the other can use.

I suppose I owe Craig Collins another dinner. This time, I'll have a much better answer when we open a bottle of Luce.

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