



During my visit to the region in September of last year, I was struck by the constant attention producers brought to their elevation, and the effect on the wines. My first visit was to the Maremma, which is a broad region that lies at low elevation along the Tuscan coastline. The soils are primarily alluvial, forming during hundreds of millions of years of weathering of the Apennine Mountains. Growing grape vines in this region is relatively new, as most of the land was very swampy until the years leading up to WWII. Knowing war was inevitable, Benito Mussolini directed the swamps to be drained so that cereal crops could be raised to feed the population. Driving through the Maremma you still see vast fields of wheat, interrupted by the occasional vineyard. Despite what appears to be an endless fields of these crops, low elevation, flat land only makes up eight percent of the land in Tuscany.

The much more common topography of Tuscany happens as you drive east from the coast, toward the Apennine Mountains that rise like a spine through the middle of the Italian peninsula. Almost two-thirds of the land mass of Tuscany is the foothills of the Apennines, which create the setting for Tuscany's most famous wine regions. It is here that we find the great vineyards of the Chianti Classico, Montalcino and Montepulciano wine regions, just to name a few. The difference in the growing conditions is why the styles of wines produced in the region are so diverse, demonstrated by our features.

### 2015 Muralia Manolibera (\$18)

Unlike the wineries of the hills, who often trace their history back generations, those of the plains, like Muralia, are much younger. This forty-two acre estate was founded in 1997 by Chiara and Stefano Casali, who fell in love with the region and decided to open the Muralia winery and adjoining small resort, named Poggiarello. They were drawn by the potential to produce world class wines from the combination of gorgeous weather and fertile land. Their vineyards are divided between three locations on the estate; one flat and the other two on low rolling hills rich with limestone soils. It is from the slopes that they produce Manolibera, one of their six offerings.

Like most of the wines produced in the Maremma, this one has a foundation built on the Sangiovese grape, which is almost eponymous with Tuscan viticulture. The difference is that the variety can be too vigorous in the fertile soils, so most producers augment with Bordeaux varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. There is also quite a bit of Syrah planted in this area as well. Producers in this region point to the similarities between their conditions and those of the chateau of Bordeaux. The soils are clay based but mixed with gravel, and the proximity to the warm waters, in this case those of the Mediterranean, which extend their growing season long enough for the Bordeaux varieties to ripen. For that reason almost half of the vineyards of Muralia are dedicated to these grapes. To produce Manolibera, the winery uses 50% Sangiovese, and equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

Winemaking at this estate is quite modern, as the cellar was built with the property in the late 1990's. In order to achieve a cool, natural place for the wines to mature the Casali family dug their cellar into a hill. This provides the perfect environment for slow aging in both tanks and barrels. Their goal for the style of Manolibera is to show off the quality of the fruit they harvest, without the veneer of oak, so this wine is fermented and aged only in tank. Each variety is individually made and the final blend is made right before bottling.

When you open this wine, decant it for a half-hour to allow the bouquet to develop. Once you do it offers a very modern expression of fresh blackberries, dried cherries, cooked red plums, sage and orange peel. On the palate it is very long, with a nice sense of fruit framed by smooth, polished tannins and a kiss of acidity right at the finish. Serve this wine with a grilled flat iron steak and mushroom gravy or pan seared swordfish wrapped in prosciutto.

### 2014 Podere Brizio Rosso di Montalcino (\$29)

The hills surrounding the ancient town of Montalcino are home to one of the world's greatest red wines, Brunello di Montalcino. Grapes have been grown here since Etruscan times, but the modern era of Montalcino wines began in the mid-19th century, when Clemente Santi began isolating superior genetic strains of the local Sangiovese grape, selecting those with deep color and powerful tannins. The "clone" he developed is called Brunello, as the color is deep and leans toward brown when fully ripe. This clone is also called *Sangiovese Grosso*, as the clusters are quite large in comparison to other strains of Sangiovese. What makes his region uniquely suited for this clone is that the vineyards lie at much higher elevation than Maremma, at almost 2000 feet in elevation, but are shielded from the coastal influence by nearby Mont Amiata. This makes Montalcino warmer and drier than nearby regions, such as Montepulciano to the east, allowing them to harvest up to two weeks earlier.

In the years leading up to WWII, Clemente's grandson, Ferruccio Biondi-Santi, was the first to release a wine made exclusively of Brunello grapes. The wine established Brunello di Montalcino as one of Italy's great wines, but it would not be until 1980 that the first official *Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita* (DOCG) was established, quantifying quality to the rest of the world. Surprisingly, at the time there were only 53 producers of the wine. Today the number is over 200, producing around 330,000 cases per year from roughly 3,000 acres of vineyards.

One of the features that make's Brunello so exclusive is the requirement for extended aging in barrel. Producers are required to hold the wines four years before release, with a minimum of three years aging in barrel. Traditionally the barrel choice is large, Slovenian oak casks called *botte*. These large casks, between 3000 and 10,000 liters, do not impart wood flavor on the wine because they are very old, but allow for a slow maturation, as the tannins smooth and aromas develop. It is this extended aging that makes Brunello such a complex wine with great capacity to age.

As the reputation of Brunello has climbed in the past couple of decades, so has the rise of Rosso di Montalcino, which for most estates is their second wine. Also made exclusively of Sangiovese Grosso, the biggest difference is aging requirements before release, one year instead of four. Producers often separate their less desirable vineyard parcels, or grapes from younger vines, to produce Rosso, as the time in oak for Brunello would overwhelm the wine. In some years, such as the wet and warm growing season of 2014, producers declassify some, or all, of their better grapes exclusively into Rosso. Such is the case with Podere Brizio and their 2014 Rosso di Montalcino.

The small Podere Brizio estate was created in 1996, when Roberto Bellini sold most of his property to Angelo Gaja, who created Pieve Santa Restituta. What was lost in the transaction is that Bellini kept the best parcels for himself. Then in 2013 he sold to Alejandro Pedro Bulgheroni, who also bought the historic Dievole winery, one of the oldest estates in Chianti Classico. Bulgheroni retained the services of Alberto Antonini, one of the top oenologists in Tuscany, and together they are transforming this estate, and Dievole, into the most dynamic properties in Tuscany.

One way they are accomplishing this goal is by only releasing wines that perform above and beyond expectations. In the challenging 2014 vintage they made the hard decision to declassify most of the Brunello into their Rosso, a difference of roughly \$30 a bottle. As a result, this is a much bigger and more serious Rosso than you are likely to find from most estates. When you open this bottle, decant it for a half-hour before serving. Once you do this it reveals a rich nose of fresh cut sage leaves, dried mushrooms, fresh red cherries, strawberry jam and new ball mitt. On the palate it is nicely dense and broad, with moderately tannins and acidity. Drink over the next three to five years with roast duck, grilled ribeye or mushroom risotto.

### **Swordfish Spiedini**

Do not let the exotic name deter you from making this recipe, spiedini is the Italian name for shish-kabob. The real surprise is how well this dish works with the Muralia Manolibera. To me, swordfish is so dense and meaty that it can be treated like red meat when pairing with wine. Red wine is particularly appropriate with this dish as the pancetta reinforces the red meat quality. Make sure to buy swordfish steaks that are at least 1 inch thick and have the deli person slice the pancetta the same thickness as they do for turkey breast for sandwiches. The Boar's Head brand works well and is available at Publix. For this recipe you can either use wooden skewers soaked in water for a half hour, or stainless steel, which do not burn.

**1/4 c extra-virgin olive oil**  
**2 tsp herbes de Provence**  
**1 tsp salt**  
**1/2 tsp fresh ground black pepper**  
**2 lbs swordfish steaks, at least 1 inch thick, trimmed**  
**12 short wooden skewers, soaked**  
**12 thin slices of pancetta, 3 oz, unrolled into strips**  
**6 lemon wedges**

Whisk the oil, herbes de Provence, salt, and pepper in a large bowl to blend. Cut the swordfish steaks into 36 (1-inch) cubes and toss in the oil mixture to coat. Thread the swordfish cubes onto wooden skewers, 3 per skewer. Wrap a slice of pancetta around and between the swordfish cubes on each skewer. Arrange the swordfish skewers on a small baking sheet and brush with the remaining oil mixture. Cover and refrigerate at least 1 hour and up to 1 day, turning occasionally in the oil mixture.

Prepare the barbecue for medium-high heat or preheat a grill pan over medium-high heat. Grill the swordfish skewers until the swordfish is just opaque in the center and the pancetta is crisp, turning often, about 10 minutes. Transfer the skewers to plates and serve with lemon wedges.

### **Bistecca Fiorentina**

Alas, in the US we cannot find steaks from the Chianina breed of cows that graze the hillsides of Tuscany. However, we can pretend with a thick cut steak and a glass of Brizio Rosso di Montalcino.

**2 T-bone steaks or porterhouse steaks, each 1 1/2 inches thick (about 3 1/2 pounds total), patted dry**  
**2 teaspoons kosher salt**  
**1 teaspoon ground black pepper**  
**3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**  
**lemon wedges for serving**

Prepare your grill or preheat the broiler of your oven

Sprinkle each side of steaks with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Cook steaks, uncovered until well-browned on each side, about 2 1/2 minutes per side. (If steaks start to flame, move them to a cooler side of fire and/or extinguish flames with squirt bottle). Continue cooking, turning once, to desired doneness, 5 to 6 minutes more for rare (120 degrees on instant-read thermometer), 6 to 7 minutes for rare medium-rare (125 degrees), 7 to 8 minutes for medium medium-rare (130 degrees), or 8 to 9 minutes for medium (135 to 140 degrees).

Transfer steaks to cutting board and let rest 5 minutes. Following illustrations below, cut strip and tenderloin pieces off bones and slice crosswise about 1/2 inch thick. Arrange slices on platter, drizzle with olive oil, and serve immediately with lemon wedges.