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You may remember from the February offering that in 2019 we will be following the season of the vine. Last quarter we discussed soil and how that affects the wine as you perceive it in the glass. For this quarter we will look at the planning of the vineyard, and more specifically, the reasons that winemakers have selected the grape varieties they choose to grow.

As with virtually every topic in wine, and I suppose life really, there are an almost limitless set of variables that influence what grapes a producer chooses to plant in his vineyard. To help narrow the scope and keep this down to roughly 2500 words I will focus on two: tradition and climate. In addition, all of the features come from Italy, which we already know has been producing wine for roughly four thousand years. Here I think we will find great examples of each factor and amazing wines to boot.

For those who know me this first selection probably falls into the category of, “what took you so long?” The **2014 Ciacci Piccolomini d’Aragona Brunello di Montalcino (\$72)** comes from one of my favorite estates, and a quick survey of my personal cellar reveals more bottles of wine from them than any other, regardless of appellation. My first introduction to this estate was their first US release of the wine, sometime in the mid-1990’s. I remember finding the wine a more polished example of Brunello than many others, a trait they continue to this day. Their story is fascinating and the wines have moved from one strength to another over the past two decades showing the commitment of the Bianchini family to their craft.

It is hard to imagine now, but in 1980 there were only fifty-three estates in Montalcino that were producing wine. The 1990 vintage became something of a catalyst as the wines from that amazing year brought a lot of critical- and later consumer- attention to the category. While Ciacci was around at that time, they had only begun producing wine on a commercial scale in the late 1980’s. This is because for most of their history they were the estate of former nobility, with wine being produced primarily for personal consumption. The estate dates back to the 17th century when the palace was built by Fabivs de’ Vecchis, Bishop of Montalcino and Abbot of Sant’Antimo Abbey. After the death of the bishop the palace and the surrounding estate were purchased by the countess Eva Bernini Cerretani in 1868. On December 31, 1877, the countess Cerretani sold the entire estate to the Ciacci family from Castelnuovo dell’Abate. After the marriage between the count Alberto Piccolomini d’Aragona, a direct descendent of Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) and Elda Ciacci, the bishop’s palace became the Ciacci Piccolomini d’Aragona estate. In 1985 the countess Elda Ciacci bequeathed the entire property to Giuseppe Bianchini, her longtime caretaker of the property. Along with his children, Paolo and Lucia, they set out to produce world class wine. Their first step was to build a modern cellar in the early 1990’s, and have since acquired neighboring properties to expand their production. Today they are seen as one of the great crown jewels of the Montalcino region, due in large part to their extensive holdings in the cru of Castelnuovo dell’Abate.

What makes Brunello so unique by Italian wine standards is that it is a mono-varietal wine, produced only from one grape variety, Sangiovese, and only from a single clone called Brunello as well. In a place with such a long history of winemaking, most Italian wines have evolved as blends of multiple varieties. This is in part because different varieties bud, bloom and ripen at different times, providing insurance against weather events, such as frost or hail, destroying the entire crop. In some areas it also is to develop complexity in the finished wine. Remember, the idea of picking different varieties at the peak of ripeness, then vinifying separately and blending after, is a very modern concept. Until even the 1990’s many producers would pick all the grapes together as a field blend, each contributing something to the blend, such as color, acidity, tannin or body. The wines of Montalcino are different in that they have only ever been a single variety, and were one of the first regions in Italy to establish prohibitions against blending other varieties.

It started in the late 1860’s, when Clement Santi identified one genetic mutation of Sangiovese in his vineyard that yields a more substantial wine. Nicknamed *brunello* for the brown tone the skins achieve when ripe, he pushed that producers in the Montalcino region use only that variety for their wines. In 1888 his grandson, Ferruccio Biondi-Santi, released the first modern Brunello, using only that clone, and aged in oak casks for more than ten years. The wines from this region enjoyed a great reputation and in 1980 were one of the first five Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) wines to be established in Italy.

The reason that the Brunello clone works so well in the vineyards around Montalcino is the region is one of the warmest and driest growing sites in Tuscany. This allows the Brunello clone to ripen completely earlier than other areas, for example Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, which is their neighbor to the east. In Montepulciano they prefer to grow a clone of Sangiovese known as Prugnolo Gentile, which ripens slowly and is well suited to their higher elevation, and cooler vineyards. That variety also does not achieve the body of Brunello, so producers legally blend in up to fifteen percent other varieties, most typically Merlot, to add depth and color. Typically producers in Montalcino do not need to blend anything into their wines and, if they do, will declassify it as a lesser wine.

I chose the 2014 from Ciacci because it is a rare example of a vintage released by them that is pretty accessible young. 2014 was a challenging vintage in Montalcino, as most of Europe, due to a wet spring and cool, cloudy summer growing season. In Montalcino grape clusters rotting on the vine was a big problem, exacerbated by the appearance of *Drosophila suzukii*, the Asian vinegar fly. This fruit fly pierces the skins of even healthy grapes and created huge issues for volatility acidity issues at the crush pad. Diligent winemakers, like Paolo Bianchini, sorted the grapes many times to ensure only the healthiest clusters went into the fermentor. As a result their wine is beautifully pure and correct, but less tannic and age worthy than vintages such as 2010 and 2012.

I still recommend decanting this wine for a half-hour to hour before serving. The nose then delivers a classic Brunello aroma of tart cherry, dried red plum, new ball mitt leather, espresso coffee beans and black tea. On the palate it is

relatively plump and forward, with well- integrated tannins and moderate acidity, that provide structure into the long finish. Drink this wine from 2019 to 2024.

My second selection is also from Tuscany, but this time from a region with a very short history of winemaking compared to Montalcino. The **2017 Grattamacco Bolgheri (\$45)** is from the coastal region of Tuscany, which prior to WWII was primarily swamp land. In preparation for the war, Mussolini's engineers drained much of the region in order to plant cereal crops to feed the population. Unfortunately, much of the area was too rocky for wheat and other cereals, and after the war winemakers noticed a similarity to the soils of Bordeaux. The first to really bring light to the area is Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, who in 1948 established his estate, Sassicaia. The name Sassicaia means "stoney field." For many years they produced wine only for home consumption, then in 1971, Mario's son, Nicolò, persuaded him to release some for commercial sale. In 1974 their 1968, the first release, won a "Judgement of Paris" type tasting at Decanter magazine, defeating a number of First Growth Bordeaux. This put great attention on the Bolgheri region as winemakers flocked to the relatively unknown area.

Coincidentally, Grattamacco was founded in 1977 by Piermario Meletti Cavallari, the second estate in Bolgheri. He chose the vineyard site on the middle of one of only two hills in Bolgheri. In 2002 Cavallari leased the property to Carmelo Claudio Tipa, owner of Collemassari winery in the nearby Montecucco zone. Under the terms of the agreement Cavallari continues to live on the estate but has stepped away from any winemaking responsibilities. In my research I could not find if Tipa has purchased the 25 acre property, but the agreement was only for twelve years so I suppose they have. His money comes from owning a pharmaceutical company so I doubt cash flow is an issue. Regardless, Tipa modernized the winery, begun replanting the oldest vineyards, and has brought in rock stars for management and winemaking. During his tenure this has become something of a cult wine for Italian fans, selling for a fraction of neighbors Sassicaia and Ornellaia, but often scoring higher with critics.

The main reason this estate thrives is due to the elevation of the vineyards, at roughly 300 feet above sea level. Because of their site it is windier and less humid than the valley floor. Being on the second hill, behind the first, also shields the vines from the hardest winds of the afternoon, preventing evaporation of the ripening grapes. I should note that another former Euro Reserve Club pick, Argenteria, sits on the first hill, and Sassicaia sits above Grattamacco on the second. Thanks to a perfect exposition and rocky soils, the estate is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, all Bordeaux varieties. In an unusual move, they do grow Sangiovese as well, although most producers in Bolgheri feel the soils are too vigorous for Sangiovese.

All of the grapes are hand harvested, destemmed then fermented in large, conical, oak up-right fermentors. Once dry the wine is moved to oak barriques, where it undergoes malolactic fermentation and is aged for ten months. For 2017 the blend is 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc, 20% Merlot, 6% Sangiovese and 4% Petit Verdot.

When you open this wine, plan on decanting it for an hour. This wine falls in to the category of "Bordeaux with an Italian accent" to me, with an evocative nose of fresh black cherries, and blackberries, milk chocolate, wet concrete and claro cigar wrapper. On the palate the difference between a Bordeaux and Bolgheri is more obvious, as the copious fruit is more restrained by lively acidity than most Bordeaux, as well as traditional Cabernet tannins that pull the edges in near the finish. This wine is very drinkable now, but will be best if you wait until 2020 and drink by 2030.

Finally, we have a wine that is something of a passion project for me, but also one of the most memorable of my trip to Italy in 2017. The **2015 Inama Bradisismo Veneto Rosso (\$39)** stands out for a couple of reasons, the quality is sublime, and spending time with Stefano Inama and his sons was also a highlight of the trip. Those who know Inama as one of the great houses of Soave Classico may be less familiar with their red wines. They are produced from vineyards in the Colli Berici, fifteen miles east of the Soave Classico zone. Although virtually unknown outside Italy, this area has an ancient winemaking history that was lost after the WWII. In 1997 Stefano began planting vineyards on the hills and is now the champion of the region, using a "traditional" grape in this wine that may surprise you.

The Colli Berici are hills formed during the creation of the Alps. The name Bradisismo refers to the way the hills were formed when magma swelled under the earth's crust to the south of the Alps, lifting the land up, but rarely breaking the surface. Over millions of years the volcanic material dried leaving air pockets which then collapsed. This created a series of steep hills with volcanic soils. In the mid-1800's the wineries in the area noticed that Bordeaux varieties perform better in these conditions, and began planting using cuttings from that area. Of course the process was less sophisticated than today and much of the "Merlot" that was planted was actually Carmenere. The same thing happened in Chile during this period as well. Soon after, phylloxera struck Bordeaux and most of Western Europe, wiping out almost all vineyards. In Bordeaux the very late ripening Carmenere was systematically removed due to poor performance. However, in parts of the Veneto and Chile the growers thought it was Merlot, and without the aid of the internet for immediate comparison, did not identify the variety properly until the 1990's. Today this is a very popular variety in the eastern edges of Veneto and this wine will show you why.

For those familiar with the weedy and herbaceous examples of Carmenere from Chile, do not be alarmed. The way the grape is farmed in Chile exacerbates the problem, but in the hands of Stefano Inama this variety is redeemed. His Bradisismo is 80% Cabernet Sauvignon and 20% Carmenere, with both varieties being hand harvested, destemmed and fermented in stainless steel tanks. Each wine is vinified and aged separately, in fifty-percent new, French barriques, the remainder in two-year-old barrels.

To serve, decant for a half-hour to reveal a complex combination of cooked blackberries, fresh black plums and blueberries, cigar box, fresh cut cedar, graphite and warm vanilla wafers. On the palate it is broad to start but the fruit is quickly framed by firm but integrated tannins and relatively low acidity. Drink 2019 to 2029.