



Decanter

ITALY

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE

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Le Mortelle staircase

Super Tuscans 2.0

Once it embodied everything new and ambitious about Italian wine. But while some say the SuperTuscan is no longer the hero it once was, Tuscany's boundary pushers insist that it still has the power to surprise – brace yourself for its long-awaited sequel...

STORY RAFFAELE MOSCA

perceived as more desirable. 'Even water brand Acqua Panna achieved a boost in sales by starting to showcase the word Toscana on the label,' observes Stefania Saccardi, head of the region's agricultural department. Art, culture and marvellous landscapes contribute to the lofty reputation of the region, but the Toscana brand wouldn't be as powerful if the region weren't home to some of Italy's finest wines.

Tuscany is where the Italian wine renaissance started, thanks to the so-called SuperTuscans, which began grabbing headlines between the late 1970s and early 1980s. Initially labelled as simple *Vino da Tavola* wines, they were brought into existence as a reaction to outdated or non-existent regulations.

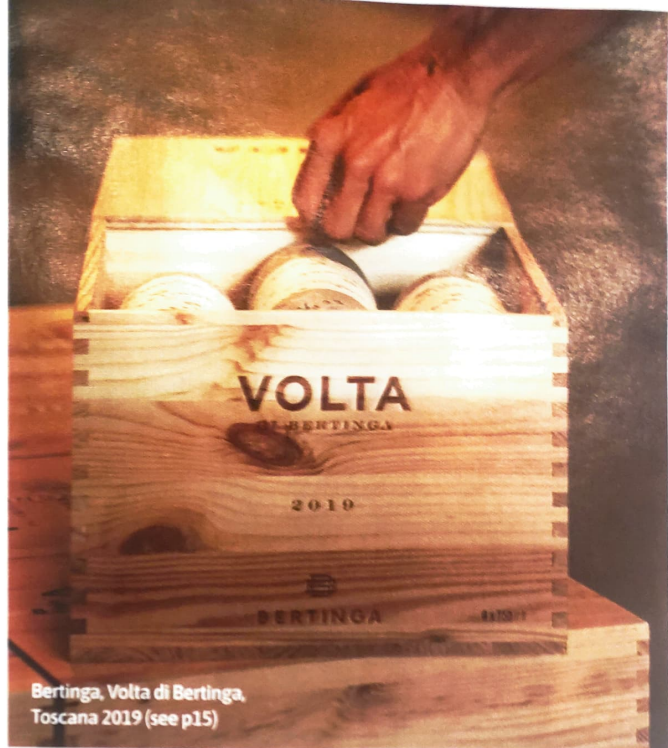
The pioneers behind these SuperTuscans had a thorough knowledge of French wine – especially Bordeaux – and they introduced techniques such as temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel vessels and barrel ageing. Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon were the key grapes in the earliest examples, while Merlot gained prominence from the 1990s onwards.

CARVING THEIR OWN PATH

'The SuperTuscans were all part of a huge change that took place in Tuscan life following the disappearance of *mezzadria* (the traditional sharecropping system), the move to specialist viticulture and the realisation that Tuscany was – and is – an expensive place in which to grow grapes,' explains David Gleave MW, founder of leading UK merchant Liberty Wines. 'For that reason, the quality of the wines needs to be high, in order to ensure the costs of production are covered.'

It's thought that the late Nicolas Belfrage MW coined the term 'SuperTuscan', with the 'super' prefix intended to highlight the category's high aspirations. Revisions to regulations in areas such as Chianti Classico during the 1990s offered a more appealing prospect to SuperTuscan producers than previously existed, and some of the wines earned DOC/DOCG status when the Bolgheri denomination was restructured to incorporate red wines in 1994. Yet despite this, most SuperTuscans – perhaps because of their free-spirited essence – were simply upgraded [from *Vino da Tavola*] to Toscana IGT (*indicazione geografica tipica*, established in 1995) or Costa Toscana IGT (2010), giving a boost to the regional brand at the expense of the local.

The category remains loosely defined even today and represents just a small fraction of the output of these two broad appellations, which together account for more than 30% of the region's production, according to official figures



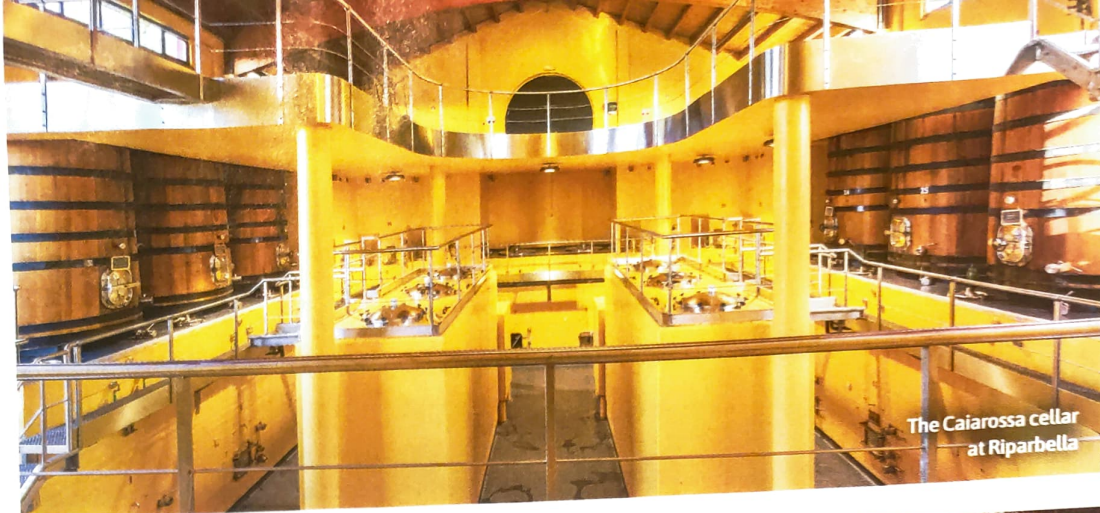
Bertinga, Volta di Bertinga, Toscana 2019 (see p15)

from the Consorzio Vino Toscana. And although the term SuperTuscan may be less popular than in the past – some even argue it is somewhat outdated – collectors and members of the trade continue to use it to refer to a specific prototype of high-achieving red wine: lush and often oak-accented, blending Tuscan exuberance with an international flair.

NATURAL PROGRESSION

The group isn't homogenous, however, and while historical SuperTuscans swing between a classic imprint and the transition towards a sleeker style, a new generation – whose wines we shall identify as **SuperTuscans 2.0** – is preventing it from becoming obsolete or stagnant. Some of these wines were conceived at the beginning of the new millennium and have gradually become the standard-bearers of a major stylistic shift. Others are newcomers to the market.

'Rather than being disruptive like the original ones, these new SuperTuscans represent the evolution of a well-established category,' suggests Montalcino-born wine marketing specialist Gabriele Gorelli MW. Surgical precision in winemaking is a feature they have in common with their predecessors and they further stress exclusivity, smaller production volumes and lofty positioning targeting an even narrower niche of savvy and affluent consumers. They also reflect an urge to keep up with global trends. 'Relying on such a powerful IGT brand means having room to experiment and that helps a lot in times of big changes', says Luca Vitiello, sales director at Bertinga, a promising new winery located in ►



the commune of Gaiole in Chianti Classico. 'But we also need to show a link to a specific place instead of just focusing on style.'

Opulence and power are the key descriptors defining many first-wave SuperTuscans; however, new-wave wines combine the signature generosity and universal appeal for which the category is known with greater emphasis on finesse and a newfound sensibility for terroir.

SEEKING ELEGANCE

Focusing on Cabernet Franc is one of the ways in which to follow this shift. Pioneering efforts from Le Macchiole, Fornacelle and Duemani in the early 2000s first demonstrated the grape's potential on the Tuscan coast. 'The initial goal with Cabernet Franc was to find a single-variety alternative to the déjà-vu Bordeaux blend,' affirms renowned consultant and former owner of Duemani, Luca D'Attoma. 'Its aromatic character is suited to the changing climate and to today's market,' adds Gleave.

In Tuscany, Cabernet Franc typically exhibits excellent freshness and restraint. The noteworthy quantity of pyrazines means the wines can taste slightly green, but such greenness leans on attractive aromas of balsam, herbs and *macchia* ('scrubland') when the grapes are picked at full maturity. Pure expressions of Cabernet Franc scream Mediterranean terroir while being supple and energetic. 'The tannins are always fine-grained and those long-lasting herbal elements also ensure excellent longevity,' D'Attoma remarks.

Although the variety is increasingly widespread along the Tuscan coast, Bolgheri is its hotspot, with roughly 250ha and more than 20 recently launched DOC or IGT varietal wines. The best expressions from this area also prove its transparency to terroir. For instance, Tenuta Sette Cieli's *Scipio* (see *tasting notes*, p18), which comes from parcels on pebbly soils located just outside the appellation at up to 400m, tastes like the missing link between the Loire valley and the Tuscan coast with its exuberant leafiness and lifted acids. Tenuta Argentiera's *Ventaglio* originates from a marl-rich hill lying closer to



the sea and combines greater voluptuousness with remarkable vibrancy.

Cabernet Franc is also gaining ground beyond the coast. In Val d'Orcia, *Guardiavigna* by tech entrepreneur-turned biodynamic wine producer Pasquale Forte represents an especially ambitious and terroir-expressive take, mixing Orcia's typical earthy imprint with high-altitude freshness.

UNCONVENTIONAL STYLES

Syrah is the other variety to watch, defying heat in areas such as Cortona in central Tuscany and Suvereto on the coast. 'It shines for its versatility,' notes D'Attoma, who worked with prominent Suvereto estate Tua Rita to craft *Keir* (pictured, above), the most groundbreaking among at least a dozen new-wave Syrahs fermenting in Tuscan terracotta amphorae. Vinified with 40% whole clusters, it displays a radically different profile to



'We like to refer to our wines as **MediTuscans** rather than SuperTuscans, as the goal is to express a fiercely **Mediterranean identity**'

————— Daniele Parri, Caiarossa